

woods cocaine cooker is usually the only thing stirring, the small infantry patrol ran into an enemy ambush.

In the tactical manuals that twenty-one-year-old Lieutenant Ruben Amezaga had studied at military academy, enemy fire from any sort of position was represented by neatly dotted arcs. But no such thing appeared now. A crack, no louder than a hard ping-pong serve, snapped from high up among the boulders on the steep river gorge, and the patrol guide in front of Lieutenant Amezaga, a local civilian named Epiñano Vargas, half-turned in surprise, his arm outflung. Then came a splatter of short explosions; both the guide and Lieutenant Amezaga were killed before they could exchange a word. With them died most of the detachment's lead section. Six soldiers and the guide were killed, four wounded, fourteen captured by the mysterious attackers.

Eight soldiers got away. With terror-marbled eyes, they ran cross-jungle several miles until they dared form up again under a senior sergeant. Then they loped on until they hit a narrow dirt road, where a petroleum truck picked them up and took them to Camiri, headquarters base of the Bolivian Fourth Infantry Division.

The division had a radio. The word brought by the Nancahuazu's hard-breathing survivors went to La Paz, Bolivia's cloud-top capital, via a surplus U.S. Signal Corps communications trailer parked in Fort Miraflores, supreme headquarters of Bolivia's armed forces, where, as if by remote kinetics, people started running, too.

An officer carrying the decoded message galloped up to Major General Juan José Torres, the tough, smooth, pint-sized Bolivian chief of staff. General Torres dashed into the presence of the commander-in-chief, General of the Forces Alfredo Ovando—a measured presence not ever lightly dashed into. By then the news was spreading in every direction.

How the CIA Got Che

BY ANDREW ST. GEORGE

Even the romantic adventurer's close friends seldom knew where he was or what he was doing after he left Cuba. America's Central Intelligence Agency didn't always have an open line to Che Guevara. But as an apparatus frequently given to chasing shadows, the CIA knew precisely where he was and how to help run him down at the very end.

ON MARCH 23, 1967, AT THE MISERABLE military morning hour of 0700, the three officers and twenty-nine men of a Bolivian army patrol picking its way along the Nancahuazu River stumbled into something all had been trained for but none had really expected. Here, in the unlikely, ravine-scarred jungle of Bolivia's remote southeastern badlands, where a back-

A copy of the signal sheet landed on the desk of Colonel Federico Araña, the military intelligence chief, who rose as he began reading it and trotted rapidly, still reading, across the Miraflores quadrangle toward the back-of-the-base cluster of buildings that housed the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group, known as MAAG. At about the same time, General Orando got on the direct telephone line to Bolivia's president, René Barrientos.

Within minutes, a call went out from the Presidential Palace for U.S. Ambassador Douglas Henderson, a tweedy, erect, gray-haired career foreign-service officer, who happened to be driving home in his barge-like limousine cluttered with special communications devices. At his desk President Barrientos—a heavy-shouldered, florid man who had been an Air Force general before he became ambassador and a hot fighter pilot before *that*—and the ambassador in his car spoke briefly. Even as they talked, the limousine wheeled around and headed towards the U.S. Embassy and its rooftop radio.

In La Paz, intelligence chief Colonel Araña was still deep in conference with the American military advisers when a phone began ringing in Washington on the desk of William Bowdler, President Johnson's senior adviser for Latin American affairs. Bowdler, a tall, intelligent, very quiet man, listened silently, then walked a few steps down the Executive Office Building corridor to the office of Walt Whitman Rostow, the White House troubleshooter for presidential-sized troubles abroad. The balloon, as more than one harassed secretary was to observe in Washington during the remainder of that day, was definitely *up*.

An isolated jungle skirmish has seldom been known to trigger such topside tensions. But the sudden shootout that killed Lieutenant Amezaga and practically destroyed his troop was the curtain raiser in the drama that brought back on stage the long-vanished Ernesto Che Guevara. The guerrilla expert had become the

warrior, personally leading his long-threatened showdown with "Yanqui imperialism." The ambush set in motion a conflict which brought about—but did not end with—Guevara's own violent death on October 9, 1967.

The conflict was to live on after Che in a worldwide controversy about the true circumstances of the legendary guerrilla general's downfall. Just exactly *what* was the U.S. role in it? There have been accusations that Che was captured and executed by the ubiquitous Central Intelligence Agency; other versions blamed his death on the Soviet Union and the old-line Communist Party leaders, others still on Cuban strong-man Fidel Castro—or on Che's own wrongheaded tactics.

To appreciate the difficulty of unraveling such tangled current events as Che's last adventure, one does not need a degree in modern history. The outcome must be pieced together from the contestants themselves—the men in the field. The day-to-day story presented here of Guevara's side of the showdown took shape through months of travel in South America and more months of poring over handwritten diaries, documents, charts and logs.

The U.S. role proved even more difficult to reconstruct. Putting it together involved long talks with people who were hard to find and others hard to talk to. Some of them—intelligence people and Special Forces men—had moved on since 1967, and wanted the whole bad scene forgotten—the jungle hunt and the killing. A few felt themselves still bound by official secrecy.

Yet in talks with the men who had held the stakes in what turned out to be Che Guevara's last gamble, the story came to life for this writer with color and sharp outline. I had known some of the Cuban guerrilla leaders from my years as a magazine correspondent in Havana during the Castro revolution, and I had known Che best of them all. I had marched with him through many moonless nights of the bitter jungle campaign in

1957-58. But ten years later, it was an enigmatic, elusive, changed Che whose contradictory behavior persisted at the heart of the puzzle.

In postwar Cuba the Honorable Ernesto Guevara de la Serna, M.D., Ph.D., had led a busy life as a government official of high rank, as a bank president, diplomat, world traveler, author, public speaker and the twice-married father of five children. But it was as Che, the legendary guerrilla general, that he became an international celebrity and hero of young people everywhere; it is Che's bearded, burning-eyed poster image which flies over hundreds of insurgent college campuses.

While Che's doctrine of "confrontation" and "direct action" was taking hold with the young, the reckless, romantic rebel leader himself had become a man of mystery. He had risen to fame as Castro's right-hand man in the triumphant Cuban guerrilla insurrection of 1958, only to vanish from sight in the spring of 1965, having renounced all his privileges in a handwritten letter to Fidel Castro. For two years Che's whereabouts became the world's best-kept, most-guessed-at secret.

