

Reminiscences of the Cuban Revolutionary War

ERNESTO CHE GUEVARA

Translated by Victoria Ortiz

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There are many survivors of this battle and each of them is encouraged to contribute his recollections so that the story may thus be filled out. I ask only that the narrator be strictly truthful. He should not pretend, for his own aggrandizement, to have been where he was not, and he should beware of inaccuracies. I ask that after having written a few pages to the best of his ability, depending on his education and his disposition, he then criticize them as seriously as possible in order to remove every word which does not refer to a strict fact, or those where the fact is uncertain. With this intention I begin my reminiscences.

ERNESTO CHE GUEVARA

"El Patojo"

A few days ago a cable brought the news of the death of some Guatemalan patriots, among them Julio Roberto Cáceres Valle. In this difficult job of a revolutionary, in the midst of class wars which are convulsing the entire continent, death is a frequent accident. But the death of a friend, a comrade during difficult hours and a sharer in dreams of better times, is always painful for the person who receives the news, and Julio Roberto was a great friend. He was short and frail; for that reason we called him "El Patojo," Guatemalan slang meaning "Shorty" or Kid. El Patojo had witnessed the birth of our Revolution while in Mexico and had volunteered to join us. Fidel, however, did not want to bring any more foreigners into that struggle for national liberation in which I had the honor to participate.

A few days after the Revolution triumphed, El Patojo sold his few belongings and, with only a small suitcase, appeared in Cuba. He worked in various branches of public administration, and he was the first Chief of Personnel of the Department of Industrialization of INRA [the National Institute of Agrarian Reform]. But he was never happy with his work. El Patojo was looking for something different; he was seeking the liberation of his own country. The Revolution had changed him profoundly, as it had all of us. The bewildered boy who had left Guatemala without fully under-

32 standing the defeat had changed now to the fully conscious revolutionary.

The first time we met we were on a train, fleeing Guatemala, a couple of months after the fall of Arbenz. We were going to Tapachula, from where we could reach Mexico City. El Patojo was several years younger than I, but we immediately formed a lasting friendship. Together we made the trip from Chiapas to Mexico City; together we faced the same problems—we were both penniless, defeated, and forced to earn a living in an indifferent if not hostile environment.

El Patojo had no money and I only a few pesos; I bought a camera and, together, we undertook the illegal job* of taking pictures of people in the city parks. Our partner was a Mexican who had a small darkroom where we developed the films. We got to know all of Mexico City, walking from one end to another, delivering the atrocious photographs we had taken. We battled with all kinds of clients, trying to convince them that the little boy in the photo was really very cute and it was really a great bargain to pay a Mexican peso for such a marvel. Thus we ate for several months. Little by little the contingencies of revolutionary life separated us. I have already said that Fidel did not want to bring him to Cuba, not because of any shortcomings of his, but so as not to turn our army into an international force.

El Patojo had been a journalist, had studied physics at the University of Mexico, had left his studies and then returned to them, without ever getting very far ahead. He earned his living in various places, at various jobs, and never asked for anything. I still do not know whether that sensitive and serious boy was immensely timid, or too proud to recognize his weaknesses and his personal problems to approach a friend for help. El Patojo was an introvert, highly intelligent, broadly cultured, sensitive. He matured steadily and in his last days put his great sensibilities at the service

* As foreigners, they did not have permission to work.

"El Patojo"

of his people. He belonged to the Partido Guatemalteco de Trabajo [Guatemalan Labor Party] and had disciplined himself in that life—he was developing into a fine revolutionary. By then, little remained of his earlier hypersensitivity. Revolution purifies men, improves and develops them, just as the experienced farmer corrects the deficiencies of his crops and strengthens the good qualities.

After he came to Cuba we almost always lived in the same house, as was proper for two old friends. But we no longer maintained the early intimacy in this new life, and I only suspected what was going on in his mind when I sometimes saw him earnestly studying one of the native Indian languages of his country. One day he told me he was leaving, that the time had come for him to do his duty.

