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Reminiscences of the Cuban Revolutionary War

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PROLOGUE

For a long time we have wanted to write a history of our revolution, illustrating its many and varied aspects. Many of the revolution's leaders have often expressed, privately or publicly, their desire to write such a history. But the tasks are many, the years go by, and the memory of the insurrection is dissolving into the past. These events have not yet been properly described, events which already belong to the history of the Americas. For this reason, I present here a series of personal reminiscences of the skirmishes, attacks, and battles in which we all participated. I do not wish that this fragmentary history, based on memories and a few hasty notes, should be regarded as a full account. On the contrary, I hope that those who lived through each event will further elaborate.

The fact that during the entire struggle, I was limited to fighting at a given point on Cuba's map, evidently prevented me from participating in battles and events in other places. Still, I believe that to bring to life our revolutionary actions, and to do this with some order, I can best begin with the first battle—the only one Fidel Castro fought in that went against our forces—the surprise attack at Alegría de Pío.

There are many survivors of this battle and each of them is encouraged to fill out the story by contributing what they remember. I ask only that such a narrator be strictly truthful. They should not pretend, for their own aggrandizement, to have been where they were not, and they should be wary of inaccuracies. I ask that after writing a few pages—to the best of their ability, according to their disposition and education—they seriously criticize them, in order to remove every word not corresponding strictly with fact, or those where the facts are uncertain. With this intention, I myself begin my reminiscences.

Ernesto Che Guevara [1963]

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ALEGRÍA DE PÍO

Alegría de Pío is in Oriente province, Niquero municipality, near Cape Cruz, where on December 5, 1956, the dictatorship's forces surprised us.

We were exhausted from a trek that was not so much long as painful. We had landed on December 2, at a place known as Las Coloradas beach. We had lost almost all our equipment, and wearing new boots had trudged endlessly through saltwater swamps. Almost the entire troop was suffering open blisters on their feet; but boots and fungal infections were not our only enemies. We reached Cuba following a seven-day voyage across the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea, without food, in a poorly maintained boat, almost everyone plagued by seasickness from not being used to sea travel. We left the port of Tuxpan on November 25, a day with a stiff wind when all sea travel was prohibited. All this had left its mark on our troop made up of raw recruits who had never seen combat.

All we had left of our equipment for war was nothing but our rifles, cartridge belts, and a few wet rounds of ammunition. Our medical supplies had vanished, and most of our backpacks had been left behind in the swamps. The previous night we had passed through one of the cane fields of the Niquero sugar mill, owned at the time by Julio Lobo. We had managed to satisfy our hunger and thirst by eating sugarcane, but lacking experience we had left a trail of cane peelings and bagasse. Not that the guards following our steps needed any trail, for it had been our guide – as we found out years later – who betrayed us and brought them to us. When we stopped to rest the night before, we let him go – an error we were to repeat several times during our long struggle until we learned that civilians whose backgrounds we did not know could not be trusted in dangerous areas. In the circumstances, we should never have permitted that false guide to leave.

By daybreak on December 5 only a few could take another step. On the verge of collapse, we would walk a short distance and then beg for a long rest. Thus debilitated, orders were given to halt on the edge of a cane field, in some bushes close to dense woods. Most of us slept through the morning hours.

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At noon we noticed unusual activity. Piper planes as well as other small army and private aircraft began to circle. Some of our group continued peacefully cutting and eating sugarcane, not realizing they were perfectly visible to those flying the enemy planes, which were now circling at slow speed and low altitude. I was the troop physician and it was my duty to treat everyone's blistered feet. I recall my last patient that morning: his name was *compañero* Humberto Lamotte and it was to be his last day on earth. In my mind's eye I see how tired and anguished he was as he walked from my improvised first-aid station to his post, carrying in one hand the shoes he could not wear.

Compañero [Jesús] Montané and I were leaning against a tree talking about our respective children, eating our meager rations – half a sausage and two crackers – when we heard a shot. Within seconds, a hail of bullets – at least that's how it seemed to us, this being our baptism of fire – descended on our group of 82 men. My rifle was not one of the best; I had deliberately asked for it because I was in terrible physical condition due to a prolonged asthma attack I had endured throughout our whole maritime voyage, and I did not want to be held responsible for wasting a good weapon. I can hardly remember what followed; my memory is already hazy. After the initial burst of gunfire, [Juan] Almeida, then a captain, approached requesting orders, but there was no one to issue them. Later I was told that Fidel had tried in vain to gather everybody into the adjoining cane field, which could be reached just by crossing a boundary path. The surprise had been too great and the gunfire too heavy. Almeida ran back to take charge of his group. A *compañero* dropped a box of ammunition at my feet. I pointed to it, and he answered me with an anguished expression, which I remember perfectly, and which seemed to say, "It's too late for ammunition." He immediately took the path to the cane field. (He was later murdered by Batista's henchmen.)

This might have been the first time I was faced, literally, with the dilemma of choosing between my devotion to medicine and my duty as a revolutionary soldier. There, at my feet, was a backpack full of medicine and a box of ammunition. They were too heavy to carry both. I picked up the ammunition, leaving the medicine, and started to cross the clearing, heading for the cane field. I remember Faustino Pérez, on his knees in the bushes, firing his submachine gun. Near me, a *compañero* named [Emilio] Albentosa was walking toward the cane field. A burst of gunfire hit us both. I felt a sharp blow to my chest and a wound in my neck; I thought for certain I was dead. Albentosa, vomiting blood and bleeding profusely from a deep wound

made by a .45-caliber bullet, screamed something like, "They've killed me," and began to fire his rifle although there was no one there. Flat on the ground, I said to Faustino, "I'm fucked," and Faustino, still shooting, looked at me and told me it was nothing, but I saw in his eyes he considered me as good as dead. Still on the ground, I fired a shot toward the woods, on an impulse like that of my wounded companion. I immediately began to think about the best way to die, since in that minute all seemed lost. I remembered an old Jack London story in which the hero, aware that he is about to freeze to death in Alaskan ice, leans against a tree and prepares to die with dignity. That was the only thing that came to my mind. Someone, on his knees, shouted that we should surrender, and I heard a voice—later I found out it belonged to Camilo Cienfuegos—shouting, "No one surrenders here!" followed by a swear word. [José] Ponce approached me, agitated and breathing hard. He showed me a bullet wound that appeared to have pierced his lungs. He told me he was wounded and I replied, indifferently, that I was as well. Then Ponce, along with other unhurt *compañeros*, crawled toward the cane field. For a moment I was alone, just lying there waiting to die. Almeida approached, urging me to go on, and despite the intense pain I dragged myself into the cane field. There I saw the great *compañero* Raúl Suárez, whose thumb had been blown away by a bullet, being attended by Faustino Pérez, who was bandaging his hand. Then everything blurred—low-flying airplanes strafing the field, adding to the confusion—amid scenes that were at once Dantesque and grotesque, such as an overweight combatant trying to hide behind a single sugarcane stalk, or a man who kept yelling for silence in the din of gunfire, for no apparent reason.

A group was organized, headed by Almeida, including Commander Ramiro Valdés, in that period a lieutenant, and *compañeros* [Rafael] Chao and [Reynaldo] Benítez. With Almeida leading, we crossed the last path among the rows of sugarcane and reached the safety of the woods. The first shouts of "Fire!" were heard from the cane field and columns of flame and smoke began to rise. But I can't be sure about that. I was thinking more of the bitterness of defeat and the imminence of my death. We walked until darkness made it impossible to go on, and decided to lie down and go to sleep huddled together in a heap. We were starving and thirsty, the mosquitoes adding to our misery. This was our baptism of fire, December 5, 1956, on the outskirts of Niquero. Such was the beginning of forging what would become the Rebel Army.

