

End of a Myth

Gustavo Villoldo stood in the steamy Bolivian jungle thinking of his father. Days after Batista's government was toppled in Cuba, Che Guevara had ordered the family's auto assembly plant and car dealership seized for the good of the Cuban people. If the liberation of the Villoldo's property wasn't enough, the revolutionaries jailed Gustavo's father on suspicion of receiving unfair tax breaks from Batista's government. For ten days the communist revolutionaries interrogated and beat the elder Villoldo in hopes of gaining a confession for the crimes of being a "lackey of the United States and Yankee imperialists." When the confession never came, the revolutionaries took a different tact, and released Gustavo's father.

After being released from custody, the elder Villoldo received another visit from Che Guevara. This time, the doctor turned liberator of the people gave Villoldo a choice. Villoldo could face a firing squad to pay for his crimes or accept Guevara's alternative. If the elder Villoldo wanted to live, Che would have his son Gustavo executed. The death of the man's son should be sufficient penalty for being a capitalist. Che left and let Villoldo consider his options. That night, not wishing to give the communists the satisfaction of executing him, Villoldo took an entire bottle of sleeping pills. Villoldo drifted off to an eternal sleep knowing that he had saved the life of his son.

Gustavo left Cuba a month after his father's death and fled to Miami where he found other anti-communist exiles. It wasn't long before he obtained a commission as a Second Lieutenant in the United States Army. His special knowledge of Cuban culture and landscape made him a prime recruitment target for the CIA. Gustavo would go on to infiltrate Cuba at least 30 times between 1959 and 1971 and to participate in air support during the Bay of Pigs as his part to destabilize Castro's regime.

That night in Bolivia in October of 1967, Gustavo was thinking about not only his father, but his quarry. In 1965, Che Guevara had broken his ties with the Cuban government to export his vision of glorious revolution to other countries. The CIA had gotten intelligence that Guevara would be making national liberation attempts and Gustavo was set on his trail. Gustavo's team went to the Dominican Republic and Argentina on following tips that Che would be assisting leftist groups; the effort proved useless. After missing Che by just a few days in the Congo, Gustavo was ordered to Bolivia. Reports were that Che was preparing a guerrilla campaign and it would be in the best interests of democracy if he were stopped.

The CIA made their orders very clear to Gustavo, he was simply to locate Che. Gustavo had his own agenda for the man who drove his father to suicide. "My intention was to get him [Guevara], dead or alive." Gustavo told a Miami Herald reporter. Gustavo was inserted in Bolivia under a deep cover as Captain Eduardo Gonzalez of the Bolivian Army. His cover was so flawless that other Bolivian Army officers did not realize he was a CIA man.

Gustavo threw himself into analyzing interrogation intelligence to ascertain Che's location. Then on October 8, 1967 word came down that Che had been wounded in a fire fight with US Army led Bolivian Rangers. The revolutionary leader was taken to a mud brick school house in the village of La Higuera to await his fate. It was almost a foregone conclusion that Che would be executed. The Bolivian government had already announced that Che had died in the earlier fire

fight. A trial of Guevara would only result in a platform for him to discuss his revolutionary ideals and that did not interest the Bolivian government in the least.

Che's capture, by the Bolivians, had put Gustavo in a precarious position. His orders from the CIA were to "do everything possible to keep him [Guevara] alive." The United States had aircraft waiting to take Che to Panama for interrogation. A member of Gustavo's team, Félix Rodríguez, was tasked with relaying the political position of the United States to Bolivian Colonel Joaquín Zenteno Anaya. The Bolivian had orders to execute Che and commanded a non-commissioned officer to do so. Rodríguez went into the schoolhouse turned jail cell holding Guevara to advise him of his fate. Guevara simply replied, "It's better like this... I never should have been captured alive." The CIA operative left Che and shortly thereafter heard the sharp crack of gunfire.

To make sure there was no question to Guevara's death, his body was flown to nearby Vallegrande. The media, and anyone else who wished, were allowed to view Che's body for twenty-four hours. After which, Gustavo watched a doctor remove the bullets from Guevara's body and saw off the man's hands. The Bolivians had fingerprinted Che earlier and wanted to have proof of the revolutionary leader's death, should the need ever arise. Gustavo left behind the body of the man who had, in essence, killed his father knowing he must do one more thing.