El Patojo had had no military training; he simply felt that duty called him. He was going to his country to fight, gun in hand, somehow to reproduce our guerrilla struggle. It was then that we had one of our few long talks. I limited myself to recommending strongly these three things: constant movement, absolute trust, and eternal vigilance. Movement: that is, never stay put; never spend two nights in the same place; never stop moving from one place to another. Mistrust: at the beginning, mistrust even your own shadow, friendly peasants, informants, guides, contacts; mistrust everything until you hold a liberated zone. Vigilance: constant guard duty, constant reconnaissance; establishment of a camp in a safe place and, above all, never sleep beneath a roof, never sleep in a house where you can be surrounded. This was the synthesis of our guerrilla experience, the only thing—along with a warm handshake—which I could give to my friend. Could I advise him not to do it? With what right? We had undertaken something at a time when it was believed impossible, and now he saw that it had succeeded.

El Patojo left and, in time, the news of his death came. At the beginning we hoped that there had been a confusion of names, that

there had been some mistake, but unfortunately his body had been identified by his own mother; there is no doubt that he is dead. And not only he, but a group of comrades with him, all of them as brave, as selfless, as intelligent perhaps as he, but not personally known to us.

Once again we taste the bitterness of defeat and we ask the unanswered question: why did he not learn from the experience of others? Why did those men not heed more carefully the simple advice which was given? We still do not know exactly what happened, but we do know that the region was poorly chosen, that the men were not physically prepared, that they were not mistrustful enough and, of course, that they were not vigilant enough. The repressive army surprised them, killed a few, dispersed the rest, then returned to pursue them, and virtually annihilated them. They took some prisoners; others, like El Patojo, died in battle. After losing their unity, the guerrillas were probably hunted down, as we had been after Alegria de Pio.

Once again young blood has fertilized the fields of America, to make freedom possible. Another battle has been lost; we must make time to weep for our fallen comrades while we sharpen our machetes. From the valuable and tragic experience of the cherished dead, we must firmly resolve not to repeat their errors, to avenge the death of each one of them with many victories, and to bring about total liberation.

When El Patojo left Cuba, he left nothing behind, nor did he leave any messages; he had few clothes or personal belongings to worry about. However, old mutual friends in Mexico brought me some poems he had written and left there in a notebook. They are the last verses of a revolutionary; they are, in addition, a love song to the Revolution, the homeland, and to a woman. To that woman whom El Patojo knew and loved in Cuba, are addressed these final verses, this injunction:

Take it, it is only my heart
Hold it in your hand
And when the day dawns,
Open your hand
And let the sun warm it . . .

El Patojo's heart has remained among us, in the hands of his beloved and in the loving hands of an entire people, waiting to be warmed beneath the sun of a new day which will surely shine for Guatemala and for all America. Today, in the Ministry of Industry where he left many friends, there is a small school of statistics, called in his memory "Julio Roberto Cáceres Valle." Later, when Guatemala is free, his beloved name will surely be given to a school, a factory, or a hospital, to any place where people fight and work in the building of a new society.

with the tiring job of carrying the wounded in hammocks. At dawn the next day, after eating well, we quickly left the place, for we had stayed there a whole day immediately after the attack, close to highways on which soldiers could arrive. The place where we were was at the end of one of those roads constructed by the Babún Company to reach deeper into the forest. With the few available men we started on a short but difficult trek down to the small ravine called Del Indio. Then we climbed a narrow path to a small shack where a peasant named Israel lived with his wife and brother-in-law. It was exceedingly difficult moving our wounded comrades over such rugged terrain, but we did it. The two peasants even gave us their own double bed for the wounded to sleep in.

We had left behind some of our older weapons and a variety of equipment constituting minor war booty, for the weight of the wounded increased with each step. Evidence of our presence always remained in some *bohío*; because of this and since we had the time, we decided to return to each campsite and efface all these traces, since our security depended on it. At the same time Sinecio left to find some friends of his in the region of Peladero.