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THE BATTLE OF LA PLATA

An attack on a small army garrison at the mouth of the La Plata river in the Sierra Maestra produced our first victory. The effect was electrifying and traveled far beyond that rough region. It was like a call to attention, proving that the Rebel Army did in fact exist and was disposed to fight. For us, it reaffirmed our chances for final victory.

On January 14, 1957, a little more than a month after the surprise attack at Alegría de Pío, we came to a halt by the Magdalena river, which separates La Plata and a ridge beginning in the Sierra Maestra and ending at the sea. Fidel gave orders for target practice as some sort of training for our people—some of the men were using weapons for the first time in their lives. We bathed there as well—having ignored matters of hygiene for many days—and those who were able to do so changed into clean clothes. At that time we had 23 working weapons: nine rifles equipped with telescopic sights, five semiautomatic machine guns, four bolt-action rifles, two Thompson submachine guns, two submachine guns, and a 16-gauge shotgun.

That afternoon we climbed the last hill before reaching the environs of La Plata. We were following a narrow track, traveled by very few people, which had been marked out by machete especially for us by a peasant named Melquiades Elías. He had been recommended by our guide Eutimio [Guerra], who at that time was indispensable to us and seemed to be the epitome of the rebel peasant. He was later apprehended by [Joaquín] Casillas, however, who, instead of killing him, bought him off with an offer of \$10,000 and a rank in the army if he managed to kill Fidel. Eutimio came close to fulfilling his part of the bargain, but lacked the courage to do so. He was nonetheless very useful to the enemy, informing them of the location of several of our camps.

At the time, Eutimio was serving us loyally. He was one of the many peasants fighting for their land in the struggle against the big landowners, and anyone who fought them also fought the Rural Guard, who did the landowners' bidding.

That day we took two peasants prisoner, who turned out to be relatives of our guide. One of them was released but we kept the other one as a precautionary measure. The next day, January 15, we sighted the La Plata army barracks, under construction and with zinc roofs. A group of half-dressed men were

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moving about, but we could nevertheless make out their enemy uniforms. Just before sundown, about 6 p.m., a boat came in; some soldiers got out and others climbed aboard. Because we could not quite figure out the maneuver, we postponed the attack to the following day.

We began watching the barracks from dawn on January 16. The coast-guard boat had withdrawn during the night and although we searched the area, no soldiers could be seen. At 3 p.m. we decided to approach the road along the river leading to the barracks and take a look. By nightfall we crossed the very shallow La Plata river and took up position on the road. Five minutes later we apprehended two peasants; one of them had a record as an informer. When we told them who we were and assured them that if they did not speak our intentions could not be guaranteed, they gave us some valuable information: the barracks held about 15 soldiers. They also told us that Chicho Osorio, one of the region's three most notorious foremen, was about to pass by; these foremen worked for the Laviti family estate. The Lavitis had built an enormous fiefdom, maintaining it through a regime of terror with the help of individuals like Chicho Osorio. Shortly afterward, the said Chicho showed up drunk, astride a mule, with a small Afro-Cuban boy riding behind him. Universo Sánchez, in the name of the Rural Guard, gave him the order to halt and Chicho rapidly replied, "mosquito." That was the password.

We must have looked like a bunch of pirates, but Chicho Osorio was so drunk we were able to fool him. Fidel stepped forward and in an indignant tone said he was an army colonel who had come to investigate why the rebels had not yet been liquidated. He bragged about having gone into the woods, which accounted for his beard. He added that what the army was doing was "trash." In a word, he cut the army's efficiency to pieces. Sheepishly, Chicho Osorio admitted that the guards spent all their time inside the barracks, eating and doing nothing but firing occasional useless rounds. He readily agreed that the rebels must be wiped out. We carefully began asking about who was friendly and unfriendly in the area and noted his replies, naturally reversing the roles: when Chicho called somebody a bad man we knew he was one of our friends, and so on. We had some 20 names and he was still jabbering away. He told us how he had killed two men, adding, "But my General Batista set me free at once." He spoke of having slapped two peasants who were "a little bad-mannered," adding that the guards were

incapable of such action; they let the peasants talk without punishing them. Fidel asked Osorio what he would do if he ever caught Fidel Castro, and Osorio, with an explicit gesture, said that he would cut his ... off, and that the same went for Crescencio [Pérez]. "Look," he said, showing us his shoes, which were the same Mexican-made kind our troops wore, "these shoes belonged to one of those sons of ... we killed."

There, without realizing it, Chicho Osorio signed his own death sentence. At Fidel's suggestion, he agreed to accompany us to the barracks in order to surprise the soldiers and prove to them they were badly prepared and were neglecting their duties. Nearing the barracks, with Chicho Osorio in the lead, I was still not certain he had not wised up to our trick. But he kept on ingenuously, so drunk he could not think straight. After crossing the river again to approach the barracks, Fidel said that established military rules called for a prisoner to be tied up. Osorio did not resist and he went on, unwittingly, as a real prisoner. He explained to us that the only guards posted were at the entrance to the barracks under construction, and at the house of one of the other foremen named Honorio. Osorio guided us to a place near the barracks on the road to El Macío. *Compañero* Luis Crespo, now a commander, went on to scout around and returned saying that the foreman's report was correct. Crespo had seen the two barracks and the fiery ends of the guards' cigarettes.

We were just about ready to approach the barracks when we had to hide to let three soldiers on horseback go by. The men were driving a prisoner on foot like a mule. They passed close by me, and I remember the words of the poor peasant, "I'm just like one of you," and the answer by one of the men we later identified as Corporal Basol, "Shut up and keep walking or I'll whip you." We thought the peasant would escape danger by not being in the barracks when we attacked with our bullets, but the following day, when the soldiers heard of the attack, they brutally murdered him at El Macío.

We had 22 weapons ready for the attack. It was an important occasion, and we had very little ammunition. We had to take the army barracks at all costs, for failure meant wasting our ammunition, leaving us practically defenseless. *Compañero* Lieutenant Julio Díaz – who later died heroically at the battle of El Uvero – Camilo Cienfuegos, Benítez, and Calixto Morales, armed with semiautomatic machine guns, were to surround

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the palm-thatched quarters on the right side. Fidel, Universo Sánchez, Luis Crespo, Calixto García, [Manuel] Fajardo – today a commander with the same last name as our physician, Piti Fajardo, who was [later] killed in the Escambray – and myself, would attack the center. Raúl [Castro] with his squadron and Almeida with his would attack from the left.

We approached within 40 meters of the barracks. By the light of a full moon, Fidel initiated the gun battle with two bursts of machine-gun fire and all available rifles followed. Immediately, we demanded the enemy's surrender, but with no results. The murderer and informer Chicho Osorio was executed as soon as shooting broke out.

The attack had begun at 2:40 a.m., and the guards put up a much fiercer resistance than we had expected. A sergeant, armed with an M-1, responded with fire every time we demanded their surrender. We were given orders to use our old Brazilian-type hand grenades. Luis Crespo threw his, and I mine, but they did not detonate. Raúl Castro threw a stick of dynamite and nothing happened. We then had no choice but to get close to the quarters and set them on fire, even at the risk of our own lives. Universo Sánchez made the first, futile attempt and Camilo Cienfuegos also failed. Finally, Luis Crespo and I got close to one of the buildings and this *compañero* set it alight. The light from the blaze showed us it was simply a storeroom full of coconuts, but we had intimidated the soldiers and they gave up the fight. One of them, trying to escape, ran right into Luis Crespo's rifle; Luis shot him in the chest, took the man's rifle, and continued firing into the house. Camilo Cienfuegos, sheltered behind a tree, fired on the fleeing sergeant and ran out of ammunition. The soldiers, almost defenseless, were being wounded mercilessly by our bullets. Camilo Cienfuegos was first into the quarters, on our side, where shouts of surrender could be heard.

