

Life and Liberty: One Man's Pursuit of Happiness

Story by PA1 Tasha Tully, PADET St. Petersburg, Fla.

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. -- Darkness covered them like a veil, allowing the group to move along the beach unseen. Nineteen people worked hurriedly, putting a steel-framed raft in the water and saying good-bye to those staying behind. They had been planning this night for several years and the moment had finally come, along with the hope of a better future.



The group, made up of 15 family members and four of their close friends, silently rowed the 19-foot raft far enough off shore where they

CLEARWATER, Fla. – Petty Officer 2nd Class (BM2) Wilger Irizarry serves his country as a coxswain at Coast Guard Station Sand Key in Clearwater. Irizarry and several of his family members fled Cuba for America in 1994 in search of freedom. Coast Guard photograph by PA1 Tasha Tully.

could start the engine without being heard. The engine was from an old World War II Ural motorcycle. The motorcycle, wheels removed, was fastened to the center of the raft and fitted with a shaft that connected the engine to a propeller in the stern.

The engine started, and the group breathed a premature sigh of relief, for after a few minutes someone noticed that they weren't getting any farther from shore. They checked the propeller and saw there was nothing securing it to the shaft; the shaft was spinning in place in the center of the prop.

The group laboriously rowed back to shore trying not to be seen or heard. A few of the men crept along the beach to a fisherman's shack. The men traded some of the items they had packed for the journey; including a tarp, money and a knife, for a drill that they used to bore a hole through the shaft and the propeller, securing them with a screw. They rowed away from shore again, started the engine and immediately began making way.

"I was 19 years old and my wife, Ariagna, was seven months pregnant with our first child," remembers Coast Guard Boatswain's Mate 2nd Class Wilger Irizarry. "We were terrified. We put everything we had in that raft; our lives, our hopes, our dreams and our future."

The anxious group traveled through the night, most of them unable to sleep. As anticipation and hope grew, so did the distance between them and their homeland.

"Spirits were high at first. We sang songs and laughed," added Irizarry. "Before we left, my cousin told his five-year-old daughter that we were going on a picnic. So every few hours she would ask, 'Are we at the picnic yet?' Here we were in the middle of the ocean

on a raft, with all these plans for a new life and the whole time she thinks we're going on a picnic!"

However, this trip would prove to be no picnic for anyone aboard the raft. The next morning, the air-cooled antique engine overheated and several of the men unknowingly used seawater to cool it. The water spilled across the battery creating continuous shocks, which quickly left it dead. The raft began to drift, and the group became more nervous as the seas got choppier.

"Several of us, particularly my cousin Mamita, were getting seasick and weren't able to eat much. All we could do was sit and wait," said Irizarry.

After several hours, they saw an airplane. They jumped to their feet and waved excitedly. It was a small plane flown by a pilot from "Brothers to the Rescue", a Miami-based non-profit organization founded in 1991 that conducts humanitarian search missions throughout the Florida Straits dropping water, food and basic survival supplies to migrants. The plane delivered the provisions and disappeared.

Morale immediately sank. The raft of people drifted and waited for hours. The August sun steadily scorched their skin as it lit the horizon. Another raft appeared in the distance. As the raft got closer, the group noticed that there were about eight Cubans on it and that it was in bad shape.

"Their raft was falling apart. One of the inner tubes they were using had popped and they had too many people on such an unstable craft," said Irizarry. "We were scared because we had heard stories about people killing everyone aboard your raft and stealing it, like pirates, and our raft was very well built compared to theirs."

The other raft of people had an engine but no gas, and after lengthy negotiations, both groups decided to share supplies in order to get to America.

"We didn't really trust them, and they didn't trust us. We held tow lines from their raft as we gave them gas little by little," stated Irizarry. "It was a slow-going journey, but it was the only way any of us were going to get anywhere."

Hours passed and the sky darkened, but the coolness of night offered no relief to the desperate fugitives. The water had gotten choppier and Mamita had yet to stop vomiting. In the distance, there were thousands of white lights and it was quickly decided that they would travel in that direction.