After a short time Acuña and Joel Iglesias told me that they had heard strange voices on the other slope. We really thought that the time had come when we would be forced to fight under the most difficult circumstances, for our obligation was to defend to the death the precious burden of wounded men with which we had been entrusted. We advanced so that the encounter would take place as far as possible from the *bohío*; some prints of bare feet on the path indicated that the intruders had gone along the same way. Approaching warily, we heard an unconcerned conversation among several persons; loading my Tommy gun and counting on the assistance of Vilo and Joel, I advanced and surprised the speakers. They turned out to be the prisoners from El Uvero whom Fidel had freed and who were simply looking for a way out of the forest. Some of them were barefoot; an old corporal, almost un-

Caring for the Wounded

The day after the battle of El Uvero, planes circled above from dawn. Our farewells to the departing column were over, and we devoted ourselves to effacing the traces of our entry into the forest. We were a mere hundred meters from a truck road and we waited for Enrique López and the trucks which would take us to our hideout.

Almeida, Pena, and Quíque Escalona could not walk; I had to urge Manals not to walk either because of the wound in his lung; Manuel Acuña, Hermes Leyva, and Maceo could all walk on their own. To protect, nurse, and transport them, there were Vilo Acuña, Sinecio Torres, Joel Iglesias, Alejandro Oñate, and myself. The morning was well advanced when a messenger came to tell us that Enrique López could not help us because his daughter was ill and he had to leave for Santiago; he left word for us saying he would send us some volunteers to help, but they never arrived.

The situation was difficult, for Quíque Escalona's wounds were infected and I could not determine exactly how serious Manals' wound was. We explored the nearby roads and found no enemy soldiers, so we decided to move the wounded to a *bohío* three or four kilometers away. The *bohío* had been abandoned but the owner had left behind several chickens.

On the first day two workers from the lumber camp helped us

conscious, hoarsely expressed his admiration for us and our familiarity with the forest. They were without a guide, and had only a safe-conduct signed by Fidel. Taking advantage of the impression our surprise appearance had made on them, we warned them not to enter the forest again for any reason.

They were all from the city and they were not used to the hardships of the mountains and the means of coping with them. We came into the clearing where the *bohío* was and we showed them the way to the coast, not without first reminding them that from the forest inward was our territory and that our patrol—for we looked like a simple patrol—would immediately notify the forces of that sector of any foreign presence. Despite these warnings, which they heeded carefully, we felt it prudent to move on as soon as possible.

We spent that night in the sheltering *bohío*, but at dawn we moved into the forest, first asking the owners of the house to bring some chickens for the wounded. We spent the whole day waiting for them, but they did not return. Some time later we found out that they had been captured in the little house and that the next day the enemy soldiers had used them as guides and had passed by our camp of the day before.

We kept a careful watch and no one could have surprised us, but the outcome of a skirmish under those conditions was not difficult to foresee. Near nightfall Sincio arrived with three volunteers: an old man named Feliciano, and two men who would later become members of the Rebel Army: Banderas, a lieutenant killed in the battle of El Jigüe, and Israel Pardo, the oldest of a family of revolutionaries, who today holds the rank of captain. These comrades helped us to move the wounded speedily to a *bohío* on the other side of the danger zone, while Sincio and I waited for the peasant couple until nightfall. Naturally, they couldn't come because they were already prisoners. Suspecting a betrayal, we decided to leave the new house early the next day. Our frugal meal consisted of some

fruits and vegetables picked in the vicinity of the *bohío*. The following day, six months after the landing of the "Granma," we began our march early. These treks were tiring and incredibly short for anyone accustomed to long marches in the mountains. We could carry only one wounded comrade at a time, for we had to carry them in hammocks hanging from strong branches which literally ruined the shoulders of the carriers. They had to spell each other every ten or fifteen minutes, so that under those conditions we needed six or eight men to carry each wounded man. I accompanied Almeida, who was half dragging himself along. We walked very slowly, almost from tree to tree, until Israel found a short-cut through the forest and the carriers came back for Almeida.