We quickly took stock of our takings: eight Springfields, one Thompson machine gun, and about 1,000 rounds; we had fired approximately 500 rounds. In addition, we now had cartridge belts, fuel, knives, clothing, and some food. Casualties: they had two dead, five wounded, and we had taken three prisoners. Some, along with the informer Honorio, had fled. On our side, not a scratch.

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We withdrew after setting fire to the soldiers' quarters and tending to the wounded as best we could – three of them were seriously wounded and we left them in the care of the prisoners. We were told after the final victory that they had died. One of the soldiers later joined the forces under Commander Raúl Castro, was promoted to lieutenant, and died in a plane accident after the war.

Our attitude toward the wounded was in stark contrast to that of Batista's army. Not only did they kill our wounded men, they abandoned their own. Over time this difference had an effect on the enemy and it was a factor in our victory. Fidel ordered that the prisoners be given all available medicine to take care of the wounded. This decision pained me because, as a doctor, I felt the need to save all available medicine for our own troops. We freed all the civilians and at 4:30 a.m. on January 17 started for Palma Mocha, arriving at dawn and searching out the most inaccessible zones of the Sierra Maestra.

Our eyes met with a pitiful spectacle: the day before, an army corporal and one of the foremen had warned all the families in the area that the air force was going to bomb the entire zone, and an exodus – almost all the peasants – toward the coast had begun. No one knew of our presence in the area, so it was evidently a maneuver on the part of the foremen and the Rural Guard to take the land and belongings away from the peasants. But their lie had coincided with our attack and now became a reality. Terror reigned among the peasants and it was impossible for us to stop their flight.

This was the first victorious battle of the Rebel Army. This battle and the one following it were the only occasions in the life of our troop when we had more weapons than men. Peasants were not yet ready to join in the struggle, and communication with the urban bases was practically nonexistent.

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THE BATTLE OF ARROYO DEL INFIERNO

The Arroyo del Infierno is a narrow, shallow river flowing into the Palma Mocha river. Walking along it, away from the Palma Mocha, and mounting the slopes of the bordering hills, we reached a small circular clearing where we found two peasant huts. Here we made camp, naturally leaving the huts unoccupied.

Fidel presumed that the army would come after us, locating our approximate position. With this in mind, he planned an ambush to capture some enemy soldiers, and to this end he posted the men.

Fidel watched our lines vigilantly, and checked and rechecked our defenses. Contour lines were marked irregularly every five or so meters up the hill. On the morning of January 19 we were reviewing the troops when there was an accident that could have had serious consequences. As a trophy from the battle of La Plata, I had taken a helmet from one of Batista's corporals, and I wore it with great pride. But when I went to inspect the troops, walking through open woods, the forward guards heard us coming in the distance and saw that someone wearing a helmet was leading the group. Fortunately, at that moment they were cleaning their weapons, and only Camilo Cienfuegos's gun was working. He opened fire on us, and immediately realized his mistake. His first shot missed and then his machine gun jammed, preventing him from firing further. This incident was symptomatic of the state of high tension that prevailed as we waited for the relief that battle would bring. In such moments, even those with the strongest nerves feel a certain faint trembling in the knees, and everyone longs for the stellar moment of war: battle. None of us, however, wanted to fight; we did so out of necessity.

At dawn on January 22 we heard a few single shots from the direction of the Palma Mocha river, and this forced us to maintain even stricter discipline in our lines, to be more cautious, and to wait for the imminent arrival of the enemy. Believing the soldiers to be nearby, we ate neither breakfast nor lunch. Some time before, the *guajiro* Crespo and I had found a hen's nest and we rationed the eggs, leaving one behind as is customary so the hen would continue to lay. That day, in light

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of the shots we had heard during the night, Crespo decided we should eat the last egg, and we did so. It was noon when we saw a human figure in one of the huts. At first we thought that

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one of the *compañeros* had disobeyed the order not to approach the huts. That was not the case: one of the dictatorship's soldiers was looking around. Then about six others appeared; some of them left, three remained in view. We saw the soldier on guard look about, pick a few weeds, put them behind his ears in an attempt at camouflage, then sit calmly in the shade; his face, clearly visible through the telescopic sight, showed no signs of fear. Fidel's opening shot shattered him; he managed to shout out something like, "*Ay, mi madre!*" then he fell over dead. The gun battle spread and the unfortunate soldier's two comrades fell. Suddenly, I noticed that in the hut closer to me another soldier was trying to hide from our fire. I could only see his legs, since from my elevated position the roof of the hut concealed his body. I fired at him and missed; the second shot caught the man full in the chest and he fell, leaving his rifle pierced in the ground by the bayonet. Covered by the *guajiro* Crespo, I reached the house and saw the body; I took his bullets, his rifle, and a few other belongings. The man had been struck full in the chest, the bullet probably piercing his heart, and his death had been instantaneous; he already showed the first signs of rigor mortis, perhaps because of the exhaustion of his last day's march. The battle was extraordinarily fast and soon, our plan successfully executed, we all withdrew.

Taking inventory, we found that we had spent approximately 900 bullets and had retrieved 70 from a full cartridge case. We also acquired a machine gun, a Garand, which was given to Commander Efigenio Ameijeiras, who used it for a good part of the war. We counted four enemy dead, but months later, after capturing an informer, we learned that five had actually been killed. It was not an absolute victory, but neither was it Pyrrhic. We had matched our forces against the enemy, in new conditions, and we had passed the test.

This improved our spirits greatly, and enabled us to continue climbing the whole day toward the most inaccessible reaches in order to escape pursuit by larger enemy groups. We reached the other side of the mountain. We were walking parallel to Batista's troop, also withdrawing, both groups having crossed the same mountain peak to reach the other side. For two days our troops and those of the enemy marched almost side by side without realizing it. Once, we slept in a hut that was barely separated from another housing the enemy, by a small river like the La Plata and a couple of bends in the road. The lieutenant

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commanding the enemy patrol was Sánchez Mosquera, whose name had become infamous throughout the Sierra Maestra in the wake of his pillaging. It is worth mentioning that the shots we had heard several hours before the battle had killed a peasant of Haitian descent who had refused to lead the troops to our hideout. If they had not committed this murder they would not have alerted us and found us waiting for them.

Once again, we were carrying too much weight; many of us had two rifles. Under these circumstances, it was not easy to walk, but clearly morale was different from what it had been after the disaster of Alegría de Pío. A few days earlier we had defeated a group smaller than ours, entrenched in a barracks; now we had defeated a column on the march, superior in numbers to our forces. We could all verify the importance of this type of battle to eliminate the enemy's forward guard, for without a forward guard, an army is paralyzed.

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AIR ATTACK

After the victory over Sánchez Mosquera's forces, we walked along the La Plata's banks, and later, crossing the Magdalena river, returned to the already familiar region of Caracas. But the atmosphere was different from what we had experienced that first time, when we had been in hiding and the villagers had supported us. Now, Casillas's troops had passed through, sowing terror throughout the region. The peasants had gone, leaving only their empty huts and a few animals, which we sacrificed and ate. Experience had taught us it was not smart to stay in the houses, so after spending the night in one of the more isolated huts, we climbed back to the woods and pitched camp beside a small spring almost at the summit of Caracas peak.

