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A GLIMPSE OF THE CUBAN MILITARY IN 1996

by

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Cubans live without streetlights and till much of their soil with ox-drawn plows. Dilapidated Chevrolets dating from the 1950s are familiar sights on the roadsides, while drivers poke through heaps of ancient parts to get them going again. Toilet seats are luxury items outside the capital city. Soldier-farmers sing of the glories of the Revolution, as they harvest sugar or listen to lectures on the "War of All the People." Citizens "volunteer" their weekends to dig bunkers against the coming Yankee assault.

But the government recognizes its isolation since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The country badly needs hard currency to climb out of the economic hole its socialism has helped to dig. The government wants to protect the revolution, but it also wants to gain a more normal trading relationship with the Western World. It fears the North American colossus and strives to demonstrate its capabilities for self-defense, but hopes at the same time to earn an acceptance of its independence and the benefits of foreign investment.

In early February 1996 Major General Ulises Rosales del Toro, chief of the Cuban General Staff, invited a small group of senior U.S. retired military and foreign service officers to visit the island for the purpose of developing a security dialogue between the General Staff and knowledgeable Americans. Clearly, he had in mind similar successful efforts in earlier years between the United States, on the one hand, and Russia and China on the other. The author, a member of that group of visitors, reports for the AUSA Institute of Land Warfare.

The visitors' approach to Cuba began inauspiciously. The small chartered Beechcraft which had lifted them from Miami was unceremoniously refused permission to land as it approached the island. Hunching his shoulders and opening his hands to express his own bemusement, the pilot performed a U-turn and headed back toward the Florida Keys. Then he received further instructions, still without explanation. First, "Go into orbit"; then, "Proceed to Havana. A high-level welcoming

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delegation awaits you.” Sharing their amusement, most of the group concluded that either: (a) the left hand didn’t know what the right hand was doing, or (b) the government wanted to demonstrate its independence for the *norteamericanos*. Maybe both.

The reception was, indeed, warm. The senior officer waiting on the tarmac, who would serve as the group’s principal escort throughout the visit, was Brigadier General Annaldo Tomayo Mendez, Cuba’s hero cosmonaut who went into space in the halcyon years of the Soviet program. A host of microphone-wielding reporters and television camera crews pinned the visitors to chairs in the reception lounge for the better part of an hour. Did we think this was a breakthrough in Cuban-American relations? (No.) Were we happy to be there? (Of course.) Would the United States attack Cuba? (Of course not.)

The schedule was tight for a four-day visit. Of greatest importance were two extended sessions across the table from General Rosales del Toro and his senior staff. Another such meeting brought the group to the Foreign Ministry, opposite the deputy foreign minister, Señor Bolaños (who is fluent in English and a graduate of Georgia Military Academy). Other visits included the National Defense College, the NCO Academy, the Cadet School, an underground defensive installation for a reinforced motorized infantry regiment, the barracks of another regiment (formerly occupied by a Soviet brigade), a Youth Labor Army farm, the submarine base at Cienfuegos (another installation formerly used by the Soviets — now inactive), and the Juragua nuclear power plant, under construction near Cienfuegos for almost a decade, but with most work halted over international environmental and nuclear waste disposal issues. The group would also meet with the head of the American Interests Section (officially part of the Swiss Embassy).

Cuban Defense Strategy

Cuba’s concept for defense was explained and discussed by General Rosales del Toro at the two sessions in his headquarters and during a social evening hosted by the Defense Ministry. The elements have taken shape in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Since that time, and most particularly since the U.S.-led victory in 1991 over Iraq (which Havana interprets as further evidence of American inclination to seek solutions to international problems through resort to force), the Cuban defense establishment has undergone fundamental reorientation and restructuring. The principle results have been a sharp downsizing of the armed forces; adoption of new techniques of deterrence and defense, under an umbrella concept termed “The War of All the People”; and a new focus on the self-support of the armed forces through farming.

