

“Give me liberty or give me death!”
Patrick Henry’s resounding battle cry became the heartfelt cry of Dr. Oliver and the Gomez’s as they risked their lives, using their imagination, resources and determination, to reach a new life of freedom.

Rafting to Freedom: A Harrowing Escape to America



When Aker Kasten’s anesthesiologist, Dr. Rafael Oliver-Vidaud, attended school in his native Cuba, he became a valued medical professional, having gained his medical degree at the University of Havana School of Medicine. Yet Cuba’s tight rein on free expression and its communist government’s close watch on anyone engaged in acts considered a threat or “treasonable” made daily life there an oppressive, tyrannical and fearful experience. Every word uttered and every move made was a potential door into incarceration or exile. Secret police relied on informers, and citizens were patriotically bound to report the questionable activities of their neighbors, friends and relatives (ranging from listening to foreign radio news to placing beef or lobster on your table). It was a restrictive life that Dr. Oliver was intent on leaving. He longed for the freedom of America.

In 1977, Dr. Oliver was sent as a physician with the Cuban forces to Angola. Because he had mentioned in the past that he would like to leave Cuba – an unforgivable offense - he was later suspected of being a potential defector. As a result he was immediately returned to Cuba and stationed in a remote eastern province, far from friends and family. To return closer to his family, Dr. Oliver had to feign insanity and even placed himself into an insane asylum in Cuba with the help of friends. Once there, he demonstrated “recovery of his mental faculties” and was released. Survival became a daily challenge and in order to stay close to family, he made himself invisible to the health care system as a doctor , and worked instead as a TV mechanic, for which he had trained in the past.

In early 1980, Castro removed the guards from the Peruvian embassy in Havana in a vendetta against Peru. As a result the embassy was mobbed with thousands looking for asylum and freedom. Professionals, technicians and anyone of value to the Cuban economy were denied permission to leave, including Dr. Oliver. He aligned himself with Dr. Jose Gomez-Cortes and his wife, Maritza, who were also considered enemies of the state due to Dr. Gomez’s comments against the Communist Party.



The three devised a daring plan to build a raft and escape from Cuba. With strict rations and informants lurking around every corner, procuring supplies had its immense challenges. Neighbors, shopkeepers and black marketeers were given the excuse that they were building a bookcase. Bedframes were stripped apart for fastenings and miscellaneous parts that were not possible to purchase on the black market. A broomstick was to serve as a mast and a large raincoat as the sail. Extra buoyancy was to be provided by inner tubes. The raft was carefully constructed to break down into small pieces which fit into the compartment of the gas tank in their car. A separate gas can with a hidden fuel line in the trunk was used to fuel the car. Night after night they practiced assembling the raft.

Altura, a secluded beach with only one small access road, was carefully chosen as the departure point. Plans to leave quickly escalated after finding out their escape had been discovered and would be reported to the authorities. Once at the beach, two of the three attempted to divert attention by swimming and acting like vacationers, while the third one worked swiftly to assemble the raft in the vast underbrush nearby.

On the moonless night of October 4, 1980 at 9:20pm, having prevailed over countless obstacles along the way, the three attempted to depart under the cover of darkness. Unfortunately the excessive weight of their supplies forced them to discard their radio and other gear. Glucose, which had been purchased with prescriptions (sugar was rationed and unavailable), remained their only source of food.

Finally they were underway, and despite desperate paddling for 2-3 hours, they made little progress until an offshore breeze blew up, allowing them to set their make-shift

sail. Unfortunately, the weather began to deteriorate. By the second day, they lost sight of land, and discovered the incredibly remote feeling of being alone on a vast ocean. On the second night, the treacherous waters threw both Dr. Oliver and Dr. Gomez from the raft, with only their life vests (made from packing material) to save them.

After the fifth day with slow progress, little sustenance and no rescue, they began to discuss heading back to shore and giving up the escape attempt. On the sixth day, Maritza, who had been unable to eat or drink since they left, started to become delirious. Just as the three weary voyagers were about to lose all hope, they spotted a boat in the distance. Fearing they had been discovered by a communist patrol boat, Dr. Oliver and the Gomez’s became ecstatic when they realized it was an American boat, the USCGC UNIMAK! *Freedom was in sight!*

A motor surfboat was launched to receive the refugees, who were so weak they had to be hoisted aboard. Later that day after a health checkup, the three were transferred onto a smaller boat and were finally on the last leg of their journey to freedom!



Aker Kasten Eye Center counts it a true privilege to have Dr. Oliver as a board certified anesthesiologist at our outpatient surgical facility. He takes pride in offering personalized anesthesiology care to you in a professional, yet warm and caring environment. Every day, his story reminds us how fortunate we are to live in America, the land of the free!

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