It was there that Manuel Fajardo came to me and asked me if it were possible that we could lose the war. My response, quite aside from the euphoria of victory, was always the same: the war would unquestionably be won. He explained that he had asked me because the *gallego* Morán had told him that winning the war was impossible, that we were lost; he had urged Fajardo to abandon the campaign. I made Fidel aware of this, who told me that Morán had already let him know he was covertly testing the morale of the troops. We agreed that this was not the best approach, and Fidel made a short speech urging greater discipline and explaining the dangers that might arise if this discipline were disregarded. He also announced three crimes punishable by death: insubordination, desertion, and defeatism.

Our situation was not particularly happy in those days. The column lacked that spirit which is forged only through battle, and it was without a cohesive political consciousness. On one day, a *compañero* would leave us, on the next day another, and many requested assignments in the city that often entailed much more risk but that meant an escape from the rough conditions in the countryside. Still, our campaign continued on its course; the *gallego* Morán demonstrated indefatigable energy looking for food and making contact with the peasants in the immediate vicinity.

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Such were our spirits on the morning of January 30, [1957]. Eutimio Guerra, the traitor, had earlier asked permission to visit his sick mother and Fidel had granted it, also giving him some money for the trip. According to Eutimio, his trip would last some weeks. We had not yet caught on to a series of incidents, but this man's subsequent behavior clearly explained them. When he rejoined the troop, Eutimio said that he had almost reached Palma Mocha when he realized government forces were on our trail. He had tried to get back to warn us but found only the bodies of the soldiers in Delfín [Torres's] hut, one of the peasants whose land became the scene of the battle of Arroyo del Infierno. Eutimio said he had followed our trail across the Sierra Maestra until he finally found us; but what had actually happened was that he had been taken prisoner. After being bribed with money and a military rank in exchange for murdering Fidel, he was now working as an enemy agent.

As part of this plan, Eutimio had left the camp the previous day and on the morning of January 30, after a cold night, just as we were getting up, we heard the roar of planes. We could not quite locate them since we were in the woods. Our field kitchen was some 200 meters below us near a small spring, where the forward guard was stationed. Suddenly, we heard the dive of a fighter plane, the rattle of machine-gun fire, and after a moment, the bombs. Our experience was very limited and we seemed to hear shots from all sides. Fifty-caliber bullets explode when they hit the ground and, although what we heard was machine guns firing from the air, as the bullets exploded near us they gave the impression of coming from the woods. Because of this, we thought we were being attacked by ground troops.

I was instructed to wait for members of the forward guard and to gather up some of the supplies we had dropped during the air attack. We were to meet the rest of the troop at the Cueva del Humo. My *compañero* was Chao, a veteran of the Spanish Civil War, and though we waited quite a while for some of the missing men, no one came. We followed the column along an indistinct track, both weighed down, until we came to a clearing and decided to rest. After a while, we noticed some noise and movement, and saw that our column's tracks were also being followed by Guillermo García (today a commander) and Sergio Acuña, both from the forward guard, who were trying to rejoin the group. After some deliberation, Guillermo García and I returned to the camp to see what was happening since the

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noise of the planes had faded. A desolate spectacle awaited us: with an eery precision that fortunately was not repeated during the war, the field kitchen had been attacked. The hearth had been smashed to pieces by machine-gun fire, and a bomb had exploded exactly in the center of the forward guard camp, just moments after our troops had left. The *gallego* Morán and a *compañero* had gone out to scout and Morán had returned alone, announcing that he had seen five planes in the distance but that there were no ground troops in the vicinity.

The five of us, with heavy loads, continued to walk through the bleak scene of our friends' burned-out huts. We found only a cat that miaowed at us pitifully and a pig that came out grunting when it heard us. We had heard of the Cueva del Humo, but did not know exactly where it was, so we spent the night in uncertainty, waiting to see our *compañeros* but fearing we would meet the enemy instead.

On January 31 we took up position on the top of a hill overlooking some cultivated fields, where we thought we would find the Cueva del Humo. We scouted around without finding anything. Sergio, one of the five, thought he saw two people wearing baseball caps, but he was slow in telling us and we could not catch up with them. We went out with Guillermo to explore the bottom of the valley near the banks of the Ají river, where a friend of Guillermo gave us something to eat, but the people there were very fearful. Guillermo's friend told us that all of Ciro Frías's merchandise had been taken by the guards and burned; the mules had been requisitioned and the mule driver killed. Ciro Frías's store was burned down and his wife taken prisoner. The men who had passed through in the morning were under Major Casillas's orders, who had slept somewhere near the house.

On February 1 we stayed in our little camp, practically in the open air, recovering from the exhaustion of the previous day's march. At 11 a.m. we heard gunfire on the other side of the hill and soon, closer to us, we heard desperate shouts, like someone crying out for help. With all this, Sergio Acuña's nerves seemed to snap, and silently, he left his cartridge belt and rifle, deserting the guard post he was assigned to. I noted in my campaign diary that he had taken with him a straw hat, a can of condensed milk, and three sausages; at the time we felt deeply for the can of milk and the sausages. A few hours later we heard some noise and prepared to defend ourselves, not knowing whether the

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deserter had betrayed us or not. But Crescencio appeared with a large column of almost all our men, and also some new people from Manzanillo led by Roberto Pesant. Missing from our forces were Sergio Acuña, the deserter, and *compañeros* Calixto Morales, Calixto García, and Manuel Acuña; also a new recruit [Evangelista Mendoza] who had been lost on the first day in the cross fire.

Once again we descended to the Aji river valley, and on the way some of the supplies from Manzanillo were distributed, including a surgical kit and a change of clothes for everyone. It moved us greatly to receive clothes which had [our] initials embroidered on to them by the girls of Manzanillo. The next day, February 2, two months after the *Granma* landing, we were reunited, uniform group; 10 more men from Manzanillo had joined us and we felt stronger and in better spirits than ever. We had many discussions on what had caused the surprise air attack, and we all agreed that cooking by day and the smoke from the fire had guided the planes to our camp. For many months, and perhaps for the duration of the war, the memory of that surprise attack weighed heavily on the spirits of the troop. Right to the end, fires were not built in the open air during the day, for fear of unfavorable consequences.

We would have found it impossible to believe, and I think it did not enter anyone's mind, that the traitor and informer Eutimio Guerra had been in the observation plane, pointing out our location to Casillas. His mother's illness had been a pretext to leave us and join the murderer Casillas. For some time to come, Eutimio played an important adverse role in the development of our liberation war.

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SURPRISE ATTACK AT ALTOS DE ESPINOSA

After the surprise air attack described previously, we abandoned Caracas peak and attempted to return to familiar regions where we could establish direct contact with Manzanillo, receive more help from the outside, and better follow the situation in the rest of the country.

We turned back, crossing the Ají, and returned through territories familiar to all of us, until we reached the house of old Mendoza. With machetes, we had to open up paths along the ridges of the hills that had not been walked for many years, and our progress was very slow. We spent the nights in those hills, practically without food. I still remember, as though it were one of the great banquets of my life, when the *guajiro* Crespo turned up with a can of four pork sausages – a result of earlier savings – saying that they were for his friends. The *guajiro*, Fidel, myself, and someone else enjoyed the meager ration as if it were a lavish feast. The march continued until we reached the house, to the right of Caracas peak, where old Mendoza prepared us something to eat. Despite his fear, his peasant loyalty meant he welcomed us each time we passed through; such were the exigencies of friendship with Crescencio Pérez and other peasants who were his friends in the troop.

For me the march was excruciating – I was suffering a bout of malaria. Crespo and the unforgettable *compañero* Julio Zenón Acosta helped me complete the anguished march. We never slept in the huts in that area; but my state and that of the famous *gallego* Morán, who took every opportunity to fall sick, meant that we had to sleep beneath a roof, while the rest of the troop kept watch in the vicinity, coming to the house only to eat.