The War of All the People, General Rosales explained, is composed of six strategic tasks:

1. *Training the entire populace for prolonged defensive warfare against superior forces with high technological advantage.* The Cuban leadership argues that “artificial intelligence should not be confused with human intelligence.” The reasoning runs that in the final analysis, in war, men must fight men. They must get out of their planes and off of their ships and face each other man-to-man. “The Cuban strategy is based upon imposing high human and political cost upon an enemy in terms of body bags and is therefore bound to prevail in the long run.” General Rosales went on to assert

that Cuba would never make the mistake Saddam Hussein did by leaving his forces in the open, exposed to attack by high technology weaponry.

2. *Preparing the theater of operations.* For the most part, this involves the fortification of the Cuban island for protection of military equipment and forces from a surprise attack and for development of a capability for protracted defense and guerrilla type operations. It also involves protection of the entire population through construction of underground shelters.

3. *Subjecting all military programs to strict measures for increased efficiency to realize maximum possible savings to the government.* This will include the preparation of civilian defenses through “voluntary” participation in shelter construction. (Defense Minister Raul Castro recently announced that the Eastern Army had constructed 70 km of tunnels in the eastern third of the country. It was not clear whether he meant *by* 1995 or *in* 1995.)

4. *Extending the useful life of military equipment through storage of all materiel not essential for current military training and operations.* This includes the encapsulation of equipment in underground facilities in nitrogen-filled plastic bags. The minimum storage life sought through this technique is five years. At the five-year point the equipment is removed from storage and checked for deterioration. Reportedly, the latest such check — in December 1995 — found a tank unit to be fully serviceable.

5. *Making the island self-sufficient in foods.* This will include the complete self-sufficiency of the armed forces through farming, and provision of approximately 40 percent of the needs of the civil population by the Youth Labor Army. Most foods will be provided by state cooperative farms, but the population will assist through the operation of private garden plots. Individuals may sell a designated share of privately grown foods.

6. *Maintaining a high level of readiness of the armed forces.* The United States is perceived as a volatile, intolerant power with a history of aggression against Cuba. Readiness is measured in terms of manning, training and authorized equipment on hand. Cuba cannot afford equipment modernization and claims to have a strategy that does not require it. General Rosales dismisses modernization as simple participation in a pointless arms race.

The Armed Forces

The Cuban armed forces (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias*, or *FAR*) number about 150,000 men and women in the active components and the Youth Labor Army (*Ejercito Joven Trabajo*, or *EJT*). (This is in contrast to a total of 175,000 reported in the International Institute for Strategic Studies' *Military Balance 1995/96*.) Conscripts serve in either the active forces or the EJT for a period of two years. Thereafter they revert to reserve status or serve in the territorial militia. (IISS estimates these forces at 135,000 and 1.3 million respectively.) The General Staff believes that it has a special asset in the reserve and militia forces, which are believed to have some 300,000 veterans with combat experience in Angola between 1975 and 1987. Some of these men are expected to remain in the structure until the year 2017.

The visiting group encountered no units of the *FAR* (aside from the schools described later), but it had the services of a detachment of particularly sharp-looking guides, wearing red berets, creased trousers and parachute wings. Unfortunately, the visual impression was not confirmed by the unit's performance — which strongly suggested a Keystone Kops entertainment routine. The function of the detachment was to clear the way for the visitors' bus through traffic. The soldiers' approach to this mission was to speed their Russian Lada squad car ahead while all four of the occupants waved and shouted out of the windows to everyone in sight. The tactic did manage to leverage a few lumbering trucks toward the curb, but as often as not, it was accomplished on the wrong road. The guides had a tendency to pay more attention to clearing the path than to pursuing the planned route, necessitating frequent U-turns. Sometimes the bus driver seemed to have a better sense of direction than the guides and would pull over to the side and wait until the guides discovered that they no longer had anyone following them. They would suddenly reappear from behind at high speed, honking their horn and waving to bewildered bystanders.

Youth Labor Army

The *EJT* was formed in 1973 as a part of the Revolutionary Army to perform rural labor and to fulfill local area security missions. The strength of the organization is said to vary from 50,000 to 70,000, depending upon the season. The *EJT* is credited with having harvested as much as one third of the nation's sugar crop and 40 percent of the national food production effort when such help was needed. For the most part it operates farms in areas not otherwise under cultivation by the state cooperatives. The Isle of Youth (formerly Isle of Pines) is said to be a large *EJT* preserve. While the *EJT* undergoes periodic infantry and guerrilla training, it is probably not particularly adapted to the area in which it serves since the members are frequently moved according to seasonal demands for farm labor.