Nowhere did the Guevara mystery set off more educated guesswork than in Washington. There Che had been a fascinating subject of study ever since his emergence in 1961 as one of Cuba's ruling revolutionary triumvirate.

Indifferent to pomp and power, Che had remained restless. Having been a prime factor in winning Cuba, he turned to the "national liberation" of other Latin republics. He organized special guerrilla schools for recruits from every country in the hemisphere, and for volunteers who could not make it to Cuba, he wrote long essays on guerrilla warfare, one of which became an international best seller.

Inevitably not all of Che's readers joined his fan club. In Washington the freshly-launched New Fron-

tier administration was alarmed. Largely in response to Che's theories, President John Kennedy and young Attorney General Robert Kennedy revived "special warfare" as a key U.S. military strategy. Every United States ambassador going abroad was required to take a course in guerrilla and antiguerrilla warfare designed largely around Che's textbook. It is a little-known but solid fact that this asthmatic, soft-faced medico who never went to military school or owned a brass button had a greater influence on inter-American military policies than any single man since the death of Josef Stalin.

Che enjoyed the role of big bad wolf. He organized paramilitary commands and guerrilla schools. By the end of 1962 his alumni and America's Green Berets were at each other's throats in a dozen countries.

Thousands of anonymous combatants on both sides were killed in far-flung, merciless guerrilla battles. Among them died quite a few *yanquis* never mentioned in official dispatches. Che himself in a coldly ferocious speech before the U.N. General Assembly in December, 1964, hinted at American casualties the American public never knew about.

Washington, ignoring the contemptuous verbal assault Che sounded before the world forum ("jackals . . . byenas . . ."), maintained a calm and ostentatiously pacific stance. "Truth to tell, it was kind of fascinating for us to sit back for a couple of years and just watch Che operate," one special warfare adviser recalled. "Oh, there was fighting one place or another practically all the time between 1961 and 1966. Wherever the guerrilla teams moved in—the Congo, Santo Domingo, Tanzania, Peru, Venezuela, Guatemala—our counterteams moved in, too. But we kept the fighting on a strictly limited basis.

"Of course, Che got impatient with all the Mickey Mouse action. He tried to goad us into a real game, for keeps—winner take all. Che found it in Bolivia, poor

guy. But back in '63, '64, when Che began talking like a man looking for a showdown with the United States—and sounding like a man who meant it—we decided we needed to do some studying before we tackled him.”

Making a study of people like Che Guevara is a full-time job of the Central Intelligence Agency. It does so through a PPS file, sometimes called the BP file. “PPS” stands for “Psychiatric Personality Study,” “BP” for “Behavior Profile,” and both mean essentially the same thing—a top-secret, inductive, psychiatric case study of someone about whom the U.S. must do some serious thinking.

Having a PPS project of one's own is usually a mark of distinction. Neither Hitler nor Stalin ever had one (both died before the PPS was perfected), but by the mid-'50's several U.S. intelligence outfits, including the Army's experimental 515th M.I. Detachment, were at work on the basic intelligence problem of trying to predict what foreign leaders might do in certain situations.

Che Guevara attracted a great deal of secret psychiatric attention from the moment he emerged on the world scene in 1959. By 1965 his case study contained enough carefully pieced-together behavioral data for some educated guesses about what made Che run.

“Did you know that all through his teens and early twenties, Che called himself ‘Chancho’? That means ‘pig.’ Not ‘Fats’ or ‘Porky’—it means plain pig.” A government psychiatrist connected with a research project jointly sponsored by the U.S. Air Force and the CIA was talking. “That's what his schoolmates and friends called him, you see, because Guevara put on a big show of being ‘disgusting.’ He wore messy clothes, three-day-old shirts, black fingernails. He'd slurp his food. Of course, what Guevara was trying to do was play the outlaw, even then. When the other kids started calling him ‘pig,’ he adopted the name with relish. When he was eighteen he wrote an account of a

student's rugby game for a sports paper and signed it ‘El Chancho,’ The Pig. The editor said he would print it if Che changed that stinky by-line. But Che hung on—he loved role-playing, the outcast, the loner, the rebel, the pig. Finally he did something typical of a certain neurotic type—he ‘alienized’ the name. He signed the story ‘Chang-cho.’”

The psychiatrist, with his government colleagues quietly reconstructing Che's childhood years, developed a revealing emotional profile of the angry rebel.

“Che was an asthmatic; this is what some social psychologists have come to call a ‘blemished identity,’” he said. “Children like that tend to have difficult relations with their parents, often—as seems to have been the case with Che—with their fathers. In adulthood, the difficulties carry over to society at large. Acceptance, ego management—lots of psychic hang-ups are involved. It's definitely a neurotic pattern.”

Intelligence analysis, even when they have come to think of someone as a neurotic personality, cannot predict what he will do. But they can “project” something about the way he will do things, because neurotic people tend to act in certain repetitive patterns. By the end of 1964 Che had furnished U.S. intelligence with a great deal of insight into the *modus operandi* of his personal strategy. Washington even knew where its basic outline came from: the CIA had discovered that Che's bible, his favorite guerrilla manual, was a Soviet book on special warfare called *The Clandestine Regional Committee in Action*.

“In 1963-64 Che staged a big guerrilla operation in the northern provinces of Argentina—not very far from where he was born,” a State Department intelligence analyst recalled. “It was led by military and civilian members of Che's personal Havana staff: Jorge Ricardo Masetti, who was Che's press aide, and his longtime adjutant, Captain Hermes Pena. These people were stand-ins for Che. Masetti, who was the leader of

the operation, took the pseudonym, 'Comandante Segundo,' because the First Commander was, of course, Che himself. Guevara did everything to make this operation a success, except for going to Argentina and running it. It was a failure. Three of Che's closest friends, Masetti, Pena, and a Cuban *comandante* we later identified as Raul Davila, were killed. Also ten other *guerrillas*, mostly young Argentinians. When Che vanished from public sight in Havana shortly afterward, in March, 1965, any intelligence analyst could have given you a strong projection of what was likely to happen next: an operation led in person by a furious, guilt-tormented, vengeful Che."