We were forced to reduce the troop's size, as a group of men were suffering very low morale, and one or two were seriously wounded; among the latter were Ramiro Valdés (today minister of the interior), and one of Crescencio's sons, Ignacio Pérez, who later died heroically with the rank of captain. Ramirito [Ramiro Valdés] had been badly wounded in the knee, the same knee that had already been hit during the [1953] Moncada attack, so we had no choice but to leave him behind. A few other men also left, to the advantage of the troop. I remember one of them had

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an attack of nerves and began to shriek, there in the solitude of mountains and guerrillas, that he had been promised a camp with abundant food and anti-aircraft defenses, but that now the planes were hounding him and he had neither a roof over his

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head, nor food, nor even water to drink. More or less, this was the impression new guerrillas had of campaign life. Those who stayed and survived the first tests grew accustomed to the dirt, the lack of water, food, shelter, and security, and to a life where the only things one could rely on were a rifle and the cohesion and resistance of the small guerrilla cell.

Ciro Frías arrived with some new recruits, bringing news that today makes us smile, but which at the time filled us with confusion. Díaz Tamayo was on the verge of switching allegiance and “making a deal” with the revolutionary forces; and Faustino had collected thousands and thousands of pesos. In short, subversion was spreading throughout the entire country and chaos was descending on the government. We also heard some sad news, but with important lessons in it. Sergio Acuña, the deserter of some days before, had gone home to some relatives. He began to brag to his cousins about his feats as a guerrilla. A certain Pedro Herrera overheard and denounced him to the Rural Guard. The infamous Corporal Roselló arrived, tortured him, shot him four times, and apparently hanged him. (The assassin’s identity has never actually been verified.) This taught the men the value of cohesion and the futility of attempting to flee a collective destiny alone. But it also made it necessary for us to change camps, for presumably the young man had talked before being murdered, and he knew we were at Florentino’s house.

There was a curious incident at that time and only later when we were fitting the evidence together did things become clear: Eutemio Guerra told us he had dreamed Sergio Acuña’s death, and that in his dream, Corporal Roselló had killed him. This sparked a long philosophical discussion about whether dreams could really predict things to come. It was part of my daily work to explain cultural or political-type things to the men, so I tried to explain that it was not possible. Perhaps the dream could be explained by a huge coincidence, and anyway, we had all believed Sergio Acuña might meet his fate that way; we all knew Roselló was the man pillaging the region at that time. Universo Sánchez provided the key, suggesting that Eutimio was a “storyteller,” and that the previous day when he had left the camp to get 50 cans of milk and a military lamp, someone had obviously told him about it.

One of those who insisted most strongly on the premonition was a 45-year-old illiterate peasant I have already mentioned: Julio Zenón Acosta. He was my first student in the Sierra Maestra; he was working hard to learn to read and write, and

every time we stopped I would teach him a few letters of the alphabet; at that point we were learning the vowels. With great determination, not dwelling on past years but looking at those to come, Julio Zenón had set himself the task of becoming literate. Perhaps his example may be useful today to many peasants, to *compañeros* of his during the war, or to those who know his story. For Julio Zenón Acosta was another of our great *compañeros* at that time; he was a tireless worker, familiar with the region, always ready to help a combatant in trouble, or a combatant from the city who did not yet have the necessary reserves to get out of tight spots. He was the one to cart water from distant springs, the one to take a quick shot, the one to find dry kindling on days of rain and quickly build a fire. He was, in fact, our jack-of-all-trades.

One of the last nights before his treachery became known, Eutimio complained that he did not have a blanket, and asked Fidel if he would lend him one. It was cold in the heights of those mountains that February. Fidel answered that if he did so, they would both be cold, and suggested that they sleep under the same blanket and Fidel's two coats to keep warm. So Eutimio Guerra spent the whole night next to Fidel, with a .45 pistol from Casillas with which to kill him. He also had a pair of grenades to cover his retreat from the peak. He spoke to Universo Sánchez and me, both always near Fidel, about Fidel's guards, "I'm very concerned about those guards; it's so important to be careful." We explained that there were three men posted nearby. We ourselves, veterans of the *Granma* and Fidel's trusted men, relieved each other through the night to protect Fidel personally. Thus, Eutimio spent the night beside the revolution's leader, holding his life at the point of a gun, awaiting the chance to assassinate him. But he could not bring himself to do it. That whole night, the fate of the Cuban Revolution depended, in large measure, on the twists and turns of a man's mind, on a balance of courage and fear, and, perhaps, on conscience, on a traitor's lust for power and wealth. Luckily for us, Eutimio's inhibitions were stronger, and the day broke without incident.

We had left Florentino's house and were camped in a ravine in a dry creek bed. Ciro Frías had gone home, relatively close by, and had brought back some hens and food, so that the long night of rain, virtually without shelter, was offset in the morning by hot soup and food. The news came that Eutimio had passed through as well. Eutimio came and went, for he was trusted by everyone. He had found us at Florentino's house and explained that after he had left to see his sick mother he had seen what had happened at Caracas, and had come after us to see what

else had happened. He explained that his mother was now well. He was taking extraordinary, audacious risks. We were in a place called Altos de Espinosa, very close to a chain of hills—El Lomón, Loma del Burro, Caracas—which the planes strafed constantly. With the face of a soothsayer, Eutimio said, “Today, I tell you, they will strafe the Loma del Burro.” The planes did in fact strafe the Loma del Burro, and Eutimio jumped for joy, celebrating his keen prediction.

On February 9, 1957, Ciro Frías and Luis Crespo left as usual to scout for food, and all was quiet. At 10 a.m., a peasant boy named [Emilio] Labrada, a new recruit, captured someone nearby. He turned out to be a relative of Crescencio and an employee in [León] Celestino’s store where Casillas’s soldiers were stationed. He informed us that there were 140 soldiers in the house; from our position we could in fact see them in the distance on a barren hill. Furthermore, the prisoner said he had talked with Eutimio who had told him that the following day the area would be bombed. Casillas’s troops had moved, but he could not say exactly which direction they were going in. Fidel became suspicious; finally, Eutimio’s strange behavior had come to our attention and speculation began.

At 1:30 p.m., Fidel decided to leave the area and we climbed to the peak, where we waited for our scouts. Ciro Frías and Luis Crespo soon arrived; they had seen nothing strange, everything was normal. We were talking about this when Ciro Redondo thought he saw a shadow moving, called for silence, and cocked his rifle. We heard one shot and then another. Suddenly the air was full of the shots and explosions of an attack, concentrated on our previous camp. The new camp emptied rapidly; afterward I learned that Julio Zenón Acosta would live for eternity at that hilltop. The uneducated peasant, the illiterate peasant, who had understood the enormous tasks the revolution would face after victory, and who was learning the alphabet to prepare himself, would never finish that task. The rest of us ran. My backpack, my pride and joy, full of medicine, reserve rations, books, and blankets, was left behind. I managed, however, to pick up a blanket from Batista’s army, a trophy from La Plata, and ran.

Soon I met up with a group of our men: Almeida, Julito [Julio] Díaz, Universo Sánchez, Camilo Cienfuegos, Guillermo García, Ciro Frías, Motolá, Pesant, Emilio Labrada, and Yayo [Reyes]. (There was one other in this group, though now I don’t remember who it was.) We followed a circuitous path, trying to escape the shots, unaware of the fate of our other *compañeros*.