The farm we visited was unremarkable. The workers wore civilian clothes and appeared to have old but serviceable transport (some horse-drawn) and machinery. The briefing officer gave no numerical strength figures for men working at the farm, but said that the number varied widely from season to season. The briefer also mentioned "frontier brigades," but it was not clear whether these units were associated with *EJT*. Some brigades were said to include women, especially in air defense units. A female company was mentioned as serving in the Guantánamo area.

The National Defense College

The National Defense College, established in 1990, is located near the suburb of Cojimar, east of Havana. The institution offers an array of programs, ranging from advanced military branch courses to senior service college (master's) level. The senior course, which lasts for one year and grants a master of arts degree in national defense studies, has a student body of 60, selected from all departments of government. During the year some 250 military and other government officials address the students. Approximately half of the senior student body is from the armed forces, and as many as 15 or 20 may be women. The curriculum is divided into four periods: basic international political theory (eight weeks); Cuban domestic issues, including 16 days' travel in the country (19

weeks); diplomatic, scientific, international and geopolitical studies (14 weeks, including foreign travel); and review, including visits by national leaders (nine weeks, including a one-week war game).

The students write two major papers during the year, one an individual thesis, the other a contribution to a group study project. Judging by the quality of the questions asked of the visitors by the students, the curriculum is probably similar to that of the U.S. National Defense University. The students gave the impression of being well informed on their topics of interest. Cuba has no foreign students or faculty members at any of its military educational or training institutions.

Notable in the seminar rooms of the college were numerous instructional panels dealing with guerrilla operations in Chinese, Vietnamese and Korean wars. Also prominent were maps dealing with the campaigns of Napoleon and Simon Bolívar. Perhaps the conflicts afforded greatest significance in the college are the Cuban Ten-Year War against Spain (1868-1878), led by Carlos Manuel de Céspedes (“father of his country”), and the subsequent uprising (1895), led by José Martí, who perished in battle. Cuban history records that in these campaigns an indigenous Cuban force of 25,000 effectively defeated the Spanish army of 300,000. U.S. forces intervened in 1898, but while not unwelcome, were seen largely as interlopers who entered the struggle just in time to steal the Cuban victory. The Cubans remark dolefully that they were cut out of the Treaty of Paris, which settled the war in America’s favor and set the stage for 35 years of U.S. domination of the island — first as occupiers and later as economic bullies under the infamous Platt Amendment. The U.S. law authorized U.S. intervention practically on whim until revoked in 1936 by President Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor policy. In discussions regarding the concept of the “War of All the People,” which some seem to believe to be a likely future event, Cuban officers drew parallels with the campaigns of Manuel de Céspedes and Martí. Particularly, they focused on the decade-long duration of the first conflict.

The NCO Academy and Cadet School

These institutions are collocated on an attractive campus near the town of Ceiba del Agua, southwest of Havana. The NCOs (who, with a single exception, were black) staged an impressive display of close order drill and weapon-handling, culminating in a half-time style march in review in a star formation, with one of the women of the group standing on a platform of interwoven rifles, waving the Cuban flag. The group was said to be celebrating completion of its five-month course. The class evidenced an esprit and style worthy of any NCO corps.

The Cadet School staged an array of field exercises over a twenty-acre area, circus style. A lieutenant colonel acted as master of ceremonies, pointing out salient events to the observers. The women participated in all but the most strenuous demonstrations. In one routine, students (including women) clasped the ends of bamboo poles and were thrust aloft to the tops of high walls from which they dropped ropes for others to follow.

Flaming hazards were prominent. At one point, successive pairs of cadets were smeared with grease and set afire to test their fortitude and their ability to quickly extinguish the flames. Others entered a flaming mock village to flush out snipers. Still others rolled beneath tanks (T-55s) bearing down upon them, rising afterwards to pitch Molotov cocktails on the rear decks of the vehicles. The

finale brought the cadets together in a mass formation, singing a patriotic anthem and waving their arms and poles in unison.

