

“We lost a battle”



C SANTIAGO, CHILE. The five guerrillas are seated around an office at the headquarters of Investigaciones, the Chilean security agency. When they crossed the frontier of northern Chile, the five men—three Cubans: Harry Villegas Tamayo, Leonardo Tamayo Nuñez and Daniel Alarcón Ramírez, and the two Bolivian guides—reeked of their 133-day trek through western Bolivia. Now they are clean, bathed. This noon the haggard fugitives asked for a lunch of beefsteak with eggs and wine. They still wear the heavy-soled sandals of the jungle fighter and the clothes of coarse cloth sold in northern Chile.

These are the worn survivors of the original force of Che Guevara, guerrillas of the Valle Grande, who were trapped by an ever-shrinking circle of 2000 Bolivian troops from September 26 to October 8. Che fell near the three Cubans, before they could break through the strangling noose of soldiers and flee westwards, through 400 miles of mountain and jungle, to the Chilean border. The two Bolivian guides, Estanislao Villeca and Efraín Quiñones Aguilar,

would-be guerrillas but latecomers both, missed the fateful battle of October 8, but found the three fleeing Cubans in time to show them the way to the border.

Now the five, in the custody of Investigaciones while in Chile, idly await their departure for Havana. Their airline tickets have arrived, sent from Cuba, and the two Bolivians will accompany the guerrillas to their homeland. The Cubans, when they came into Chile, requested repatriation, not asylum, and no government has demanded their extradition. The men say they chose to cross into Chile because its government offered better chances of safe conduct than any of Bolivia's other neighbors: Argentina, Paraguay, Brazil or Peru. They agree that their treatment by Chilean officials has been unobjectionable. The Frei government, however, is known to be eager to see the explosive five on their way.

Our interview is delayed by the entrance of three men, armed with satchels: they are street vendors, admitted by Investigaciones after some importuning, to try selling clothes to the guerrillas, “for the trip home.” But a minor official

obstructs whatever sales they might have made. “No. No,” he remonstrates. “They can't buy anything because they have only dollars, and here we accept only *escudos*. They would have to go to a bank to change their money.” Then, a smile stealing across the functionary's face like an afterthought, he asks his audience: “And, anyway, how are guerrillas going to get into a bank?” The sale fails, but the interview begins.

C THE THREE CUBANS had fought in Cuba with Guevara and with Cienfuegos. They were between sixteen and eighteen years old when they joined the Cuban guerrillas.

“I was the machine gunner for the column of Camilo Cienfuegos,” says Alarcón Ramírez (“Benigno”).

“And in Bolivia?”

“A machine gunner also. I was Guevara's point man in Valle Grande.”

The three Cubans were together with Che when he fell, but none saw how he was captured. They fought in separate places. Benigno, the point man, had received that day an order from Che:

by Edgardo Damommio

Photograph by Marc Hutten

"You go there, to the front. The soldiers have to pass through there. You must, on no account, leave that position."

"During the whole day I held my position . . . from six in the morning to eight at night. I was fighting nearly hand-to-hand with the soldiers, at less than 30 yards distance. I killed four and wounded six. At night, I came down from my post. Che was no longer there. Apparently, two comrades had been sent to fetch me, but they had fallen before reaching me. This was the encirclement that lasted from September 26 to October 8. In the end, we broke the ring fighting."

The machine gunner says little else. As a boy in Cuba, he was a peasant and tilled coffee fields. Ever since, he has been a fighter. "The machine gun was an SIT, a Belgian weapon," he says, and slouches into his coat.

Now the questioning turns to "Pombo," practically Guevara's bodyguard.

"Why did the guerrilla war fail?"

"It didn't fail. We lost a battle."

Nobody will budge him from that belief. He likes to talk, and his eyes shine as he explains: "The guerrilla, like man, is at birth an almost defenseless creature, a child. If ours had survived he would have grown and developed. But in Bolivia there was one failure: they discovered us too early and we had to fight in March. Che had calculated that we could undertake the first battles in December. Then our people would have been ready and we would have had good connections with the cities. Also, the peasant's distrust would have dissipated."

"There was no peasant support?"