We heard isolated explosions following on our heels; we were

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easy to follow since the speed of our flight meant we could

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not erase our traces. At 5:15 p.m., by my watch, we reached a rocky spot where the woods ended. After vacillating for a while we decided it was better to wait there until nightfall; if we crossed the clearing in daylight we would be spotted. If the enemy had followed our tracks, we were well placed to defend ourselves. The enemy, however, did not appear and we were able to continue on our way, guided unsurely by *Ciro Frías* who vaguely knew the region. It had been suggested that we divide into two patrols in order to ease the march and leave fewer signs. But *Almeida* and I were opposed to this, wanting to maintain the unity of the group. We realized we were at a place we knew called *Limones*, and after some hesitation, for some of the men wanted to continue, *Almeida*—who as a captain led the group—ordered us to continue to *El Lomón*, which *Fidel* had designated as our meeting point. Some of the men argued that *Eutimio* knew about *El Lomón* and that the army would therefore be waiting for us. We no longer had the slightest doubt that *Eutimio* was a traitor, but *Almeida* decided to comply with *Fidel's* order.

After three days of separation, on February 12, we met *Fidel* near *El Lomón*, at *Derecha de la Caridad*. There it was confirmed for us that *Eutimio Guerra* was the traitor, and we heard the whole story. It began after the battle of *La Plata*, when he was captured by *Casillas* and, instead of being killed, was offered a certain sum of money for *Fidel's* life. We learned that he had been the one to reveal our position in *Caracas* and that he had also given the order to attack the *Loma del Burro* by air, since that had been our itinerary (we had changed plans at the last minute). He had also organized the attack on the small hollow in the river canyon we were sheltered in, from which we saved ourselves with only one casualty because of the opportune retreat *Fidel* had ordered. Further, we had confirmation of the death of *Julio Acosta* and at least one enemy soldier. There were also a few wounded. I must confess that my gun caused neither deaths nor wounds, for I did nothing more than beat a highspeed "strategic retreat." We were once again reunited, our 12 (minus *Labrada* who had gone missing) and the rest of the group: *Raúl*, *Ameijeiras*, *Ciro Redondo*, *Manuel Fajardo*, [*Juan Francisco*] *Echeverría*, the *gallego* *Morán*, and *Fidel*—a total of 18 people. This was the "Reunified Revolutionary Army" of February 12, 1957. Some *compañeros* had been scattered, some raw recruits had abandoned us, and there was the desertion of a *Granma* veteran named *Armando Rodríguez*, who carried a *Thompson* submachine gun. In the last days, whenever he

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heard shots closing in from the distance, his face filled with so much horror and anguish that later we termed his the "hunted face." Each time a man revealed the face of a terrified animal, possessed by the terror our *ex-compañero* had shown in the days before Altos de Espinosa, we immediately foresaw an unfortunate outcome, for that "hunted face" was incompatible with guerrilla life. Someone with such a face "shifted into third," as we said in our new guerrilla slang; Rodríguez's machine gun later showed up in a peasant hut some distance away: his legs must have been blessed.

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DEATH OF A TRAITOR

After this small army was reunited, we decided to leave the region of El Lomón and move to new ground. Along the way, we continued making contact with peasants in the area and laying the necessary groundwork for our subsistence. At the same time, we were leaving the Sierra Maestra and walking toward the plains, where we were to meet those involved in organizing the cities.

We passed through a village called La Montería, and afterward camped in a small grove of trees near a river, on a farm belonging to a man named Epifanio Díaz, whose sons fought in the revolution.

We sought to establish tighter contact within the July 26 Movement, for our nomadic and clandestine life made impossible any exchange between the two parts of the July 26 Movement. Practically speaking, these were two separate groups, with different tactics and strategies. The deep rift that in later months would endanger the unity of the movement had not yet appeared, but we could already see that our ideas were different.

At that farm we met with the most important figures in the urban movement. Among them were three women known today to all the Cuban people: Vilma Espín, now president of the Federation of Cuban Women and Raúl [Castro's] *compañera*; Haydée Santamaría, now president of Casa de las Américas and Armando Hart's *compañera*; and Celia Sánchez, our beloved *compañera* throughout every moment of the struggle, who in order to be close to us later joined the guerrillas for the duration of the war. Another figure to visit was Faustino Pérez, an old acquaintance of ours, and a *compañero* from the *Granma*, who had carried out several missions in the city and came to report to us, before returning to continue his urban mission. (A short while later he was taken prisoner.)

We also met Armando Hart, and I had my only opportunity to meet that great leader from Santiago, Frank País. Frank País was one of those people who command respect from the first meeting; he looked more or less as he appears in the photographs we have of him today, though his eyes were extraordinarily deep.

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It is difficult, today, to speak of a dead *compañero* I met only once, whose history now belongs to the people. I can only say of him that his eyes revealed he was a man possessed by a cause, who had faith in it, and that he was clearly a superior kind of person. Today he is called “the unforgettable Frank País”; and for me, who saw him only once, that is true. Frank is another of the many *compañeros* who, had their lives not been cut short, would today be dedicating themselves to the common task of the socialist revolution. This loss is part of the heavy price the people have paid to gain their liberation.

Frank gave us a quiet lesson in order and discipline, cleaning our dirty rifles, counting bullets, and packing them so they would not get lost. From that day, I made a promise to take better care of my gun (and I did so, although I can't say I was ever a model of meticulousness).

That same grove of trees was also the scene of other events. For the first time we were visited by a journalist, and a foreign journalist at that – the famous [Herbert] Matthews, who brought to the conversation only a small box camera, with which he took the photos so widely distributed later and so hotly disputed in the stupid statements of a Batista minister. Javier Pazos acted as interpreter; he later joined the guerrillas and remained for some time.

Matthews, according to Fidel, for I was not present at the interview, asked unambiguous questions, none of them tricky, and he appeared to sympathize with the revolution. To the question of whether he was anti-imperialist, Fidel said he replied in the affirmative, and also that he objected to the [US] arms deliveries to Batista, insisting that these would not be used for continental defense but rather to oppress the people.

Matthews' visit was naturally very brief. As soon as he left us we were ready to move on. We were warned, however, to redouble our guard since Eutimio was in the area; Almeida was quickly ordered to find him and take him prisoner. Julito Díaz, Ciro Frías, Camilo Cienfuegos, and Efigenio Ameijeiras were also in the patrol. It was Ciro Frías who overcame Eutimio easily, and he was brought to us. We found a .45 pistol on him, three grenades and a safe conduct pass from Casillas. Once captured with this incriminating evidence, he could not doubt his fate. He fell on his knees before Fidel and asked simply that we kill him. He said he knew he deserved to die. He seemed to have aged; there were a good many grey hairs at his temple I had never noticed before.

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The moment was extraordinarily tense. Fidel reproved him harshly for his betrayal, and Eutimio wanted only to be shot, recognizing his guilt. None of us will forget when *Ciro Frías*, a close friend of Eutimio, began to speak. He reminded Eutimio of everything he had done for him, of the little favors he and his brother had done for Eutimio's family, and of how Eutimio had betrayed them, first by causing the death of *Ciro's* brother — who Eutimio had turned over to the army and who had been killed by them a few days before — and then by trying to destroy the whole group. It was a long, emotional tirade, which Eutimio listened to silently, his head bent. He was asked if he wanted anything and he answered that yes, he wanted the revolution, or better said us, to take care of his children.

The revolution has kept this promise. The name Eutimio Guerra resurfaces today in this book, but it has already been forgotten, perhaps even by his children. They go by another name and attend one of our many schools; they receive the same treatment as all the children of the country, and are working toward a better life. One day, however, they will have to know that their father was brought to revolutionary justice because of his treachery. It is also just that they know that the peasant — who in his craving for glory and wealth had been tempted by corruption and had tried to commit a grave crime — had nevertheless recognized his error. He had not even hinted at asking for clemency, which he knew he did not deserve. They should also know that in his last moments he remembered his children and asked our leader that they be treated well.