The Former Soviet Garrison

The barracks at Bejucal, south of Havana, was reportedly built by Soviet forces to house a reinforced motorized rifle regiment. The original mission of the unit was to protect the nuclear warheads deployed to the island in 1962. Subsequently, the Soviets became advisors and trainers for the Cuban military, particularly for those units preparing for overseas duty. Supposedly, the garrison now houses a similar Cuban unit, but the visitors were not invited to inspect the equipment sheds, so it was impossible to confirm the type of organization said to be stationed there. From a distance the sheds appeared to be full of mechanized and armored equipment.

The six principal buildings of the barracks complex, each with three floors, appeared adequate to house battalion-sized units. A hasty count of the double-deck bunks in the single room visited indicated a capacity for approximately 125 soldiers. No separate facilities were seen for women.

Underground Fortifications

The tunnel complex shown to the visitors was located at a short distance from the National Defense College. The installation is basically an intersecting pair of twin tunnels with at least six exits. Four of the exits appeared to lead to external combat positions; three others may lead to other subterranean installations. The entrances seen were covered by large, heavily camouflaged doors, closely resembling the karst limestone into which the tunnels had been dug. So closely did the camouflage material match the surrounding rock that one had to knock on the surface to determine the difference. In its entirety, the complex may extend over a square kilometer or more. Auxiliary casements in the tunnels were said to hold 290 tons of diesel fuel, 175 tons of gasoline, 90 tons of medical supplies, 160 tons of life support equipment, 30 tons of clothing, and 12,000 liters of water.

The tunnel complex was described as a principal fortification for a territorial motorized infantry regiment. The unit was said to be composed of three infantry battalions, an artillery battalion, a tank company, and antitank, air defense, chemical and service units. A large portion of the tunnels appeared to be filled with the units' heavy equipment. Notable were BMP infantry fighting vehicles, D-30 122mm howitzers and ZU-23 twin barrel anti-aircraft guns. Most of the equipment was shrouded in plastic bags. There did not appear to be sufficient space for the various vehicles and pieces of equipment to pass each other in the tunnels, probably necessitating their removal in the order in which they stood. "Experiment stations" were noted at several points in the complex, with instruments probably recording temperature, humidity and other conditions.

Also notable in the sections of the facility which could be viewed was the absence of provisions for personnel comfort. If the facility is intended to shelter troops for more than a few days, there must be more spacious areas with better provisions for air, water, waste disposal and rest. Also apparently

lacking were baffles to contain the damage in case of explosion. Fuel and munitions casements, as with those for other supplies, appeared to lead directly to the main tunnels.

The Cienfuegos Naval Base

The base was removed from active service as part of the drawdown of the *FAR*. The visitors were shown two piers said to service Soviet submarines and a large warehouse apparently for recharging submarine batteries. The piers were said to accommodate up to 11 submarines at one time. Approximately 300 batteries with Russian markings, each about four feet tall and 2 x 3 feet in cross section, remained on racks with power connections attached. The base commander said that these were extra batteries left behind by the Soviets when they withdrew. It was not clear whether they were serviceable or not, since the machinery with which they were associated was not in operation. The only vessel in the area at the time appeared to be a corvette standing several miles from shore.

The Juragua Nuclear Power Plant

The Juragua plant is located on Cuba's southern shore, across the bay from the Cienfuegos Naval Base. Work has progressed over a decade to the point of erection of one of two planned reactor shells and several associated buildings. Some large reactor machinery and components are on the site but are stored in separate sheds as much as a half mile from the principal structure. No nuclear fuel is on hand. The engineers at the installation expressed considerable frustration at the multiple inhibitions to completion of the plant.

The engineers estimate that at least an additional \$800 million will be required to complete the project. They admit that as many as 11 safety-related deficiencies may exist in the structure, but complain that the international community — particularly the United States — has not been helpful in moving the project forward. (The reactor design is described as being similar to that of Chernobyl, but considerably improved. Most objections to the plant appear to relate both to its design and to its location with respect to Florida.)