But for the next sixteen months nothing decisive happened. There were frequent reports spotting Che in Guatemala, in Vietnam, in Argentina, even in the Congo where—as we now know from his own diaries—he did make several short visits in 1966.

Most of the Che specialists in Washington's various intelligence and special warfare agencies spent this time largely in a curious pastime: they exchanged "smoke" with their opposition in Havana.

"Smoke" is the slang term for false information put out by an espionage organization to mislead another espionage organization. During most of 1965 and 1966 Havana planted clues and rumors indicating that Che had disappeared or died. Washington reciprocated by telling people—even journalists and people from other government agencies—off-the-record that the rumors of Che's death were probably true.

It can now be told that this was a long-range, purposeful deception. Washington knew more about Che's whereabouts during this period than it ever admitted, in part because the U.S. Navy and the National Security Agency jointly maintain a huge communications vessel off Havana harbor. This ship monitors every word of radio traffic in and out of Cuba. The first incident which revealed something to U.S. intelligence

about Che's real whereabouts was a series of emotional long-distance exchanges occasioned by the fatal illness and sudden death of Che's mother in Buenos Aires in May, 1965. Che, the United States learned, was holed up in an isolated base camp on the eastern coast of Cuba.

For nearly a year and a half thereafter Che stayed out of public sight—quiet, brooding, surely planning. During this period both sides edged toward a showdown. The Cuban propaganda line called for guerrilla activities in Latin America on the Viet Cong pattern; the aim was the creation of a "second Vietnam" somewhere near America's land frontiers. For the United States, Vietnam itself was proving a quagmire; a second Vietnam might upset traditional American politics altogether. Washington prepared the defense of its own hemisphere with the tense, secretive concentration of a serious crisis.

Che began making his move November 7, 1966. Followed by seventeen senior Cuban army leaders—among them eleven flag officers of general rank—he arrived at a small jungle-edge base camp in southeastern Bolivia. Setting up headquarters, he spent the next nineteen weeks exploring the countryside and recruiting a small cadre of Bolivian guerrilla trainees.

Bolivian and United States intelligence finally got the first solid clue about Che's movements from these recruits. Three of them deserted the guerrilla camp on March 11 and ran straight to the nearest Bolivian army post. Their story was still under evaluation two weeks later when, on March 23, the lightning-quick attack on Lieutenant Amezaga's patrol produced the confirmation.

The gunfire of Che's attack echoed sharply in Washington, where it set off a major battle among a dozen-odd agencies, departments, services and international agencies, each of which had come to think of Che as its responsibility.

High government leaders flocked hurriedly during the last week of March and the first half of April for short, secretive palavers at a quick succession of locations. Some were held at Army Chief of Staff General Harold K. Johnson's conference chamber, some at Walt Rostow's office, some at a conference hall adjoining what was once the ExComm (Executive Committee of the National Security Council) suite in the Executive Office Building. The purpose of the hopping about was to make sure the meetings did not alert the Washington press corps. Air-tight secrecy was the one essential policy all conferees concurred in. Even minor State Department officials and military officers assigned to such key areas as Bolivia, or to the special interagency board set up to deal with Cuban emergencies, were kept in the dark.

A quick State Department survey confirmed that—luckily—only a single foreign correspondent, Murray Sayle of the *London Times*, happened to be in Bolivia the day Che struck. Sayle, however, accidentally discovered, before the curtain came down, that there were daily scrambled radiotelephone conversations between the White House and the U.S. Embassy in Bolivia on and after March 23. A seasoned reporter, Sayle decided to check out the scene by accompanying a Bolivian army company on a patrol of the Nancabuzazu area. Nothing happened to Sayle, but stories were circulating now of a guerrilla band in action.

When Sayle returned to La Paz on April 10, he was smothered under a barrage of amiable reassurances from U.S. officials. "What the whole flap really means," the British correspondent was told by a high U.S. diplomat in La Paz, "is that the Bolivians are trying to put the squeeze on us again for more aid."

An even more thorough snake-oil job was done on the Washington *Evening Star*. Intrigued by vague rumors that "something big" was brewing in South America,

the *Star* sent veteran correspondent Jeremiah O'Leary there to make a quick cross-continental exploration. O'Leary, given the full treatment, reported from Lima, Peru: "U.S. officials throughout Latin America are virtually unanimous in their belief that Che Guevara . . . is dead. They believe Guevara was executed in Cuba because of policy clashes with Castro. . . . The most reliable information available is that the guerrilla band [spotted in Bolivia] is made up almost entirely of Bolivians."

To make sure readers realized this was the outcome of a thorough investigation, O'Leary noted that although a man named Guevara had been rumored among the guerrilla chiefs, evidence showed this Guevara was simply a local bushwhacker: "Guevara is a common name in Bolivia."

It was true enough that "dependable sources" had revealed the identity of a Bolivian guerrilla as Moisés Guevara, a communist mine-union organizer. But the same dependable sources—which consisted of a cache of secret guerrilla documents unearthed in a hidden jungle cave—revealed much more not disclosed to O'Leary: that high-ranking Cuban military leaders, rather than Bolivians, were in charge of the insurgency.

Harking back to the situation at that time, a high Washington intelligence reminisced: "None of this story is apt to sound very credible or sensible unless it is remembered that the government acted as if it were under attack because it was under attack, and dangerously so. Che Guevara's strategy called for setting up a guerrilla stronghold, starting a small jungle war, and then internationalizing the conflict. The key to Che's plan turned on involving other Latin American countries and, above all, the United States. Once foreign intervention had been loosed in Bolivia, Che had the makings of his primary objective—a second Vietnam."

Washington knew that Guevara's guerrilla strategy was far from stupid. The Argentinian government of General Juan Carlos Onganía began to prepare for open military intervention the moment it learned of the guerrilla outbreak on Argentina's vulnerable northern border. Convinced of the need for a "preventive" action in Bolivia, the hard-bitten, hard-charging generals who now administer Argentina proved hard to dissuade. They were determined to settle the score with the Castro regime for the 1963-'64 Cuban-backed guerrilla uprising. And a major antiguerrilla campaign of international proportions would have elevated Argentina to the status of leading military power in South America.