A heavy storm broke and the sky darkened. In the midst of the deluge, lightning streaking the sky, and the rumble of thunder, one lightning bolt struck followed closely by a clap of thunder, and Eutimio Guerra's life was ended. Even those *compañeros* standing near him could not hear the shot.

I remember a small episode as we were burying him the following day. Manuel Fajardo wanted to put a cross over his grave, but I didn't let him because such evidence of an execution would have been very dangerous for the owners of the property we were camped on. So he cut a small cross into the trunk of a nearby tree. And this is the sign marking the grave of the traitor.

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The *gallego* Morán left us at that time; by then he knew how little we thought of him. We all considered him a potential deserter (he had disappeared once for two or three days with the excuse that he had been following Eutimio and had got lost in the woods). As we prepared to leave, a shot sounded and we found Morán with a bullet in the leg. Those who were nearby later sustained themselves with many heated discussions on this: some said the shot was accidental and others that he shot himself so he wouldn't have to follow us.

Morán's subsequent history – his treachery and his death at the hands of revolutionaries in Guantánamo – suggests he very probably shot himself intentionally.

When we had left, Frank País agreed to send a group of men in the first days of the following month, March. They were to join us at Epifanio Díaz's house, in the vicinity of El Jíbaro.

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BITTER DAYS

The days following our departure from the house of Epifanio Díaz were for me, personally, the most grueling of the war. These notes are an attempt to give an idea of what the first part of our revolutionary struggle was like for all combatants. If, in this passage, more than any other, I have to refer to my own involvement, it is because it is related to later episodes. It would not be possible to separate the two without losing the continuity of the narrative.

After leaving Epifanio's house, our revolutionary group consisted of 17 men from the original army, and three new *compañeros*: Gil, Sotolongo, and Raúl Díaz. These three *compañeros* came on the *Granma*; they had been hiding for some time near Manzanillo and, hearing of our presence, had decided to join us. Their stories were the same as ours: they had been able to evade the Rural Guard by seeking refuge in the house of one peasant after another; they had reached Manzanillo and hidden there. Now they joined their fate to that of the whole column. In that period, as has been described, it was very difficult to enlarge our army; a few new men came, but others left. The physical conditions of the struggle were very hard, but the spiritual conditions even more so, and we lived with the feeling that we were constantly under siege.

We were walking slowly in no fixed direction, hiding among bushes in a region where the livestock had won out over the foliage, leaving only remnants of vegetation. One night on Fidel's small radio we heard that a *compañero* from the *Granma*, who had left with Crescencio Pérez, had been captured. We already knew about this from Eutimio's confession, but the news was not yet official; now at least we knew he was alive. It was not always possible to emerge with your life from an interrogation by Batista's army.

Every so often, from different directions, we heard machinegun fire; the guards were shooting into the trees, which they often did. But although they expended considerable ammunition, they never actually entered these areas.

In my campaign diary I noted, on February 22, [1957], that I had the first symptoms of what could develop into a serious asthma attack, as I was without asthma medicine. The new date for the rendezvous was March 5, so we were forced to wait for

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a few days. We were walking very slowly, simply marking time until March 5, the day Frank País was to send us a group of

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armed men. We had already decided that first we had to fortify our small front before increasing it in numbers, and therefore, all available arms in Santiago were to be sent up to the Sierra Maestra.

One dawn found us on the banks of a small stream where there was almost no vegetation. We spent a precarious day there, in a valley near Las Mercedes, which I believe is called La Majagua (names are now a little vague in my memory). By night we arrived at the house of old Emiliano, another of the many peasants who in those days felt the shock of fear each time they saw us, but who nevertheless risked their lives for us valiantly, contributing to the development of our revolution. It was the wet season in the Sierra Maestra and we were soaked every night, which is why we entered the homes of peasants, despite the danger, because the area was infested with soldiers. My asthma was so bad I could not move very well, and we had to sleep in a little coffee grove, near a peasant hut, where we regrouped our forces. On the day I am describing, February 27 or 28, censorship in the country was lifted and the radio streamed news of everything that had happened during the past months. They spoke of terrorist acts and of the Matthews interview with Fidel; it was then that [Batista's] minister of defense made his famous statement that the Matthews interview had never taken place, and challenged him to publish the photos.

Hermes, the son of old Emiliano, was a peasant helping us with meals and pointing out paths we should take. But on the morning of February 28 he did not appear as he usually did, and Fidel ordered us to evacuate immediately and post ourselves where we could overlook the roads, as we did not know what would happen. At about 4 p.m., Luis Crespo and Universo Sánchez were on watch, and the latter saw a large troop of soldiers coming along the road from Las Vegas, preparing to occupy the crest. We had to run quickly to the top of the hill and cross to the other side before the troops blocked our path, which was not difficult, given that we had seen them in time. The mortars and machine guns were beginning to sound in the direction we came from, proving that Batista's army was aware of our presence. Everybody was able to reach the peak easily, and pass over it; but for me it was a tremendous effort. I made it to the top, but with such an asthma attack that each step was difficult. I remember how much work Crespo put in to help me when I could not go on and pleaded they leave me behind. The *guajiro*, in that particular language among the troops, said

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to me, "You Argentine son of a ...! You'll walk or I'll hit you with my rifle butt." With everything he was already carrying, he virtually carried both me and my pack, as we made it over the hill with a heavy downpour against our backs.

That is how we reached a small peasant hut and learned we were in a place called Purgatorio. Fidel passed himself off as Major [Armando] González of Batista's army, supposedly searching for the insurgents. The owner, coldly courteous, offered us his house and waited on us. But there was another man there, a friend from a neighboring hut, who was an extraordinary groveler. Because of my physical state I could not fully enjoy that delicious dialogue between Fidel in the role of Major González and the peasant, who offered him advice and wondered aloud why that *muchacho*, Fidel Castro, was in the hills fighting.

We had to make a decision, because it was impossible for me to continue. When the indiscreet neighbor had left, Fidel told the owner of the house who he really was. The man embraced him immediately, saying he was a supporter of the Orthodox Party, that he had always followed [Eduardo] Chibás, and was at our service. We had to send the man to Manzanillo to establish contact or at least to buy medicine, and I had to be left near the house without his wife knowing or suspecting I was there. The last combatant to join our group, of doubtful character but great strength, was assigned to stay with me. Fidel, in a generous gesture, gave me a Johnson repeater, one of the treasures of our group, to defend ourselves with. We all pretended to leave in one direction, and after a few steps my companion (who we called "El Maestro") and I disappeared into the woods to reach our hiding place. News of the day was that Matthews had been interviewed by telephone and announced that the famous photographs would be published. Díaz Tamayo had countered that this could never happen, since no one could ever have crossed the army lines surrounding the guerrillas. Armando Hart was in prison, accused of being second-in-command of the movement. It was February 28.

The peasant carried out his task and brought me sufficient adrenalin. Then came 10 of the most bitter days of struggle in the Sierra Maestra: walking, supporting myself from tree to tree or on the butt of my rifle, accompanied by a frightened *compañero* who trembled each time we heard shots and who became nervous each time my asthma made me cough in some dangerous spot. It was 10 long days of work to reach Epifanio's house once again, which normally took little more than one.

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The date for the meeting had been March 5, but it had been impossible for us to get there. Because of the army line and the impossibility of rapid movement, we did not arrive at Epifanio Díaz's welcoming house until March 11.

