

Third World Experience in Counterinsurgency: Cuba's Operation Carlotta, 1975

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On December 2, 2005, Cuba's aging Fidel Castro addressed his nation's armed forces in his last personally delivered Revolutionary Armed Forces Day speech in Havana. The speech commemorated the 30th anniversary of the Cuban army's Angolan intervention.¹ The speech was the archetypal "Castronic" socialist diatribe long-time Fidel watchers have come to expect. However, during this speech Fidel, for the first time, shed some light on the history of the secret deployment of 36,000 Cuban troops, sent in 1975, to defend the newly declared independent Marxist government of Angola. "Never before," declared Fidel, "had a Third World country acted to support another people in armed conflict beyond its geographical neighborhood." The Cuban leader declared that contemporary historical assessments of the region consistently omit the contributions of the Cuban expeditionary forces. Castro called the contributions of the Cuban army "decisive in consolidating Angola's independence and achieving the independence of Namibia."²

What was *Operation Carlotta* and, more importantly, what will be its legacy to a people soon to have their history re-examined in the post-Castro era? What are the assessments of those who fought this bloody war some 30 years later? Pragmatic Cuban veterans consider the long official silence concerning *Operation Carlotta* an admission of failure in another of Fidel's many botched programs of "Leninist internationalism." Yet, others regard participation in Fidel's African adventures, a patriotic duty proudly performed. A retired Cuban military doctor explained, "Well, you have to give credit to Fidel, he was one to back his words with deeds, and the deed was our presence in Angola. Most were quite proud to have participated. Remember, that at the time, the South Africans were a nasty bunch that never merited a lot of international sympathy."³

Defining Operation Carlotta

"The families of our internationalists deserve special mention. With remarkable stoicism, they bore absence, sent words of encouragement with every letter and kept any difficulties or worries to themselves. Prime examples include the mothers, sons, brothers and sisters and spouses of our fallen compatriots. All, without exception, have come to terms with their loss..."

-Fidel Castro, 2005

Despite the socialist rhetoric, the reality of the Angolan intervention can still be felt in the towns and villages in Cuba. Families recall the young men who after being called up for national service, suddenly disappeared in 1975-1976. Many never returned.

Nobel laureate Gabriel Garcia Marquez's assertion that Cuban troops involved in *Operation Carlotta* were universal volunteers, who signed a statement indicating that they had been fully briefed prior to the mission regarding its objectives and who "accepted the risks in a spirit of revolutionary internationalism," is as improbable as it is ludicrous.⁴ Veterans interviewed say they were told of their destination only on the day of departure. Most described the average soldier's lack of appropriate training and the constant shortages of basic supplies and equipment for their mission. The expeditionary force experienced massive intelligence failures that included an insufficient understanding of the people, culture and terrain within the Cuban area of operations in Angola. Veterans described severe losses suffered by Cuban ground troops during the 1975-6 operation. While the actual number of Cubans killed in the intervention, code-named *Carlotta* is unknown. Intelligence sources peg Cuban losses at more than thirty per cent. Of the 36,000 Cuban troops committed to fighting in Angola from 1975-79, reported combat deaths range from 3,000 to less than 10,000.⁵

The individual Cuban soldier's isolation while in-country during *Operation Carlota* was almost absolute. Veterans interviewed refuted Castro's assertion that "relative's sent words of encouragement with every letter." Because Cuba officially denied the presence of any sizable expeditionary force in the southwest African state, none of the troops were permitted to ever receive a single letter from home; some for as long as three years. Several veterans stated that relatives were informed that their loved ones had been selected for a "special engineering" program in the Soviet Union and it was inappropriate for them to be contacted.⁶ Castro's remark now seems cynical, nonetheless accurate, when he alleged that relatives bore absences with "remarkable stoicism."

General Background

Throughout the 1960's, Portugal's rejection of independence demands by African nationalist groups were unmatched by resources that would have prevented or quashed the inevitable insurgencies that flourished in her long neglected territories. Predictably, protracted guerrilla war was the result. Once begun, the wars continued with growing intensity. Insurgent forces experienced limited success against a surprisingly resilient and determined Portugal that declared it would never give in to rebel groups. But, on April 25, 1974, an unexpected military coup, known as the *Carnation Revolution*, occurred in Lisbon and overthrew the hard-line government of Marcelo Jose Caetano. The coup caught the Angolan liberation movements, expecting a drawn-out struggle lasting throughout the decade, completely by surprise. The new "democratic" regime in Lisbon began a rapprochement with Africa and swiftly announced that it would grant its African colonies independence.⁷

Three contending factions vied to succeed the Portuguese in Angola: the Soviet-backed Popular Movement for the Independence of Angola (MPLA) led by Agostinho Neto; the

anti-colonial National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA) based mainly in Zaire and led by Holden Roberto; and UNITA, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola, whose leader Jonas Malheiro Savimbi, led an anti-Portuguese guerrilla force inside Angola throughout the late 1960's and early 1970s.⁸