"There were so many lights that we thought it was a city. I'm not sure how long we followed those lights before realizing that they weren't getting any closer. Finally we saw that it was a (cruise) ship," Irizarry said. "After that, everything got so tense among us. Our hopes were so high, and with the plane, the raft and now the ship, morale was at its worst. People were screaming at each other and we thought, for sure, that if daylight came Mamita would die."

In the blackness of night Irizarry recalls seeing red and green lights. Speculations about what they could be bounced from person to person. Maybe it was a buoy, a weather station or another boat. Irizarry stood on top of the motorcycle seat and used a spotlight they brought along to signal the lights in case it was another boat. A light flashed back at him and soon they heard a loud roar in the abyss that surrounded them.

“The seas were rough, about six to eight feet high, and we could see nothing but the splash from the bow of the boat crashing into the water,” recalls Irizarry. “Suddenly, the pitch black turned to daylight when their spotlights lit up our raft. We couldn’t see anything because of the intense light.”

The two rafts of Cubans were scared stiff. They had no idea who, or what, was watching them.

“There was dead silence, you could hear a pin drop,” added Irizarry. “The next thing we heard was, ‘Esto es el Guarda Costa de los Estados Unidos. Ustedes estan salvo’ - ‘This is the United States Coast Guard. You are safe.’ We cheered and screamed we were so happy. And then things turned really scary.”

The seas got very rough. So rough, in fact, that the tethered rafts were barely able to come alongside the 110-foot Coast Guard cutter. “Our steel raft kept hitting the side of the cutter while the Coasties were holding the lines attached to the raft,” explained Irizarry.

Nine of the 10 women, including Ariagna, and the children (ages one and six), and eight of the nine men carefully embarked the cutter. Irizarry’s father, Luis, and mother, Olympia, were the last to leave the raft, waiting until the rest of their family and friends were safely aboard the Coast Guard cutter.

Suddenly, as Olympia was climbing the Jacob’s ladder, her shoe came loose and she slipped from the wooden rungs into the dark water below. Irizarry said that of all the 19 people on board their raft, she was the only one who couldn’t swim. She was wedged between the steel hull of the cutter and the steel bow of the raft, and if the raft struck the ship again, she was sure to be crushed. Luis tried to push and hold the raft away from the boat, while family and friends aboard the cutter were crying and yelling.

All of a sudden, a Coastie pushed Irizarry back from the stanchions, jumped from the deck of the cutter to the raft below, pushed Luis aside, pulled Olympia from the water and put her safely aboard the cutter, all in one fell swoop!

“That Coastie was huge!” Irizarry said with widened eyes. “At the time the guy seemed seven feet tall, hulking big and barrel-chested. Now I know that he was wearing body armor and a PFD (personal floatation device), but after all these years our family still calls him the ‘white gorilla’.”

Coast Guard crewmembers immediately administered an intravenous saline drip to Mamita to keep her from dehydrating after everyone was transferred safely aboard the cutter. The cutter's decks were loaded with migrants from previous interdictions, so the family spent the night tied to the deck at the bow of the boat due to the high seas and dangerous weather. The vessel listed and pitched all through the night.

"My wife and I sat on the metal gun grate. They (the Coasties) were running out of straps and her belly was so big, so I gave her my strap and a few of the Coasties gave us their belts in order to tie her down," Irizarry remembers. "I fell asleep in her lap and woke up all at once when the vessel pitched. I was thrown from her lap and banged my head on the deck of the ship. I almost fell overboard, but I was able to grab a stanchion and hold on until a Coastie came and helped me up. I made sure I was tied down after that."

The next morning, the Cubans were transferred from the cutter to a U.S. Navy aircraft carrier that was scheduled to go to Haiti but was redirected in order to repatriate the migrants back to Cuba.



GUANTANAMO BAY, Cuba – Luis, Olympia, Cynthia, Ariagna and Wilger Irizarry stand for a family photograph inside their tent at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, in November 1994. Photo courtesy of Ariagna Irizarry.