The inhabitants of the house informed us of what had happened. Fidel's group of 18 men had mistakenly split up when they thought they were going to be attacked by the army, in a place called Altos de Meriño. Twelve men had gone on with Fidel and six with Ciro Frías. Later, Ciro Frías's group had fallen into an ambush, but they all came out of it unhurt and met up again nearby. Only one of them, Yayo, who returned without his rifle, had passed by Epifanio Díaz's house on his way toward Manzanillo. We learned everything from him. The troop Frank was sending was ready, although Frank himself was in prison in Santiago. We met with the troop's leader, Jorge Sotús, who held the rank of captain. He had not made it on March 5 because news of the new group had spread and the roads were heavily guarded. We made all the necessary arrangements for the rapid arrival of the new recruits, who numbered around 50 men.

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REINFORCEMENTS

On March 13, [1957], while we waited for the new revolutionary troop, we heard over the radio that there had been an attempt to assassinate Batista; they listed the names of some of the patriots killed in the assault. First, there was the student leader José Antonio Echeverría; then there were others, like Menelao Mora. People not involved in the attempt also died. The following day we learned that Pelayo Cuervo Navarro, a militant from the Orthodox Party who had always stood firmly against Batista, had been assassinated and his body abandoned in the aristocratic residential area of the country club known as El Laguito. It is worth noting, as an interesting paradox, that the murderers of Pelayo Cuervo Navarro, and the sons of the dead man, joined together in the failed [1961] Bay of Pigs invasion to “liberate” Cuba from “communist disgrace.”

Despite the veil of censorship, some details of this unsuccessful attempt on Batista’s life – which the Cuban people remember well – got through. Personally, I had not known the student leader, but I had known his friends in Mexico, when the July 26 Movement and the Revolutionary Directorate had agreed to joint action. These *compañeros* were Commander Faure Chomón, who today is ambassador to the Soviet Union, Fructuoso Rodríguez, and Joe Westbrook, all of whom participated in the attack. As is well known, the men had almost made it to the dictator on third floor, but what could have been a successful takeover instead became a massacre of all those who could not escape the trap the presidential palace had become.

Our reinforcements were scheduled to arrive on March 15. We waited long hours in the agreed place, a river bend in the canyon. It was an easy wait in hiding, but no one arrived. Afterward they explained that there had been some difficulties. They arrived at dawn on March 16, so tired they could barely walk the few steps to the trees where they could rest until daybreak. They came in trucks owned by a rice farmer from the area who, frightened by the implications of his act, went into exile in Costa Rica. He later returned by plane flying arms into Cuba, transformed into a hero; his name was Hubert Matos.

The reinforcement was about 50 men, of whom only 30 were armed. They brought two machine guns, one Madzen, and one Johnson. After a few months of living in the Sierra Maestra, we had become veterans, and we saw in the new troop all the

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defects those who came on the *Granma* had displayed: lack of discipline, inability to adjust to the bigger hardships, lack of

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decision, incapacity to adapt to this life. The group of 50 was led by Jorge Sotús, with the rank of captain, and was divided into five squadrons of 10 men, whose leaders were lieutenants; they had been assigned these ranks by the movement in the plains, and these still awaited ratification. The squadron leaders were a *compañero* named Domínguez, who I believe was killed in Pino del Agua a little while later; *compañero* René Ramos Latour, an urban militia organizer, who died heroically in battle during the last days of the dictatorship's final offensive; Pedrín Soto, our old *compañero* from the *Granma*, who finally managed to join us and who also died in battle on the "Frank País" Second Eastern Front, and who was posthumously promoted to commander by Raúl Castro; also, *compañero* Pena, a student from Santiago who reached the rank of commander and took his own life after the revolution; and Lieutenant Hermo, the only squadron leader to survive the almost two years of war.

Of all the new troop's problems, difficulty marching was one of their greatest. Their leader, Jorge Sotús, was one of the worst, and he constantly lagged behind, setting a bad example for the troop. I had been ordered to take charge of the troop, but when I spoke about this with Sotús, he argued that he had orders to turn the men over to Fidel, and that as long as he was leader, he could not turn them over to anyone else, etc., etc. I still had a complex then about being a foreigner, and did not want to take extreme measures, although I noticed a great uneasiness in the troop. After several short marches, which nevertheless became very long due to the men's poor preparation, we reached a place at La Derecha where we were to wait for Fidel. There we met the small group of men who had been separated from Fidel earlier: Manuel Fajardo, Guillermo García, Juventino, Pesant, the three Sotomayor brothers, and Ciro Frías.

The enormous difference between the two groups was clear: ours was disciplined, compact, war-practiced; that of the raw recruits was still suffering the sickness of the first days. They were not used to eating one meal a day, and if the ration did not taste good they would not eat it. Their packs were full of useless things, and if they weighed too heavily on their backs they preferred, for example, to give up a can of condensed milk than a towel (a crime of *lèse-guerrilla*). We took advantage of this by collecting all the cans of food they left along the way. After we were installed in La Derecha the situation became highly tense because of constant friction between Jorge Sotús – an authoritarian spirit who had no rapport with the men – and the troop in general. We had to take special precautions and René Ramos, whose *nom de guerre* was Daniel, was put in charge of

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the machine-gun squadron at the entrance of our refuge so we had a guarantee nothing would happen.

Some time later, Jorge Sotús was sent on a special mission to Miami. There he betrayed the revolution by meeting with Felipe Pazos, whose immeasurable ambition for power made him forget his obligations, and who set himself up as provisional president in a cooked-up intrigue in which the US State Department played an important role.

With time, Captain Sotús showed signs of wanting to redeem himself and Raúl Castro gave him the opportunity, which the revolution has denied no one. He began, however, to conspire against the revolutionary government and was condemned to 20 years in prison, escaping thanks to the complicity of one of his guards who fled with him to the ideal haven of *gusanos* [right-wing Cuban exiles]: the United States.

At the time, however, we tried to help him as much as possible, to iron out his disagreements with the new *compañeros*, and to explain to him the need for discipline. Guillermo García went to the region of Caracas in search of Fidel, while I made a little trip to pick up Ramiro Valdés, more or less recovered from his leg wound. On the night of March 24, Fidel arrived with 12 *compañeros* who at that time stuck firmly by his side, and the sight was impressive. There was a notable difference between the *barbudos* [bearded men], with packs made of any available material and tied together whichever way possible, and the new combatants with clean uniforms, clean-shaven faces, and clean back packs. I explained the problems we had encountered to Fidel and a small council was established to decide on future plans. The council was made up of Fidel, Raúl, Almeida, Jorge Sotús, Ciro Frías, Guillermo García, Camilo Cienfuegos, Manuel Fajardo, and myself. Fidel criticized my behavior in not exercising the authority conferred on me, but leaving it in the hands of the recently arrived Sotús, against whom there was no animosity but whose attitude, in Fidel's opinion, should not have been tolerated. The new platoons were also organized, integrating the entire troop and forming three groups under the direction of captains Raúl Castro, Juan Almeida, and Jorge Sotús; Camilo Cienfuegos would lead the forward guard and Efigenio Ameijeiras the rear guard; I was general staff physician and Universo Sánchez functioned as general staff squadron leader.

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Our troop reached a new excellence with these additional men. We had also received two more machine guns, although they were of doubtful efficiency since they were old and poorly maintained. Nevertheless, we were now a considerable force. We discussed what action we should take immediately; my feeling was that we should attack the first possible enemy post in order to temper the new men in battle. But Fidel and all the other council members thought it better to march for some time so they could get used to the rigors of life in the jungle and the mountains, and the long marches through rugged hills. So we decided to move eastward and walk as much as possible, looking for a chance to surprise a group of soldiers after having some elementary training in guerrilla warfare. The troop prepared itself enthusiastically and left to fulfill its tasks. Its baptism of blood was to be the battle of El Uvero.

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