Afterward, a tremendous rainstorm prevented us from reaching the Pardos' house immediately, but we finally got there close to nightfall. The short distance of four kilometers had been covered in twelve hours, in other words at three hours per kilometer.

At that time Sincio Torres was the most important man in the small group, for he knew the roads and the people of the region and he helped us in everything. It was he who two days later arranged for Manals to go to Santiago to be cured; we were also preparing to send Quíque Escalona whose wounds were infected. In those days contradictory news would arrive, sometimes telling us that Celia Sánchez was in prison, other times that she had been killed. Rumors also circulated to the effect that an Army patrol had taken Hermes Caldero prisoner. We did not know whether or not to believe these at times hair-raising things. Celia, for example, was our only known and secure contact. Her arrest would mean complete isolation for us. Fortunately it was not true that Celia had been arrested, although Hermes Caldero had been captured, but he miraculously stayed alive while passing through the dungeons of the tyranny.

On the banks of the Peladero river lived David, the overseer of a latifundio. He cooperated greatly with us. Once, David killed a

cow for us and we had to go out and get it. The animal had been slaughtered on the river bank and cut into pieces; we had to move the meat by night. I sent the first group with Israel Pardo in front, and then the second led by Banderas. Banderas was quite undisciplined, and he let the others carry the full weight of the carcass, so that it took all night to move it. A small troop was now being formed under my command, since Almeida was wounded; conscious of my responsibility, I told Banderas that he was no longer a fighter, but was now merely a sympathizer, unless he changed his attitude. He really changed then; he was never a model fighter when it came to discipline, but he was one of those enterprising and broad-minded men, simple and ingenuous, whose eyes were opened to reality through the shock of the Revolution. He had been cultivating his small, isolated parcel of land in the mountains, and he had a true passion for trees and for agriculture. He lived in a small shack with two little pigs, each with its name, and a dog. One day he showed me a picture of his two sons who lived with his estranged wife in Santiago. He also explained that some day, when the Revolution triumphed, he would be able to go some place where he could really grow something, not like that inhospitable piece of land almost hanging from the mountain top.

I spoke to him of cooperatives and he did not understand too well. He wanted to work the land on his own, by his own efforts; nevertheless, little by little, I convinced him that it was better to cultivate collectively, that machinery would also increase his productivity. Banderas would today have been a vanguard fighter in the area of agricultural production; there in the Sierra he taught himself to read and write and was preparing for the future. He was a diligent peasant who understood the value of contributing with his own efforts to writing a page of history.

I had a long conversation with the overseer David, who asked me for a list of all the important things we needed, for he was going to Santiago and would pick them up there. He was a typical over-

ser, loyal to his boss, contemptuous of the peasants, racist. However, when the Army took him prisoner and tortured him barbarously on learning of his relations with us, his first concern on returning was to convince us that he had not talked. I do not know if David is in Cuba today, or if he followed his old bosses whose land was confiscated by the Revolution, but he was a man who in those days felt the need for a change. However, he never imagined that the change would also reach him and his world. The history of the Revolution is made up of many sincere efforts on the part of simple men. Our mission is to develop the goodness and nobility in each man, to convert *every* man into a revolutionary, from the Davids who did not understand well to the Banderas who died without seeing the dawn. The Revolution was also made by blind and unrewarded sacrifices. Those of us who today see its accomplishments have the responsibility to remember those who fell by the wayside, and to work for a future where there will be fewer stragglers.

respected the majority and who dissociated themselves from the struggle, subsequently put themselves in the service of the enemy, and it was as traitors that they returned to fight on our soil.

Our leaders' and fighters' awareness was growing. The best among us felt deeply the need for an agrarian reform and an overturning of the social system, without which the country could never achieve health. But they always had to drag behind them the weight of those individuals who came to the struggle out of nothing but a hunger for adventure or in the hope of winning not only laurels but economic advantage.

