Colombian Author Writes on Cuba's Angola Intervention

Colombian author Gabriel Garcia Marquez, who has made several trips to Cuba in the past two years and is friendly with Cuban Prime Minister Fidel Castro, has written a lengthy account of Cuba's involvement in Angola based on numerous interviews in Cuba. An avowed Communist, Garcia Marquez, 48, is generally regarded as one of Latin America's major living writers.

His article is, in effect, the first Cuban-authorized version of the Angolan civil war. Yesterday the official Cuban news agency, Prensa Latina, distributed several large extracts of it in Spanish. The author has granted The Washington Post first publication rights in English. This is the first of three extracts.

GABRIEL GARCIA MARQUEZ
. . . Cuban-authorized version

Colombian author Gabriel Garcia Marquez, who has made several trips to Cuba in the past two years and is friendly with Cuban Prime Minister Fidel Castro, has written a lengthy account of Cuba's involvement in Angola based on numersous interviews in Cuba. An avowed Communist, Garcia Marquez, 48, is generally regarded as one of Latin America's major living writers.

His article is, in effect, the first Cuban-authorized version of the Angolan civil war. Yesterday the official Cuban news agency, Prensa Latina, distributed several large extracts of it in Spanish. The author has granted The Washington Pot first publication rights in English. This is the first of two extracts.

In 1843, a female slave called Black Carlota had taken machete in hand to lead a slave uprising at the Triunvirato sugar mill, in the Matanzas region, and had been killed in the rebellion. In homage to her, the action of solidarity to Angola was named Operation Carlota.

It began with the sending of a reinforced battalion of special forces, made up of 650 men. They were flown over a span of 13 days from the military section of Jose Marti Airport in Havana to the airport at Luanda, still occupied by Portuguesee troops.

Their mission was to hold back the offensive so the Angolan capital would not fall into enemy hands before the Portuguese left, and then to keep up the resistance until reinforcements could arrive by sea.

But the men on the first two flights were sure they were already too late, and the only hope they nourished was that they might be able to save Cabinda.

The first contingent left at 4 p.m. Nov. 7, on a special flight of Cubana de Aviacion, on one of the legendary Bristol Britania BB-218 turboprops that the English manufacturers had stopped making and the rest of the world had stopped using.

The passengers, who remember clearly that they numbered 82 because that was the same as the number of men on the Granma, the beat that carried Fidel Castro and his band to Cuba to launch a revolution, had the healthy look of tourist tanned by the Caribbean sun. They all wore summere clothes, with no military insignia, and carried briefcases and regular passports with their real names and identification.

The members of the special battalion, which is not under the Revolutionary Armed Forces but rather the Ministry of the Interior, are well-trained warriors, with a high level of political and ideological formation. Some hold college degrees, are voracious readers and occupy themselves with intellectual pursuits. So the fiction of Sunday civilians should not have seemed a novelty to them.

But in their brief cases htey carried machine pistols, and in the cargo hold of the plane, instead of baggage, there was a substantial load of light artillery, small arms, three 75 mm cannons and three 82 mm mortars. The only change that had been made in the plane, which carried two regular stewards, was a door cut in the floor so the weapons could be reached from the passenger compartment in case of emergency.

The fligh from Havana to Luanda was made with a stop in Barbados to take on fuel, in the midst of a tropical storm, and a five-hour stop in Guinea-Bissau, mainly to wait for night. . .

[Just as the first two planes arrived in Angola], three ships were leaving Cuba bringing an artillery regiment, a mechanized battalion and recoilless rifles; they would land in Angola Nov. 27.

On the other hand, the columns of Holden Roberto [head of the National Front for the Liberation of Angola, a rival of the ultimately victorious Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola] were so close that only hours before they had shot and killed an old native woman who was trying to reach the headquarters at Gran Farni, where the Cuban forces were concentrated.

So the men arriving on the two planes had no time to rest: They put on their olive-green uniforms, joined the ranks of the MPLA [the Popular Movement] and went into battle.