Argentinian Foreign Minister Nicanor Costa Mendéz bluntly told the U.S. State Department that "Argentina had decided to use force." His warning was backed by large-scale troop movements all across northern Argentina. During the first half of April, General Alejandro Lanusse's Third Army—Argentina's only strategic combat-ready ground forces unit—was mobilized and moved to staging areas less than one hundred fifty miles from the guerrilla zone. General Arturo Aguirre, commander of the Argentinian Constabulary, an elite mobile strike force, also set up his field headquarters within sight of the Bolivian frontier.

"We felt sure that if the Argentinians found out exactly what we knew at that point," a State Department intelligence analyst recalled in Washington recently, "they would have attacked. That would have immediately pulled us in, of course—and the whole ball game would have been gone before we had a turn at bat."

Washington's determination to cool the crisis and keep it at manageable temperature resulted in loud denials when New York *Times* correspondent Barnard Collier reported from Buenos Aires that Argentina was preparing to move troops into Bolivia for joint coun-

terguerrilla operations with Bolivian units. Collier's front-page report contained, along with its major scoop, one unconfirmed detail—that Bolivian President René Barrientos had *requested* Argentinian intervention—and this provoked the Bolivian Foreign Office to join the State Department in knocking down the story.

What happened next is not yet fully known. It is said that a confidential, high-level warning invoking the national security interest found its way from the White House to *Times* Foreign Editor Seymour Topping's desk. In any case, veteran Latin America reporter Collier was suddenly called off the Bolivian guerrilla story, which was reassigned to Paul Montgomery, a quiet young staffer from the Rio bureau.

Behind the scenes, however, President Barrientos launched a private intervention campaign of his own via Bolivia's ambassador to Washington. Julio Sanjines-Goytia, a West Point graduate with a fluent command of Portuguese, was an able and efficient chief of mission. Wealthy and charming, he had been a warm befriender of many southern senators and governors. In his special objective, the ambassador could count on the strategic support of Colonel Edward Fox, the U.S. air attaché and aviation adviser in Bolivia. Colonel Fox, who had struck up a warm friendship with ex-pilot President Barrientos, had become an influential advocate for the president's views in U.S. official circles. Secure in his backing, therefore, Ambassador Sanjines-Goytia put forth an idea that seemed to have some advantages. He proposed to Secretary of State Dean Rusk that the United States do nothing for the time being about the Guevara crisis beyond increasing the military and financial aid to President Barrientos.

"Since the Barrientos government is obviously Guevara's first target," argued the ambassador, "the logical first response is to buttress Barrientos. Given the

means, the Bolivian armed forces can handle Che Guevara."

The ambassador's approach was not unattractive. It required no military intervention; it limited rather than "internationalized" the crisis; and it was not scandalously expensive. Barrientos' first request was for six million dollars, two-thirds in military supplies and one-third in dollar funds, with a follow-up program aimed at bringing some stability to the Bolivian national budget (estimated to be one hundred fifty million dollars in the red in 1967) and some benefits to Bolivia's grumbling tin miners. Rusk liked the package well enough to toss it up at the next secret Guevara crisis conference, on April 9, where it was promptly shot down.

This was a top-level meeting, crackling with urgency, in the Pentagon's Joint-Chiefs-of-Staff conference room. It was attended by Army Chief of Staff General Johnson; General Robert W. Porter, Jr., four-star boss of SouthComm (Southern Command), the joint U.S. Defense Headquarters for Latin America, based in the Canal Zone; Major General James D. Alger, SouthComm's field forces commander, lean and hawk-faced; Air Force Brigadier General William K. Skaer, the J-2 (joint intelligence chief) of SouthComm; Secretary Rusk; Assistant Secretary of State (for Latin America) Covey T. Oliver, a patient, portly troubleshooter; CIA Director Richard Helms, flanked by two assistant deputy directors and several case officers; Presidential Security Assistant Walt W. Rostow and White House Hemisphere Adviser William Bowdler.

Rusk opened the meeting with a brief description of the Bolivian proposal. He had hardly finished when CIA Director Helms took the floor to point out that, in effect, the Bolivians could not be trusted with large sums, and he had some convincing evidence. The CIA presentation included a formidable area study accompanied by charts and bar graphs on an easel, and it

made sad showing of Bolivian accounting customs. Previous U.S. funds, directly destined to keep up to date the civil service payrolls (including those of the all-important national police force), had plainly gone astray, for government employees had been unpaid for months. A special appropriation for the purchase of cross-country vehicles, essential for swift counterinsurgency operations, had been invested by the Bolivians in a fleet of Mini-Mokes, cute little beetles which, however, tended to bog down in mud and could not hope to get within shooting distance of Che Guevara's operational area. "A payoff was reportedly involved in the acquisition of these unsuitable transport craft," remarked one of the case officers at the meeting, and in the ensuing silence the Bolivian proposal sank out of sight.

General Johnson's aides had another presentation, embodying long-prepared Army plans for just such an emergency. They dealt with the setting up of a test force, called a Regional Assistance Command, made up of counterinsurgency units with special capability to isolate and crush guerrilla cadres as quickly as they were spotted. "One of the most important lessons we have learned in Viet Nam," General Johnson said, "is that guerrilla flare-ups must be smothered *immediately*, without a moment's delay. A Regional Assistance Command is being organized under SouthComm right now, and it is ready to be committed in planned stages—command and technical advisory staffs, mobile training teams and schools, and light combat support elements—if absolutely necessary."

Rusk interrupted, noting that State had strongly urged a no-intervention policy on the White House. "Ambassador Henderson, who is standing by at the radio room in La Paz, has been instructed to order the withdrawal of all MAAAG military advisory personnel from the Bolivian provinces contiguous to the guerrilla zone. I believe this has already been done. Has it?"

An aide to General Porter confirmed carrying out the order. "Six infantry, artillery and signals advisers have been temporarily reassigned from the affected areas to La Paz," he read from an information sheet.

"Well, we urge that this hands-off policy be maintained as far as humanly possible," said Rusk. "I know that something must be done about this problem, but fielding even the first elements of a Regional Assistance Command would mean the fat's in the fire. Perhaps something less obvious . . ."