A certain number of other malcontents withdrew. I don't remember their names any longer, except for Roberto, who subsequently spun out an interminable tale, chockful of lies; Count Aguero lost face by publishing it in *Bohemia*. Lalo Sardinas was dismissed and condemned to win his rehabilitation by fighting the enemy as a simple soldier. One of our lieutenants, Joaquín de la Rosa, Lalo's uncle, decided to accompany him. As a replacement for Captain Sardinas, Fidel gave me one of his best fighters: Camilo Cienfuegos, who became a captain in our column's advance guard.

It was necessary to get moving without losing a moment, so as to neutralize a group of bandits who, using the name of our Revolution as a shield, committed their crimes in the region where we had begun our struggle; also in the Caracas sector and in Lomón. Camilo's first mission in our column was to advance by forced march so as to capture all those undesirables, who would subsequently be put on trial.

The Morale and Discipline of Revolutionary Fighters

We all know what our Rebel Army was, and because we are familiar with it we tend to undervalue the feat of our emancipation, won with the blood of twenty thousand martyrs and the immense surge of the people. There are, however, profound reasons that made this triumph a reality. The dictatorship created the necessary ferment, with its policy of oppression of the masses and maintenance of a regime of privilege: privileges for the regime's lackeys, for parasitic *latifundistas* and businessmen, privileges for the foreign monopolies. Once the conflict broke out, the regime's repressive measures and its brutality, far from diminishing popular resistance, increased it. The demoralization and the shamelessness of the military caste facilitated the task. The ruggedness of the mountains in Oriente, plus our enemy's tactical ineptitude, also did their share. But this war was won by the people, through the action of its armed fighting vanguard, the Rebel Army, whose basic weapons were [their *morale* and their *discipline*].

Discipline and morale are the foundations on which the strength of an army rests, whatever its composition. Let us examine both terms. The morale of an army has two aspects which complement each other: there is morale in the ethical sense of the word, and

there is morale in its heroic sense. Any armed group, if it is to achieve excellence, must have both.

Ethical morale has changed with the passage of time, in accordance with the prevailing ideas of a given society. Pillaging homes and carrying off all objects of value was considered correct in feudal society, but carrying off women as a token of victory would have violated moral obligations; any army that behaved thus, as an established policy, would not be conducting itself according to the values of the epoch. However, prior to that period this was considered the correct thing to do, and the women of the conquered became part of the patrimony of the conquerors.

All armies must guard their ethical morale zealously, as a substantial element of their structure, as a factor of struggle, as a factor in toughening a soldier.

Morale in a heroic sense is that combative drive, that faith in the final victory and in the justice of their cause, which leads soldiers to carry out the most extraordinary deeds of valor.

The French *maquisards* who undertook their struggle—a seemingly hopeless one—under arduous conditions were faced by overwhelming adversity; yet the conviction with which they fought for a just cause, the indignation that the Nazi bestialities and crimes evoked in them, led them to carry on until victory. They had fighting morale.

The Yugoslav *guerrilleros*, their country occupied by a power fifty times their superior, threw themselves into the struggle and persisted, never wavering, until they conquered. They had fighting morale.

The defenders of Stalingrad, with forces many times inferior to those of the enemy, with the river at their backs, resisted the long and overwhelming offensive; they defended each hill and each ditch, each house and each room within, each street and each sidewalk of the city until the Soviet Army was able to mount an offen-

sive and establish a huge blockade, destroying, overrunning, and making prisoners of their attackers. They had fighting morale.

If we want a more remote example, the defenders of Verdun repulsed one offensive after another and stopped an army many times their superior in number and in weaponry. They had fighting morale.