Pombo hesitates. "Yes, there was, but they were afraid. Afraid of the Army, the strong ones."

"Didn't you have the support of the Bolivian Communist Party?"

"We had its moral support."

"What was that worth?"

"Nothing."

"Then there was no support?"

"Factions in the Party did not want to support the guerrilla. Others, yes; but they wanted to wait and see."

"Were you aware of the conversation between Mario Monje, the secretary-general of the Party, and Che Guevara?"

"Che told us about it. Monje argued three points: first, that the pro-Chinese faction of the Party would not be allowed in the guerrilla action; second, that military and political leadership of the guerrilla war must be in the hands of

the Party; third, that we should wait a while and solicit the help of all Latin American Communist parties."

Pombo continues: "Che disagreed on all three points. And on one he was inflexible: we must retain the leadership of the movement until a Bolivian force was ready. Monje, as a leader of the Party, rejected this. However, before leaving on December 31, he said that he, personally, not as a member of the Party, wanted to participate in the guerrilla force. He said he would explain his position to the Party and return to join us. As you know, he never returned."

CIT'S USELESS TO ASK the three Cubans if the Bolivian experience makes them doubt the value of the concept of the *foco*. For them, doubt is incomprehensible. They must create revolutionary centers and spread them through all the continent. The point is to make revolution now. *Ir pa'delante* (forward) and *patria o muerte*—that is all.

What kind of men are these? Are they fanatics, professional revolutionaries or political elitists? They are none of these and there *is* no adequate definition. These men of Che Guevara are, politically, almost ingenuous; without political polish, they believe profoundly in their own truths. They are a sort of practical men, practical soldiers with a belief, an enormous and simple conviction: armed struggle is the road of revolution, and there is no alternative.

"What do you talk about when you are alone? What do you discuss among yourselves?"

"We talk of the revolution. We talk of battles. We talk of battle plans."

What did that girl guerrilla mean to them, that Tania, shot in midstream while trying to cross a river gorge?

"She was a guerrilla—just like the rest of us."

"Do you talk about your own people, your wives, your private lives?"

"No. That kind of talk, that's another question. We think that kind of talk would be harmful to us. It can bring nostalgia and even fear. Sometimes we speak of the last time we ate a great meal, of a night that we drank a lot. And as for women, after a few months in the jungle, the desire to have a woman changes to something else; this drive, this desire, it gets applied to other objects. It can't really be explained, it has

to be lived. For example, Commander Guevara was to us like a father."

Leonardo Tamayo resumes the story of the guerrilla struggle in Bolivia: "In all, we were 36 men: 16 Cubans who entered by different routes—through Brazil, through Chile from Arica—all legally—18 Bolivians and two Peruvians. In December 1966, this was our strength. Che had arrived before us.

"Very soon we fell ill. Most of us were sick and there were engagements with the Army long before training was completed, before we had adapted physically to the conditions; moreover, our contacts with the cities weren't operating, and communications in Bolivia are poor.

"It became necessary to divide into two groups: one stayed under the command of Ernesto Guevara and another came under 'Joaquin' [Tania's group]. In this way our strength was split. We remained trapped in Nancahuazu, until we broke through the circle on October 8. Then the two Bolivians joined us. Villeca came looking for us, and Communist Party people, friends of his, put him on our track."

The Bolivian, Villeca, adds: "I didn't agree with the Communists who would not support the guerrillas. I wanted to fight. I came looking for them and found them."

CFROM THEN ON THE STORY of the group is the story of a 400-mile march, eluding the Army.

"We never saw any soldiers. We made the whole march on foot, carrying small arms for personal defense. Sometimes we saw airplanes searching for us. Moving by night, and sometimes also by day, with forced marches, we came to the frontier."

"Do you think it makes sense to put a group of strangers—in your case, Cubans—in a foreign country to make revolution? Did you think that a small number of you, no matter how brave, could raise a country up in arms against its government?"

"We were preparing a Bolivian force which would have been the authentic guerrilla force. Then, we would move on to another country. Peru and Argentina, for example. The revolution is Latin American."

Edgardo Damommio is director of the Latin American network of Inter Press Service.



Wood engraving by Stefan Martin, from a drawing by Ben Shahn