The Great Guevara Policy Dispute was on. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., the Kennedy historian, may have turned up something basic when, badgered by friends about U.S. policy zigzags in Cuba and Vietnam he said: "Government is not the monolith it seems. In reality, government is internal conflict." It is popular fallacy to think that such internal conflicts are resolved along sharp departmental lines. What almost invariably emerges is a compromise; the action finally adopted usually means there is *something* for every disputant.

When, at this meeting, Helms remarked, "The first need seems to be for more hard information on the scope and the short-range targets of Guevara's operation," no one offered a serious argument. Several of the agencies involved—notably the Defense Department, the CIA and the Air Force—had conducted joint research projects into the problem of acquiring just this sort of hard information. During 1965 and 1966, Fidel Castro had made several mocking speeches demanding, "If the *yanquis* are so anxious to find Che, why don't they send up a U-2 to take a picture of him?" The Cuban leader was unaware that what he offered as a sarcasm had turned into a serious suggestion: taking an aerial picture of the elusive Che was exactly what Washington was working on.

An official who attended the crisis deliberations remembered this particular meeting well. "Dick Helms' people made a long, impressive presentation. If it had

been a formal meeting of the Security Council, it would have amounted to a National Intelligence Estimate. Then two colonels from the Defense Intelligence Agency's Foreign Liaison and Area Analysis Branch gave a shorter briefing. At one point they showed blowups of some photographs we'd seen twenty minutes earlier, in the CIA presentation. They were photographs brought back by Bolivian patrols from the first abandoned guerrilla campsite they reconnoitered near Nancabuzzu. And you know, the second time around everyone spotted it almost simultaneously. It was like a jolt of electricity all around the table. There it was, right in the picture, the thing we needed, the thing Che had overlooked: a familiar, fat old Dien Bien Phu oven.

"We just looked at each other," the government man recalled. "And someone said, sounding loud because the room had turned quiet: 'Do we have anything positive on their mess schedule? Day chow or night chow?' One of the briefing officers said, quick-like, as if he'd expected the question, 'Yes, we have it from defector debriefings. Positive evaluation. It's night chow, sir.' For a minute or so we just looked at each other, because that was it. We were all thinking, 'God, now we can find him. No matter what sort of jungle, no matter how fast he's moving—now we can really find Che Guevara.'"

The Dien Bien Phu oven, as the name suggests, is a large, round-bellied cooking contraption developed by the Vietnamese guerrillas in the early '60s. Its main advantage is that it gives off virtually no smoke—the combustion gases can be funneled off—and this must have been why it caught Che Guevara's fancy when he secretly visited North Vietnam in 1965. In 1967, however, Che was apparently unaware that the United States had developed heat-seeking and image-amplifying aerial reconnaissance techniques which converted high-temperature devices, such as camouflaged cooking

pots or blacked-out shortwave radio sets, into telltale liabilities.

Few people, in fact, have any idea how supersensitive the new spy cameras are. Using a miraculously high-speed emission and multiple special-focus lenses, these infrared image devices stretch the spectrum and convert heat into visible light so efficiently that a picture of a man chewing on a warm cigar stub in a pitch-black jungle clearing, taken from as high as fifteen hundred feet altitude, will give the photo-evaluator a good guess about how recently the man's face has been shaved.

What ultimately emerged from the decisive Guevara crisis conference was the traditional "situationer" for President Johnson's eyes. It comprised the two long-established intelligence analysis forms always submitted jointly, but separated by main headings to keep fact and opinion apart: an "SOI," the summary of information, and a "C&R," the conclusions and recommendations. The situationer was read and approved at the White House in less than seventy-two hours.

A top-secret Special Operations Group was set up in Bolivia, its "safehouses" and camouflaged operational buildings scattered all the way from La Paz to some oil-company airstrips near Camiri. The group was placed under the operational command of General Skaer, a soft-spoken, graying, utterly unflappable pillar of strength. Ken Skaer spoke Spanish, knew Latin America and *Latinos* intimately, handled both planes and pilots (including the air-minded President Barrientos) with skill, and was steeped in the latest methods for gathering field intelligence.

SOG/Bolivia's field operating element actually comprised two separate groups. One was a CIA "numbered project group," the other a hush-hush Special Aerial Survey Detachment. A "numbered project group" is a time-tested CIA management system for keeping tight control of the clandestine project person-

nel scattered all over their "target areas." Under it, secret operatives assigned to a project receive sequential code designations, usually a single letter and a three- or four-digit number, with the senior case officers in charge (known as the "field control officers") given the lowest numbers.

The top-priority assignment belonged to the Air Force element of SOG/Bolivia, and the night birds went to work with wondrous speed. The guerrilla-infested zone—a three-hundred-mile corridor estimated to stretch from Santa Cruz south toward the Argentine border—was mapped in small, precise grids. Night survey missions began immediately at two altitudes. Wide-winged, high-ranging giant RB-57's flew over Bolivia out of Howard Air Force base in the Canal Zone, while miles underneath dusty little bush planes—resembling the civilian oil-company craft to which local folk were long accustomed—put-putted back and forth, pinpointing every single heat source on miles and miles of winding infrared superfilm.

The first pair of U.S. counterterrorista specialists to arrive in Bolivia, however, did not belong to SOG/Bolivia—in fact, they preceded it by about three weeks. On March 27, the commanding officer of the Eighth Special Forces Group stationed in the Panama Canal Zone, Lieutenant Colonel Redmond E. "Red" Weber, arrived aboard a military flight which took him directly to Santa Cruz, near the guerrilla zone. With Colonel Weber came a single senior Special Forces officer from the Eighth Group: Major Ralph W. "Pappy" Shelton. It was to be Shelton's duty eventually to set up an emergency counterterrorista training base.

Bolivia already had a sizable U.S. uniformed contingent, the Military Assistance Advisory Group. But MAAG's mission concerned only conventional warfare. Bolivia had no semblance of a trained or organized counterterrorista force. What it did have was one

of the smallest, poorest, slowest armies in the western hemisphere.