For thirty years the world would wonder what happened to Che's body. Che Guevara's body simply disappeared that night from recorded history. The official position of the Bolivian and United States governments was that his body was buried or cremated in an undisclosed location. The truth was that neither government knew where the leader's body was. Rumors ranged over the years that the official story was a fabrication and widely diverse theories of the disposition of Che's remains came out. The most unbelievable was that Yale's Skull and Bone Society had taken possession of Che's skull.



Che Guevara

While conjecture brewed for those thirty years, only Gustavo knew where Che Guevara was buried. Gustavo had heard on Havana radio that Fidel Castro was already making plans for a hero's funeral for Che when his body was returned to Cuba. There was no way Gustavo would allow Guevara's remains to be used in the revolutionary fervor that claimed the life of his father and thousands of others. Shortly after midnight, Gustavo tucked a Smith and Wesson 9mm in the waistband of his jeans and met two Bolivians in Che's temporary morgue. The trio then heaved the bodies of Che, and two other revolutionaries, into a truck. Gustavo directed his Bolivian compatriots to a jungle airstrip.

Once there, Gustavo threw the bodies of all three men in a 30 foot wide, 15 foot deep hole that was arranged to be dug before their arrival. A bulldozer was on station as well to make quick work of filling in the mass grave. Rain began to fall in the middle of the impromptu burial making the earth soft and pliable enough to hide their work. Before leaving the site, Gustavo noted the distance and compass bearings from landmarks. He might one day have to report the location to the CIA or another government agency to back up his story.

After his retirement from active duty in 1988, Gustavo became a simple farmer. Like many that are asked to do unsavory things in the name of one's country, Gustavo wished to turn his time with the agency into ancient history. This would have been possible except for a 1995 interview author John Lee Anderson performed while writing a biography on Che. Anderson tracked down retired Bolivian General Mario Vargas who told of rumors that Che had been buried by a jungle airstrip. Vargas had communicated the one-in-a-million rumor that happened to be true.

The Cuban government seized this new, semi-credible information and sent teams of forensic anthropologists and geologists to the Vallengrande airstrip. The Cuban teams searched the area for 16 months and came up with the remains of five rebels from the firefight in 1967. In the spring of 1997, Gustavo came forward with an offer to Che's daughter living in Havana. He would return to the site he buried Che and return the remains to his daughter for humanitarian reasons.

News of Gustavo's offer sparked a race between himself, the Cubans and the Bolivians to be the first to find Che's body. The Cubans wanted the remains for the same propaganda purposes they outlined in 1967. The Bolivians saw an opportunity to cash in on Che's memory. The Bolivians placed a moratorium on digging through late June, declaring Che's remains "a national patrimony". There was talk of building a Che Guevara museum and a "Che's Route" walking tour.

Gustavo was set to arrive in Bolivia the day after the ban on digging was to end. He would be too late. The Cuban search team has been conducting ground penetrating radar studies of the area during the ban on digging. They focused their efforts in three spots using a bulldozer to clear away mountains of earth. On July 5, 1997 the team hit their mark. They found a grave containing seven bodies, one of which was missing both hands. The Bolivians would not release the body to the Cubans until there was a positive identification of the remains.

In the middle of the night, the Cubans raced along 150 miles of bad mountain roads to the provincial capital of Santa Cruz. The chances that one of the other factions would attempt to muddy the claim the Cubans had on Che's remains were ever present. The quicker the remains could be identified and flown back to Cuba, the better. It did not take long once the remains reached the capital for the identification process to occur. Che had made a dental cast before

leaving for the Congo to assist in the identification of his remains should he be killed in combat. Che's remains would be flown back to Havana and the hero's return Castro had always dreamed would occur.

Gustavo might have lost this round, but he would win a moral victory in 2009. The Villoldo family brought a wrongful death and intentional infliction of emotional distress suit against the Cuban government for the suicide of his father. In late May of 2009, a federal judge in Miami awarded Gustavo Villoldo the sum of \$1.2 Billion to be paid by the Cuban government. While Gustavo will probably never get Fidel Castro to write a check for the damages, he can at least sleep well knowing he did all he could to vindicate his father's death.