Guerrilla warfare In Cuba

While the Castro brothers and the other July 26 Movement guerrillas were training in Mexico and preparing for their amphibious deployment to Cuba, another revolutionary group followed the example of the Moncada Barracks assault. On 29 April 1956 at 12:50 PM during Sunday mass, an independent guerrilla group of around 100 rebels led by Reynol Garcia attacked the Domingo Goicuria army barracks in Matanzas province. The attack was repelled with ten rebels and three soldiers killed in the fighting, and one rebel summarily executed by the garrison commander. Florida International University historian Miguel A. Brito was in the nearby cathedral when the firefight began. He writes, "That day, the Cuban Revolution began for me and Matanzas."

The yacht Granma departed from Tuxpan, Veracruz, Mexico, on 25 November 1956, carrying the Castro brothers and 80 others including Ernesto "Che" Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos, even though the yacht was only designed to accommodate 12 people with a maximum of 25. The yacht arrived in Cuba on 2 December. The boat landed in Playa Las Coloradas, in the municipality of Niquero, arriving two days later than planned because the boat was heavily loaded, unlike during the practice sailing runs. This dashed any hopes for a coordinated attack with the llano wing of the Movement. After arriving and exiting the ship, the band of rebels began to make their way into the Sierra Maestra mountains, a range in southeastern Cuba. Three days after the trek began, Batista's army attacked and killed most of the Granma participants – while the exact number is disputed, no more than twenty of the original eighty-two men survived the initial encounters with the Cuban army and escaped into the Sierra Maestra mountains.

The group of survivors included Fidel and Raúl Castro, Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos. The dispersed survivors, alone or in small groups, wandered through the mountains, looking for each other. Eventually, the men would link up again – with the help of peasant sympathizers – and would form the core leadership of the guerrilla army. A number of female revolutionaries, including Celia Sanchez and Haydée Santamaría (the sister of Abel Santamaría), also assisted Fidel Castro's operations in the mountains.
While Batista increased troop deployments to the Sierra Maestra region to crush the 26 July guerrillas, the Second National Front of the Escambray kept battalions of the Constitutional Army tied up in the Escambray Mountains region. The Second National Front was led by former Revolutionary Directorate member Eloy Gutiérrez Menoyo and the "Yanqui Comandante" William Alexander Morgan. Gutiérrez Menoyo formed and headed the guerrilla band after news had broken out about Castro's landing in the Sierra Maestra, and José Antonio Echeverría had stormed the Havana Radio station. Though Morgan was dishonorably discharged from the U.S. Army, his recreating features from Army basic training made a critical difference in the Second National Front troops battle readiness.

Batista's government often resorted to brutal methods to keep Cuba's cities under control. However, in the Sierra Maestra mountains, Castro, aided by Frank País, Ramos Latour, Huber Matos, and many others, staged successful attacks on small garrisons of Batista's troops. Castro was joined by CIA connected Frank Sturgis who offered to train Castro's troops in guerrilla warfare. Castro accepted the offer, but he also had an immediate need for guns and ammunition, so Sturgis became a gunrunner. Sturgis purchased boatloads of weapons and ammunition from CIA weapons expert Samuel Cummings' International Armament Corporation in Alexandria, Virginia. Sturgis opened a training camp in the Sierra Maestra mountains, where he taught Che Guevara and other 26th of July Movement rebel soldiers guerrilla warfare.

In addition, poorly armed irregulars known as escopeteros harassed Batista's forces in the foothills and plains of Oriente Province. The escopeteros also provided direct military support to Castro's main forces by protecting supply lines and by sharing intelligence. Ultimately, the mountains came under Castro's control.

In addition to armed resistance, the rebels sought to use propaganda to their advantage. A pirate radio station called Radio Rebelde ("Rebel Radio") was set up in
February 1958, allowing Castro and his forces to broadcast their message nationwide within enemy territory. Castro's affiliation with the *New York Times* journalist Herbert Matthews created a front page-worthy report on anti-communist propaganda. The radio broadcasts were made possible by Carlos Franqui, a previous acquaintance of Castro who subsequently became a Cuban exile in Puerto Rico.

During this time, Castro's forces remained quite small in numbers, sometimes fewer than 200 men, while the Cuban army and police force had a manpower of around 37,000. Even so, nearly every time the Cuban military fought against the revolutionaries, the army was forced to retreat. An arms embargo — imposed on the Cuban government by the United States on the 14 March 1958 — contributed significantly to the weakness of Batista's forces. The Cuban air force rapidly deteriorated: it could not repair its airplanes without importing parts from the United States.

Batista finally responded to Castro's efforts with an attack on the mountains called Operation Verano, known to the rebels as la Ofensiva. The army sent some 12,000 soldiers, half of them untrained recruits, into the mountains, along with his own brother Raul. In a series of small skirmishes, Castro's determined guerrillas defeated the Cuban army. In the Battle of La Plata, which lasted from 11 to 21 July 1958, Castro's forces defeated a 500-man battalion, capturing 240 men while losing just three of their own.

However, the tide nearly turned on the 29 July 1958, when Batista's troops almost destroyed Castro's small army of some 300 men at the Battle of Las Mercedes. With his forces pinned down by superior numbers, Castro asked for, and received, a temporary cease-fire on 1 August. Over the next seven days, while fruitless negotiations took place, Castro's forces gradually escaped from the trap. By the 8 August, Castro's entire army had escaped back into the mountains, and Operation Verano had effectively ended in failure for the Batista government.
The Battle of Santa Clara was the largest pitched battle of the entire insurgency and the final decisive clash between the *fidelistas* – the guerrilla revolutionaries – and the *batististas* – the army of the military dictatorship.