Yet the Bolivian High Command had firm ideas on what to do about the Guevara unpleasantness. As the two Eighth Group advance men quickly discovered, the Bolivian army chiefs wanted more U.S. aid of every description—except training. The Bolivians did not want to be told how to do things, even by the U.S. Special Forces. Rebuffed, the two Special Forces men felt discouraged, until an experienced U.S. Embassy official explained: "The trouble is, no one has found a good way yet to sell training in the black market."

U.S. Ambassador Henderson, however, had a steely one-sentence guideline to hold down the big-thinking Bolivian brass: "The United States will undertake no action, not even abrupt increases in military aid, that could be interpreted as 'intervention.'" Since Henderson's calm approach had all the weight of the U.S. government behind it, the Bolivians decided to accept training as a fact of life.

On April 29 four officers and twelve enlisted men emplaned for Bolivia at Howard AFB. This tiny group consisted of highly rated Special Forces veterans. All had been handpicked by Colonel Weber and Major Shelton. As a group, they formed what is known as an MTT—a Mobile Training Team. By 1700 hours, they were in Santa Cruz and had set up an overnight bivouac. As quietly and unobtrusively as a big-game hunter raising his rifle toward a crouching jaguar, the United States had drawn a bead on Che Guevara.

To talk of a hunt, however, calls up the wrong picture. Pappy Shelton, setting about his job in Bolivia, had nothing of the big-game hunter about him. Shelton is cool. He has no bad vibrations. What he does have is a throwaway talk style, with only the faintest twang of a distant Tennessee boyhood; a guitar that has gone with him from Laos to the Panama Canal Zone to Bo-

livia, and shows it; a smile that lights up his whole face.

Pappy's posture is disarming. His body seems neither large nor small; his face is neither pale nor ruddy, but a neutral olive tone, the color of Tennessee sorghum sod. Enemy agents would despair of writing an identifiable description of Pappy Shelton, thirty-eight, lifelong soldier (ten years an enlisted man, then through Officer Candidate School, and now ten years an officer), combat infantryman, ranger, sky diver, Special Forces team leader, who comes on like a youngish country doctor on a people-to-people sanitation mission.

He brought with him a very simple "prescription," written out on half a page of SouthComm's contingency directive:

1 Rg. Bn.

"A" MISSION:

BIT 6
AIT 3
BUT 3
AUT 5
FTX 2

Inf. Comp.

"B" MISSION:

RIT 4

The cryptic symbols meant that Pappy and his training team were to take in charge six-hundred odd green Quechua Indian recruits for nineteen weeks of training—specifically, six weeks' Basic Infantry Training; three weeks' Advanced Infantry Training; three weeks' Basic Unit Training; five weeks' Advanced Unit Training; and two weeks in a Field Training Exercise—thereby turning the recruits into the first crack Ranger Battalion ever seen in Bolivia.

The plan also included refresher infantry training for other army complements. By enrolling three selected Bolivian infantry companies at a time for a four-week

course, and repeating the course three times, Pappy's group could then send out nine retrained rifle companies to tone up the cadres of the line regiments.

Pappy's preferred trainees were the Ranger recruits. To give them a home, the U.S. team took over an abandoned sugar mill sixty miles north of Santa Cruz, whose airport became the airborne support point for the entire Special Forces program.

Supplies began to flood in. "They came in like instant Christmas," recalled one of the former team sergeants. "That's how we first knew we were on a real special job. Usually a Special Forces team goes into the field with its footlockers and a C-46 for air supply perhaps twice a month. But here we had a C-130, and we had it as often as we called it. One of the first things Pappy requisitioned was a refrigerator, not for himself but to get in good with a local bush pilot whose help we needed. I was sure all we'd get back would be the word 'Cool it.' But in twenty-four hours here's this big bird coasting in on the treetops, and what for? To bring us the icebox! We just hung there gaping, until the pilot says, 'Well, you wanted it, fellows, now pick it up!'"

Once the pipeline had been primed, Pappy used it for no more kichen commodities. He was thinking of other things.

"How many rounds per rifleman for the course?" he asked Bolivian Captain Julio Cruz, who brought in the recruits.

"How many *what*?"

"How many live bullets," Pappy enunciated in his utilitarian Spanish, "does your army issue for each man's training?"

Captain Cruz thought, "I think ten bullets are authorized for a recruit."

"Ten rounds?" Pappy was shocked. "How can you teach them anything that way?"

Captain Cruz had the patient look of a man explain-

ing ancient verities: "First we tell them. Then we kick them."

In the end, Pappy planned in enough ammunition to allot each (unkicked) rifleman three thousand live training rounds.

Meanwhile the Bolivian high command was restless. It wanted to announce Che's presence to the world, "internationalizing" the conflict, and to shorten Pappy Shelton's nineteen-week curriculum. The United States vetoed both suggestions.

"We needed every day of that training schedule," Shelton explains now. "We built a full-scale Ranger training camp by hand: an obstacle course, confidence course, quick-reaction course—where jungle footpaths are rigged with pop-up cut-outs of enemy figures—a river course, a target range. We even used Sundays. On Sundays we had a good sing."

The first Sunday morning, six hundred stone-faced, taciturn Indian draftees found themselves assembled to confront two officers and two senior sergeants playing *music* for them. Shelton had his guitar, Captain Leroy Mitchell, the tall, husky Negro team exec, twanged a washhtub with a string; the heavy weapons sergeant played the washboard, and one of the communications sergeants clacked a pair of spoons. The Indian troopers were stunned, puzzled, then wildly enthusiastic.

"By the time I came down from Panama," reminisced Captain Harvey Wallender, who, then a first lieutenant, took over the team's intelligence section in the early fall, "Pappy Shelton had built up a terrific relationship with the whole battalion. The men worshipped him, followed him around. They laughed at his jokes whether they understood them or not. Down in the jungle Che Guevara kept offering 'Two, three, many more Vietnams,' but what these *soldaditos* wanted was lots more guys like Pappy."

Pappy fought for his Indian constituency in return for their loyalty. On at least one occasion he fought the

entire U.S. Embassy. The hassle arose when the U.S. aid mission appeared in Santa Cruz to help settle some newly immigrated Japanese truck farmers. Wherever Japanese have been settled in Bolivia, they have boosted food production. But the Japanese resettlement plan required, of course, that thousands of Indian squatters be evicted from the lands. The Quechua squatters complained to the Quechua soldiers; the soldiers complained to Pappy. Pappy told USAID the project was off.