"There were 3,000 Cubans aboard that ship with the women on the bow and men on the stern. The first day we had no food or water because the ship wasn't prepared for so many people. The second day was bad. I was so weak I couldn't walk, and I was very dizzy," said Irizarry. "On the third day I finally got to see Ariagna, and when she came into sight I was absolutely terrified. All this time she had been wearing men's trousers because she was so big with the baby, but when I saw her she was holding the pants bunched in her fist at the waist. She was so skinny that I thought she lost the baby. I was crying when I looked at her and she motioned to me that she was okay. She had lost 17 pounds in three days," Irizarry said with a tight throat.

The Cubans were brought to U. S. Naval Station Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, (Gitmo) at 8:45 a.m. Irizarry remembers a woman coming aboard the ship and announcing to the crowd, "Under no circumstances will any of you ever reach the United States."

"Her words hit me like a cold bucket of water," said Irizarry. "All of our high hopes and plans were washed away just like that. It felt very frustrating to all of us because we wanted to get to America so badly, and for her to tell us like that, so cruelly, was demoralizing. I think I will always remember that woman's face."

As hours passed, the inescapable heat began taking its toll on Irizarry and his family, along with the thousands of others who waited to be processed. Babies fussed and cried and most of the adults became restless and irritated.

“We were on that ship for hours, and when we finally got to the camp it seemed so disorganized,” said Irizarry. “There were thousands of tents set up inside a barbed-wire fence that was encircled by mine fields and there were military men with guns and dogs. It was very frightening.”

According to statistics, the Coast Guard interdicted 10,190 Cubans during the week of August 22-29, 1994, more than during the decade between 1983 and 1993. By early September, as the Haitian and Cuban migrant population grew to above 45,000 at Guantanamo Bay, more than 2,000 military family members and civilian employees were evacuated in order to make room for an estimated 60,000 migrants. The mass exodus was largely attributed to an increased frustration with the economic conditions in Cuba.

“There were so many kids there and we (migrants) weren’t sure how long we would be staying. So after a little while, we began setting up schools and trying to make the place more structured. It helped to have some structure and some type of normalcy in a place so abnormal,” Irizarry explained.



GUANTANAMO BAY, Cuba – Wilger and Ariagna Irizarry hold their infant daughter, Cynthia, at the Guantanamo Bay Naval Hospital in November 1994. Ariagna was seven months pregnant when the couple fled Cuba for America. Photo courtesy of Ariagna Irizarry.

Nearly two months after arriving, on November 5, something very normal happened; Ariagna gave birth to a healthy baby girl at the naval hospital on base. The Irizarry’s named their daughter Cynthia.

“We wanted to name her something more American with hopes that if we did get to America, she would fit in with the other kids. Plus, where we’re from it is a unique name and we were proud to say that our daughter is named Cynthia,” Irizarry said as he pushed out his chest.

“Of all of the babies there, she was the healthiest. The mothers and babies were getting so sick that my wife was breast-feeding the other children in order to keep them healthy. There were many births and many deaths while we were there,” Irizarry added solemnly.

Irizarry and his family were there for more than four months. With no connection to the outside world, no way of communicating with family members at home and no idea when this transition

would end, life at the camp was taking a toll on Irizarry and his family.

“My wife cried herself to sleep nearly every night. She was so upset to have her brand new baby in such nasty conditions. She was worried that we would be there for a long time and that we might have to raise our child there,” Irizarry explained. “Some nights while we were sleeping we heard the mines going off in the fields around camp. There was constant fighting among the population and tensions were building. There were several violent riots and we just wanted out of there.

On January 10, 1995, authorities informed Irizarry that he, Ariagna and Cynthia, would finally be allowed into the United States. “We were absolutely thrilled and overwhelmed with joy. It was like winning the lottery...I have never won the lottery, but that is what I imagine it would feel like,” said Irizarry.

It was a life-changing moment for the Irizarry family. On one hand, they were getting the chance of a lifetime, but on the other hand, they had to leave their friends and family behind. “It was bittersweet,” Irizarry sighed.

However, it wasn't bitter for very long. Eventually, all 19 people who boarded that steel raft bound for America found their way safely, and legally, to its shores.