Santa Clara is representative of the entire conflict, which involved a seemingly impossible victory against the odds. The guerrillas were outnumbered ten to one, and were equipped only with small arms, whereas the soldiers were defending a series of strongpoints with an armoury of heavy weapons.

This imbalance was characteristic of the war as a whole. Only 20 or so guerrillas survived a military ambush a few days after their initial landing in December 1956. At that moment, the Batista regime had tens of thousands of soldiers under arms and an arsenal of advanced Western weaponry, including artillery, tanks, and warplanes. Yet, not much more than two years later, the victorious *fidelistas* entered Havana.

The military power of the politico-social movement unleashed by the Cuban Revolution was evident again at the Bay of Pigs. However misconceived and mismanaged as a military operation, the speed and ease with which the incursion was liquidated – despite the surprise landing in a remote region, the serious fighting was over within three days – is further testimony to the inner strength of the Cuban popular movement. This raises important questions about the relationship between morale and materiel in modern warfare.

On the other hand, the US was largely successful in containing the Cuban Revolution and preventing it from turning into a Latin American conflagration, and this, as Che Guevara fully understood, meant not only isolation but also impoverishment for Cuba – which remains, after 60 years of US blockade, and especially since the collapse of the Soviet empire in 1989, crippled by underdevelopment and poverty.

The Battle of Santa Clara was a series of events in late December 1958 that led to the capture of the Cuban city of Santa Clara by revolutionaries under the command of Che
Guevara. The battle was a decisive victory for the rebels fighting against the regime of General Fulgencio Batista: within 12 hours of the city's capture, Batista fled Cuba and Fidel Castro's forces claimed overall victory. It features prominently on the back of the three convertible peso bill.

Attack on the city

Guevara's column travelled on the 28 December 1958 from the coastal port of Caibarién along the road to the town of Camajuani, which lay between Caibarién and Santa Clara. Their journey was received by cheering crowds of peasants, and Caibarién's capture within a day reinforced the sense among the rebel fighters that overall victory was imminent. Government troops guarding the army garrison at Camajuani deserted their posts without incident, and Guevara's column proceeded to Santa Clara. They arrived at the city's university on the outskirts of the town at dusk.

There, Guevara, who was wearing his arm in a sling after falling off a wall during the fighting in Caibarién, divided his forces, numbering about 300, into two columns. The southern column was the first to meet the defending army forces commanded by Colonel Casillas Lumpuy. An armoured train, sent by Batista to reinforce supplies of ammunition, weapons and other equipment, traveled along to the foot of the hill of Capiro, northeast of the city, establishing a command post there. Guevara dispatched his "suicide squad", a force under 23-year-old Roberto Rodríguez (known as "El Vaquerito"), to capture the hill. The defenders of the hill withdrew with surprising speed and the train, containing officers and soldiers from the command post, withdrew towards the centre of the town.

In the city itself a series of skirmishes were taking place between government forces and the second rebel column, led by Rolando Cubela, with the assistance of civilians providing Molotov cocktails. Two army garrisons (the barracks of the Leoncio Vidal Regiment and the barracks of the 31 Regiment of the Rural Guard) were under siege from Cubela's forces despite army support from aircraft, snipers and tanks.

Guevara, who viewed the capture of the armoured train as a priority, successfully mobilized the tractors of the school of Agronomy at the university to raise the rails of the railway. The train was therefore derailed as it transported troops away from the Capiro hill. The officers within tumbled out asking for a truce. At this, ordinary soldiers, whose morale was very low, began to fraternize with the rebels, saying that they were tired of fighting against their own people. Shortly afterwards the armored
train was in the hands of the rebels and its 350 men and officers were transported as prisoners.

The train contained a considerable amount of weaponry, a huge bonus to revolutionary forces, which would become a basis of further attack in the hands of both the rebels and supportive peasants. Guevara himself described how the men were forced out by a volley of Molotov cocktails, causing the armored train to become a "veritable oven for the soldiers".

The capture of the train, and the subsequent media broadcasts from both the government and the rebels proved to be a key tipping point in the revolution. It is reported by witnesses, that at some point during the battle, Guevara's machine gun jammed. A local mechanic, Alberto Garcia, was taken in the midst of gunfire to his shop about a block away in order to repair the machine gun. Mr. Garcia's new home had just been built right next to the train tracks and it served as Che's headquarters during the battle. Mr. Garcia was still living in his old house with his young family just across the street. In an effort to capture Che Guevara and in retaliation for the taking of the train, Mr. Garcia's new home was subsequently bombarded by Batista's army. Despite the next day's newspapers hailing Batista's "victory" at Santa Clara, contrary broadcasts from Castro's rebel forces accelerated the succession of army surrenders. The reports ended with the news that rebel leaders were heading "without let or hindrance" towards Havana to take over the government.

Capture of the city

Most garrisons around the country quickly surrendered to the first guerrilla commander who showed up at their gate. In mid-afternoon, Che announced over Radio Rebelde that the last troops in Santa Clara had surrendered.

During the Cuban revolution, escopeteros were essential scouts and pickets from the Sierra Maestra and other mountain ranges to the plains. The "escopeteros" were responsible for semi-continuously holding terrain against smaller sized Batista patrols. The escopeteros provided first alerts, communications, protected supply routes, provided essential intelligence and often captured weapons which were sent up to the mainline Castro forces in the high mountains.

It can be argued that Ernesto "Che" Guevara's overseas adventures failed at least in part because of the lack of equivalent escopetero support. In the series of articles written by the staff of Escambray (circa 1988 to 2007, Che entre nosotros. Supplement to Escambray) the critical role of escopeteros is repeatedly mentioned. Yet the
Argentine guerrilla leader never appears to have planned the use of these essential, if poorly armed auxiliaries, in his operations overseas.