The USAID officers argued with Pappy; Pappy said, "No." Lieutenant Colonel Joe Rice, senior U.S. infantry adviser in Bolivia, came to Santa Cruz and spoke soothing words; Pappy said, "No." Finally the deep voice of Ambassador Henderson was heard on the team's radio. The wordless Indian *soldaditos* squatting in a circle round the communications shack heard Pappy use the single word they understood: "No."

Pappy and his *soldaditos* won that first joint skirmish in part because Douglas Henderson was an able diplomat who knew when to yield. But they won it partly because of sweating together under the tropical sun, exchanging hundreds of Ranger skills—how to secure jungle paths with warning devices made from coffee cans and string; how to fire the 3.5 recoilless rocket; how to counterattack in an ambush; how to cross a river; how to read maps; how to survive in the jungle on monkey meat smoked under parachute cloth. All the weeks of the training Pappy and his men were under the watchful eye of high authority. Seven casual-appearing U.S. generals, seldom seen in attendance at backwoods encampments, found reason to inspect Pappy's project at one time or another. And when Pappy flew up to SouthComm Headquarters in the Canal Zone on some matter, he often found himself discussing it in person with SouthComm's top boss, Robert W. Porter, Jr., a four-star general.

On September 17 Pappy's pupils formed up before him in the sugar mill's quadrangle for the last time. No

longer *soldaditos* but Rangers, they were ready to graduate. With Colonel Alberto Gallardo, the battalion's Bolivian C.O., Shelton walked down the line, pinning a silver condor—the Ranger emblem—on each man's chest. Within twenty-four hours Shelton watched the battalion, on its own completely under Bolivian direction for the first time, head for Eighth Division at Vallegrande, to take over a ten-mile sector infiltrated by guerrillas.

In the months since his high point, things had gone far from well for Che. The aging *numero uno* was on the defensive. The ring drawn around the guerrillas' "Red Zone" had choked off Che's supply and communications routes, and the rebel column was taking heavy casualties in fire fights with Bolivian detachments. The guerrillas were desperate for civilian support and intelligence information. Their first-phase strategy had been dislocated by the loss of two key agents, the Frenchman Régis Debray and the mysterious girl guerrilla known as "Tania."

Debray, a wealthy, well-born young Parisian intellectual, author of *Revolution in the Revolution?*, which expounds the Castroite revolutionary line, was smuggled into guerrilla territory by the ubiquitous Tania in early March for a vital strategy conference with Che about "internationalizing" the Bolivian campaign. But though Debray had written movingly enough about guerrilla warfare to be called its "young eagle" by philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, face to face with the jungle he metamorphosed into a diminishing succession of lesser birds: chicken, canary, finally a deadweight albatross around Che's burdened neck.

After his first fortnight's taste of the wilderness, Debray was bursting to get back to civilization. His return trip was a hurried cop-out. But a few hours after his parting handshake with Che, poor Debray was intercepted by Bolivian plainclothesmen the moment he entered the first village on his "escape to freedom." A

few hours after that, Debray was reeling under the fists and boots of raging Bolivian officers. Next he found himself in a small plane where, time and again, his Bolivian escort opened the door in midair and kicked and wrestled him halfway out into the sky, to demonstrate that unless he talked rapidly and convincingly, he would return to the Red Zone as the guerrillas' first live air-drop.

Régis Debray talked as only a young Parisian intellectual confronting the most vital issue of the day—his own survival—can talk. Thus, just about when Pappy Shelton set up shop in Santa Cruz, Bolivian military intelligence picked up a panoramic view of Che's top-level strategy. And whatever Bolivian intelligence picked up, U.S. intelligence received—and double-checked, largely through the CIA's field operatives.

As it turned out for Debray, the CIA was nothing like the *bête noire*—black beast—he had so often pilloried in public.

"Under the circumstances, I think they saved my life," Debray told this writer in a day-long conversation at Camiri, where he now serves a thirty-year sentence in a former Bolivian military casino converted to a V.I.P. jail. "One of the Bolivian officers had taken to emptying his .45 into the dirt floor between my legs. The CIA agents never beat me. But neither did they ever stop asking questions—or taking notes."

After Che lost Debray, he also lost in succession his Bolivian courier, Jorge Vasquez Viana; his Argentinian liaison agent, Ciro Bustos; and in the end, the one human being who was emotionally and physically close to him in the jungle—Tania. To be precise, first he lost Tania's jeep; then he lost Tania.

So much secrecy, sensationalism and speculation surround Tamara H. Bunke, the slim, sexy, supereactive intelligence officer who adopted the code name "Tania" for her last assignment in Bolivia, that eminent observers have gestured in despair. From the

professional espionage viewpoint, Tania was, of course, simply a hardworking, academy-trained career agent. Born in Argentina and raised in East Germany, she spent the last years of her life in the service of KGB, the Soviet intelligence directorate, keeping watch on the volatile, unpredictable, trouble-prone guerrilla government in Cuba.

"Not many people realize that when it comes to Cuba troubles, the United States and the Soviet Union have a lot in common," mused a senior U.S. diplomat recently at a Washington dinner. "I imagine Washington and Moscow have a lot of similar intelligence requirements in their Cuba file. And to fill such high-level EEI's—that is, Essential Elements of Information—takes trained, disciplined, professional agents. Tania was such an agent. She did a professional job for the Soviets in Havana, and kept on doing it to the very end, even though she *did* fall in love with Che Guevara."

It has been widely rumored that Tania contributed to Che's downfall heavily by sloppily forgetting all sorts of incriminating documents in her jeep, then parking it where the Bolivian *gendarmes* could find it.

Having been permitted, by personal dispensation of President René Barrientos and High Commander Alfredo Ovando, to examine all of Tania's original dossier in Bolivia, this writer can report that there is no evidence for this rumor. Tania's role as the rebels' liaison chief was initially compromised by the three guerrilla deserters who provided, in early March, the first decisive intelligence breakthrough for the Bolivian government. When her garaged jeep was located in Camiri, the police found documents in it which were embarrassing, but provided no new clues of importance about Che Guevara. When Tania was killed in the jungle, months later, she died in the crossfire of a Bolivian army ambush without uttering a word.