The Rebel Army on the battlefield of the *sierras* and the *llanos* had fighting morale. And that is just what the mercenary army lacked in its confrontation with the guerrilla deluge. We felt genuinely the forceful words of our national anthem: “To die for the fatherland is to live.” They knew the words, but they did not feel them inside themselves. The sentiment of justice that prevailed in one cause, and the sentiment of not knowing why you were fighting in the other, created great differences between the soldiers of the two sides.

There is a nexus that transforms the two types of morale, the ethical and the fighting, into a harmonious unity: discipline. There are distinct forms of discipline but, fundamentally, there is an external discipline and an internal discipline. Militarist regimes are constantly working to procure the former. In this respect also, the difference between the two armies was observable: the dictatorship's army exercised its morale, its barracks-room discipline—external, mechanical, and cold. This produced a soldier of remarkable external discipline and an underdeveloped internal one. This automatically diminishes his fighting morale. Fighting for what and for whom? Fighting to preserve certain private sinecures for the soldier? Fighting for the right to plunder, to play the thief in uniform? Fighting for such rights people will fight only up to a certain point: until the sacrifice of their life is demanded of them.

On the other side: an army with an enormous ethical morale, a non-existent external discipline and an unbending internal discipline born of conviction. The rebel soldier did not drink, not be-

cause his superior officer would punish him but because he knew he should not drink, because his morale imposed abstinence on him, and his internal discipline strengthened that morale imposed by the army. He had joined that army simply to fight, because he understood it to be his duty to give his life for a cause.

Morale was growing and discipline was becoming stronger; our army was becoming invincible; but peace, the product of victory, came and this led to the great clash between two concepts and two organizations: the old form of organization, based on external, mechanical discipline, forced into rigid patterns; and the new, based on interior discipline, without pre-established patterns. From that clash arose the difficulties familiar to all of us concerning the ultimate structuring of our Army. Today the problem has been solved, after we analyzed and understood it. We are trying to provide our rebel armed forces with the minimum of necessary mechanical discipline required for the harmonious functioning of large units, with the maximum of internal discipline growing out of the study and understanding of our revolutionary duties. Today as yesterday, although an apparatus exists that is devoted specifically to punishing offenses, discipline cannot derive totally from an external mechanism, but must be achieved through an internal eagerness to overcome all the errors committed. How to accomplish this? It is a task requiring patience on the part of the revolutionary instructors who are disseminating among the mass of our Army the great national goals.

As with armies the world over, the members of our Army must respect their superior officers, they must obey orders at once, they must serve tirelessly wherever despatched. But they must also act as both social researcher and judge. As social researchers, their contact with the people enables them to ascertain its prevailing sentiments which they can communicate to the upper echelons for constructive purposes; as judges, they have the duty to denounce any kind of abuse committed within the army or outside it, in an effort

to eliminate it. This varied task of the Rebel Army proves the value of internal discipline, the goal of which is the perfecting of the individual. Just as it was in the Sierra, the Rebel soldier must not drink, not because of the punishment that may be inflicted by the disciplinary organism, but simply because the cause that we defend—the cause of the poor and of all the people—requires us not to drink, so that the mind of every soldier is alert, his body agile, and his morale high. He must remember that today, as yesterday, the Rebel is the cynosure of all eyes and constitutes an example for the people. There is and can be no great army if the bulk of the population is not convinced of the immense moral strength we possess today. Our armed strength is not limited to those who wear the uniform; the entire people is with us, and thus it must be. We must see to it that it shall be considered an honor by the people—workers, peasants, students, professionals—to carry the weapon which permits it to struggle in given cases alongside those who wear the uniform of the armed forces.

We must, then, serve as helmsman for the civilian population. Much more difficult than fighting, much more difficult than working at tasks of peaceful national construction, is the maintenance of the necessary direction, without deviating from it by an inch at any time. When sufficient cohesion is achieved in our armed forces, and our fighting morale is joined by a high ethical morale along with the indispensable complement of internal and external discipline, then we will have achieved the firm and lasting foundation for the great army of the future: the people of Cuba.