During nine months, the mobilization of human and material resources was a drama of daring. The decrepit Britanias, patched up with brakes from Soviet-made Ilyushin 18s, kept up a steady and almost unreal traffic.

Although their normal load is 185,000 pounds, they often flew with 194,000, which is off all the charts. The pilots, who normally fly 75 hours a month, sometimes flew more than 200. In general, each of the three Britanias in service carried two complete crews, who took turns during the flight, but one pilot remembers staying in his seat 50 hours straight on a round trip, with 43 actual hours of flight. "There comes a time," he said with no attempt at heroics, "that you're so tired that you don't tire any more."

The route from Havana to Luanda

is empty and unused. At the Britanias' cruising altitudes—between 18,000 and 20,000 feet—there is no information about winds in this day of the jet.

The pilots set off without knowing the weather along their course, flying at unusual altitudes to save fuel, and without the slightest idea of landing conditions.

Between Brazzaville and Luanda, the most dangerous stretch, there was no alternative airport to fall back on. On top of everything else, the troops traveled with their weapons loaded and carried their explosives without their protective wrappings to cut down on weight.

The United States noted the Britanias' weak point: their range.

When Washington got the Barbados to bar refueling stops, the Cubans set up a transatlantic flight from Holguin, at the eastern end of Cuba, to the island of Sal, in Cape Verde.

It was a high-wire act without a net, for on the way out the planes arrived with fuel for only two more hours of flight and on the way back, because of headwinds, with only one hour's fuel left.

But even that circus route was changed, to avoid endangering defenseless Cape Verde.

Then the cabins of the planes were modified to take four supplementary gasoline tanks, which allowed nonstop flights but with 30 fewer passengers, from Holguin to Brazzaville.

An intermediate solution, of making a stop in Guyana, did not work out for two reasons:

First, the runway was very short; second, Texaco, which holds the fuel contract in Guyana, refused to sell the fuel. Cuba tried to resolve this by sending a shipload of gasoline to Guyana, but through some incomprehensible accident the fuel was contaminated with water and dirt.

Despite these bitter setbacks, the government of Guyana was firm in its solidarity toward the Cubans until the ambassador of the United States personally threatened it with the bombardment and destruction of the airport at Georgetown.

Maintenance was done in less than half the usual time, and a pilot remembers flying without radar several times, although no one recalls any instrument failure. Under those inconceivable conditions, the Cubans made 101 flights until the end of the war.

The sea route was no less dramatic.

The only two pasenger ships, of 4,000 tons each, wound up with dormitories in every open space, and latrines were set up in the lounge, the bars, the corridors.

The normal loading of 226 passengers was tripled on some voyages, and cargo ships designed to carry crews of 80 eventually were loaded with more than a thousand troops with armored cars, weapons and explosives.

Field kitchens were put up in holds and staterooms, and to save water disposable plates were used and yogurt containers served as glasses. The bilges were used for waste, nd some 50 latrine were set up on deck.

The tired machinery of the older ships began to give out after six months of overuse, and this was the only complaint of the first troops to come back: Their long-awaited return was delayed for several days because of clogged filters on the (Cuban troopship) Viet Nam Heroico.

The other ships in the convoy had to wait for her, and some of the passengers then understood what Che Guevara meant when he said that the march of a guerrilla band is determined by the slowest man.

The problems were all the more annoying because ships were the target of all sorts of provocations by North American destroyers, which followed them for days on end, and by war planes that buzzed them and photographed them.

Despite the harsh conditions of those voyages of nearly 20 days, there was no serious health problem . . . To make up for that, a more difficult epidemic had to be dealt with, for the ships' crews wanted at all costs to throw themselves into the war.

One of them, a reserve officer, managed to get an olive-green uniform, mingle with the troops and smuggle himself ashore. He was one of the intelligence officers who distinguished themselves in the war.

Cuba's chief of staff went to Angola personally at the end of November—anything was possible then, except losing the war.

But the historical fact is that the war was at the point of being lost. In the first week of December the situation was so hopeless that some thought was given to the possibility of fortifying Cabinda and saving a beachhead near Luanda for an evacuation.