Trapped in a guerrilla camp by the deserters' betrayal, with her small rear-guard unit separated from Che's column by a day's march of impenetrable jungle, she died unaware that Moscow had decided to throw its political weight *against* Che's Bolivian venture. And Che himself was shot to death exactly one month, one week and one day after Tania's death, apparently unaware that his last close companion and collaborator had been a covert KGB agent, reporting to Moscow on him.

The deadly riverbank ambush of August 30, in which Tania perished, was one of the last fire fights between the guerrillas and Bolivian infantry troops. By mid-September, the crack Rangers trained by Pappy Shelton were taking charge of the chase for Che.

First to go into action were the special intelligence platoons trained by Pappy's S-2 officer, Captain Margarito Cruz, a cinnamon-colored Puerto Rican spy-master. His mission, the battalion's intelligence training, was the most intense and secretive section within the whole secret program.

Captain Cruz trained a full platoon of intelligence operatives for every Ranger company. These novice spooks learned how to perform intelligence missions single-handed, in civilian clothes, mixing with the local population. They fanned out quietly through the guerrilla sector, decisively tipping the balance of potential between Che Guevara's small troop and the government forces.

"It wasn't just a question of information. By this time we did have a whole lot of—uh, well, *special* information on Guevara's whole setup," says Captain Wallender, who, like many other military men, cannot yet acknowledge publicly SOG/Bolivia's existence. "But when it came to combat intelligence, we attacked the problem all over again from the point of tactical requirements. I think this was really the big difference between Che and us. Che had become a V.I.P. and a big executive in Cuba, a world celebrity. He thought

like a four-star general, like a theater commander. He thought of flanking alliances, vast territories, politics, ideology, propaganda, history. Che had no time for little problems like camp perimeter security, or patrol schedule, or morale among the lowly guerrilla recruits. But we thought of nothing else. Our whole plan was built on limiting things, on keeping things *tactical*. That was Washington's scenario, and I guess they managed to convince everybody, even the Argentinian general staff and the Bolivian government, to give the quiet tactical approach a chance. Of course, it had to work, and work fast."

Che was in trouble and on the run. But whatever history's judgment may be on the indomitable guerrilla general, he was a man. His small force exhausted, his radio silent, he circled his jungle killing ground without attempting to escape. Within days, the Ranger intelligence scouts had picked up his trail.

In the morning of October 8—a hot, sun-seared early Sunday—Ranger Company A, acting on guidance from its intelligence platoon, moved out in full combat gear to sweep a long, narrow, wooded ravine known as the Quebrada del Yuro, where suspicious movements had been reported the previous night. Having sealed off every exit, the Rangers began combing the canyon shortly before noon, and ran into enemy small-arms fire within minutes. Che Guevara, who would never realize his dream of engaging in direct combat with the hated *yanquis*, was finally face-to-face with the next-best thing—the Shelton-trained Rangers.

Hurt and cornered, Che swung across the ravine in a short semicircle and attempted to break out of the trap across the high ground to the rear. This was where the Ranger Company's young C.O., Captain Gary Prado, had posted Staff Sergeant Huanca with a flanking fire team. Now Sergeant Huanca began taking the brunt of a furious attack by Che Guevara's desperate column.

"Che and his column came down on Huanca's posi-

tion like a fire storm," Major Shelton recalled. "Huanca took Che's charge full blast, and he took casualties, too, right and left—lots of them. Huanca must have been scared as hell. But you know, he held that position. He kept Che from escaping until the rest of the company moved up and someone took aim and with a single bullet knocked the carbine from Che's hand. Then . . . oh, hell, I don't have to tell you what happened after that. Let me tell you simply that my Rangers delivered the captured Che alive into the hands of higher authority, and after that had no say—or part—in what happened to him."

Che, who had several noncritical wounds at the time of his capture, was shot to death a day afterward on the personal directive of Bolivian Commander-in-Chief Alfredo Ovando. The decision to kill him—and thus convert him into a legend—ran counter to all the U.S. advice to General Ovando. Ironically, the CIA—one of whose field agents was permitted to talk to Che shortly before his execution—was most urgently interested in keeping Che alive, if only for professional reasons. But Bolivia has no death penalty—more precisely, no *legal* death penalty—and the high commander faced a harsh choice: to have Che killed instantly, or never.

The fact is that in Bolivia, where more than a hundred government men died in the campaign against Che and his sharpshooters, the unwritten law for cop killers is as starkly straightforward as in, say, Cook County, Illinois. Besides, the Bolivian high command was seething with memories of the Debray trial with its hundred-headed foreign press section and its pitiless publicity for the Bolivian military, who became known as "gorillas" everywhere from Bangkok to Berlin.

Thus what looked like a crowning credit for the U.S. counterinsurgency corps turned into a political liability. There were no trumpets, no banners, not even the usual self-congratulatory press leaks in Washington. Special Operations Group found its activities winding

up in Bolivia every bit as secretively as they had begun. The only visible results were some revealing official promotions. White House adviser Bowdler found himself elevated to career ambassador—the only high appointment made by President Johnson after announcing his own retirement. General Alger, the Army field forces commander whose hand was directly on the switch in Panama during the entire Guevara crisis, moved up to become Chairman of the Inter-American Defense Board. But General Skaer, who had long before decided to retire in 1968, saw no reason to change his plans after SOG/Bolivia was phased out, and these days he wears a bow tie whenever he lunches in Washington.

Whatever the exact contribution of Pappy Shelton and his team to ending the guerrilla invasion, the Bolivian government made no attempt to acknowledge it in public. It is the official position of Bolivia that U.S. help amounted only to "a few shipments of dry rations." Washington has, as of this writing, shown no wish to argue.

Privately, Shelton was granted a special *Diploma de Honor* by the Bolivian High Command and, a year later, he was given the U.S. Joint Forces Commendation Medal—about as high an award as the warriors of undeclared wars ever get.

"Well, Che was dead," Shelton says slowly. "And it occurred to me right afterward that there was only one thing I really wanted—I wanted everyone in the team home for the holidays. I went up to Panama and spoke to the boss, and on the 19th of December we had our last breakfast in Santa Cruz. We were all home—every one of us was home the night before Christmas."