Observations and Conclusions

The Cuban motive for inviting the group to the island was probably two-fold. On the one hand the government is anxious to impress upon visitors the viability of the new defensive strategy and the specific military measures adopted since the collapse of the USSR. On the other, it is clearly interested in developing an opening at a professional level which would avoid direct confrontation over ideological issues. The General Staff conveys the impression of being as concerned about an attack by U.S. forces today as the NATO alliance was of an attack by the Warsaw Pact at the height of the Cold War. While the contingency may not be considered necessarily likely, it looms as a definite possibility and a factor coloring much government decisionmaking.

The General Staff also evidences a concern about the relocation of the U.S. Southern Command Headquarters from Panama to Miami. The latter they see as the epicenter of hostile Cuban émigré influence. Some members expressed a latent fear of coordination of U.S. military and émigré policies and possible hostile actions. Further, the appointment of the former U.S. SOUTHCOM commander in chief, General Barry McCaffrey, as director of the U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy, was interpreted by some as a potentially anti-Cuban measure.

With respect to drug control, a number of the General Staff officials argued that Cuba could be of substantial assistance to the United States. They particularly cited coordination of antidrug sea and air patrols. They pointed out that the execution of the prominent Cuban leader Ochoa for drug dealing demonstrated the government's attitude toward the drug trade. Cuba currently cooperates with Argentina, Canada, Mexico and other hemispheric countries in operations to block trade in illegal substances. Supposedly, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency expressed interest in cooperation with Cuba in 1994, but the effort was blocked by the U.S. Department of State.

What the Cubans want right now is the removal of the U.S. economic embargo of the island (which they term a blockade and therefore an act of war). They also want U.S. respect for their Revolution and assistance in completion of their nuclear power plant. Other issues, heard less frequently or in more subdued tones, are the return of the Guantánamo naval base to Cuban control, discontinuance of hostile reconnaissance and bomber exercises against the island, and curtailment of private anti-Castro operations and demonstrations by Cuban-American groups based in Miami. Still others include free trade between Cuba and the United States and the abolition of perceived historic American arrogance and hegemony.

While the visitors observed no combat units, the high esprit of the students and the members of the faculties at the National Defense College and the Cadet and NCO Schools was palpable. These Cuban elite are clearly enthusiastic and proud of what they are doing. Further, while socialism is a prominent theme in public mural sloganeering, one gains the impression that the Revolution is much more than simple Marxism-Leninism — if, indeed, it is even seriously connected. The Revolution of which military officers speak appears to be rooted deeper in Cuban history. The Ten-Year War, Jose Marti's uprising and the overthrow of the Batista regime come to the surface far more readily than does Karl Marx's call for the union of the workers of the world. The studies of Mao Tse-tung's wars and the Vietnam War enjoy a focus more for their lessons regarding peoples' wars and techniques for inflicting political damage on a superior force than for their ideological message. One gains the impression that even if Fidel Castro were to disappear tomorrow, the Revolution would remain as a national institution — shorn, perhaps, of its communist dressings.

On the other hand, it is the very socialist dimension of the Revolution that appears to be the greatest restraint on Cuba's progress. Desperate for foreign investment, the leadership seems uncomprehending of the reticence of free market managers to sink money into a society in which the laws can be made or unmade by the stroke of a pen for political purposes. Such arbitrary restrictions as a limit of 12 chairs in a private restaurant are not unusual. The law was apparently drafted in the bureaucracy in the wake of a Castro remark that it might be all right to have that many seats, but that private interests should not dominate the restaurant business. It is quite likely that Cuba's inability to attract foreign investment is due more to such arbitrary regulation than to the U.S. embargo.

In sum, through Cuban eyes, the national history is a story of prolonged suffering at foreign hands and of a proud struggle for independence. Fidel Castro is seen by the military as a living liberator, but he is not necessarily considered greater than others in the past. His specialty is socialism, and Cubans are quick to point out institutions for orphans, the blind, the infirm and the elderly which have been erected during his regime. But the Revolution is more than the radical left. It is the national heritage, and even while mired in poverty, the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias* will probably remain faithful, if limited forces for its defense.

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