America opened its golden gates, and San Francisco was the first city to welcome the new Americans. Although the Irizarry's lived with family members in San Francisco, there weren't many jobs for someone who didn't speak English that paid well enough to afford the high cost of living. Irizarry worked delivering produce to grocers in the early mornings and sold Kirby vacuums each afternoon. Ariagna worked at a videotape factory and took care of Cynthia. The Irizarry's left San Francisco after about six months in order to find better jobs. Because they had family members there, the Irizarry's moved to the rural city of Lancaster, Penn.

“There was a day and night difference between San Francisco and Lancaster. In San Francisco, we were surrounded by people who spoke Spanish, but in Lancaster we stuck out like sore thumbs,” remembered Irizarry. “I think it forced us to learn English faster.”

Irizarry found work right away cutting up chicken at a chicken factory and doing a number of various jobs. Ariagna worked at a pretzel factory and took care of Cynthia. To learn English, the couple read the newspaper and watched the news. On November 11, 1996, Irizarry's second child, Jonathan, was born. With very little money and many responsibilities, Irizarry found the U.S. Army. More accurately, the Army found him.

“I always wanted to do something for this country and, at the same time, do something for my family. It was the classic scenario...I wanted to join the Coast Guard, but the recruiting office wasn't completely built yet, and when I went down there the Army recruiter saw me and pulled me into his office,” Irizarry said. “Needless to say, I enlisted in 1997 and spent four years in the Army with the 82nd Airborne Infantry at Fort Bragg, N.C.”

Irizarry deployed for a year to Korea and earned the rank of E-4. Ariagna and the children stayed in Lancaster while Irizarry was deployed, but they moved to North Carolina when he was assigned to the 82nd Airborne Infantry Division. While Irizarry was jumping from perfectly good airplanes as an airborne ranger, Ariagna worked at a medical clinic and took care of their two young babies.

When his enlistment expired, Irizarry spent almost a year in the Army National Guard before deciding to give up three pay grades in order to enlist in the U.S. Coast Guard in 2002.

“Joining the Coast Guard was always in the back of my mind. I had always been impressed with what the Coast Guard did for us all those years ago, and serving this country in the Coast Guard was my way of saying ‘thank you’ for the opportunities that America has afforded me and my family,” Irizarry said.

After attending the eight-week boot camp at the Coast Guard Training Center Cape May, N.J., Irizarry was stationed for two and a half years aboard the 65-foot Coast Guard Cutter *Chock*, home ported in Portsmouth, Va.



“The *Chock* performed a bunch of different missions, everything from ice breaking and law enforcement, to port security and search and rescue,”

Irizarry said proudly. “There was a restaurant nearby that served sandwiches named after the local Coast Guard cutters. Each sandwich had the same number of ingredients as the cutters had missions, and the *Chock*’s was the biggest.”

PORTSMOUTH, Va. -- Irizarry served as a seaman from 2002 to 2004 aboard the 65-foot Coast Guard Cutter *Chock*, home ported in Portsmouth. *Chock*’s missions include ice breaking, law enforcement and port security. Photo courtesy of Ariagna Irizarry

While Irizarry was aboard the *Chock*, Ariagna stayed in North Carolina with the children and continued working at the clinic. “It was better for her and the kids to stay in North Carolina. We had family there, we lived in a safe neighborhood and I came home every-other weekend,” said Irizarry.

Three years ago, Irizarry and his family transferred to Clearwater, Fla., where today he serves as a boatswain’s mate at Coast Guard Station Sand Key, Fla. Among his many duties, Irizarry spends his days on the water driving boats, assisting boaters in distress and guarding America’s coast from anyone attempting to enter illegally.

“I haven’t been stationed at a unit that conducts interdiction operations yet, but I know that I will be okay with it. I understand how they (Cubans) feel and think, but this is my job, and I asked to do this. I am an American citizen, and I raised my hand and gave my word that I would serve my country,” Irizarry affirmed. “This country gave us (family) everything we have. Here, we have the right to own land, houses and cars; we don’t have to ask and they cannot be taken away from us. All of my life, I was taught that American’s are bad, evil and immoral. The first thing an American did for me was save my life.”

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