Portugal hosted the Alvor Conference in January 1975 where the three nationalist contenders negotiated an independence timetable with their former colonial master. They pledged to support a rotating Angolan presidency as well as a bizarre security arrangement that included a temporarily unified Angolan-Portuguese army.⁹ This security arrangement called for the integration of the militant wings of the three contenders into a single Angolan Defense Force. The conference ended with agreement among the factions which called for joint rule and committed them to draft a constitution and hold elections prior to the end of Portuguese control in November 1975. But unity was never possible. In early 1975, an intense struggle for political control of Angola among the MPLA, FNLA, and UNITA ensued. Each distrusted the motivations and devices of the other and all collectively feared armed takeover by its counterpart's militant wing.

Not surprisingly, violent skirmishes erupted among the followers of the three groups. In the summer of 1975, the Marxist-MPLA used its superior military strength within the proximity of Luanda to expel the FNLA from the city. Subsequently, the MPLA turned on UNITA and repeated the process and bloody civil war ensued. In early 1976, the MPLA, with substantial Soviet aid and a sizeable Cuban expeditionary force, compelled its two rivals to give up conventional war and take to the bush. With its rivals expelled, the MPLA hoisted its flag over Luanda and promptly claimed to be the legitimate government of all Angola.¹⁰

Because of the MPLA's Marxist political program, Cold War adversaries increasingly became involved. The United States initially gave \$3,000,000 to the FNLA. The CIA station chief in Luanda, Robert Hultslander, advised the State Department against backing the FNLA calling them "unscrupulous and thieving." He was overruled and censured for the comments by Dr. Henry Kissinger. However, Hultslander was correct.¹¹ Most of the money was subsequently stolen or misappropriated by the FNLA leadership. Zaire, South Africa, and reportedly even Israel, supported the two liberation movements, UNITA and the FNLA, politically and later with arms. In June 1974, almost seven months before the Alvor Agreement, the Chinese, to counter Soviet support of the MPLA, sent 120 instructors and 450 tons of weapons to the FNLA in Zaire; also the same group Dr. Kissinger was supporting. The MPLA was assured treasure of a different sort; an array of Soviet weapons, aircraft and fighting vehicles with an entire Cuban expeditionary force to do much of the fighting. This assistance was to be purchased using oil revenues from Angola's disputed province of Cabinda, where tribal guerilla groups were fighting the MPLA for the independence of Cabinda.¹²

Cuban Participation and Limitations

With his internationalist revolutionary program frustrated in Latin and South America and stymied throughout the Caribbean throughout the 1960's-70's Castro yearned to be, and later did become, the international leader of the Non-aligned Movement. He was prepared to expend his most valuable resource, the Cuban Army to procure that position. Castro claimed in 2003 that Cuba was successful in exporting revolution to Angola. However, when young Cuban "proletarian-internationalists" arrived at the outset of the Angolan intervention in 1975, the political revolution was already completed. Castro, in 1976, justified Cuban involvements without risking serious international condemnation by saying Cuban forces had landed in Angola, upon request just in time to protect the MPLA from outside aggression. A Cuban Expeditionary force was not there to launch a revolution. Yet, in a contradictory statement issued in 1975, the Cuban Communist Party affirmed that Castro's Leninist goals were furthered by assisting in the creation of a Cuban style revolutionary Marxist society under "Fidel's personal tutelage and protection." Despite conflicting justifications, the Cuban intervention played well to domestic audiences in Cuba. Fidel's stature improved internationally as he attempted to re-establish himself as the philosophical and martial leader of revolutionary movements throughout the Third World.¹³

The New Recruit

Ernesto C. is a tall, handsome, slightly graying man in his early fifties. He has lived for several years in Panama City, Panama where he is a kitchen manager for a family owned Cuban restaurant. His soft spoken manner and forced smile betrays a man whose life experiences are neither gratuitously given nor easily recounted. In 1975, at the age of 16, Ernesto was living with his mother in the Province of Havana, having just graduated from high school. Life was poor but predictable and he was looking forward to entering the University of Havana with his classmates. By law, university ambitions of all young Cubans were put on hold until the two-year compulsory military service obligation was satisfied. Within months of his graduation, Ernesto reported for his military training.

According to Ernesto, Cuban military entrance requirements at the time of his induction were quite lax, ". . . one only had to pass a medical exam. If you weren't deaf, blind or missing a leg you were in. It was obligatory, so there were no special considerations." Ernesto joined other sixteen and seventeen year old males called up from Havana Province and began 45 days of basic combat training known as "*la previa*." Cuban conscripts were trained at the older isolated revolutionary-era military camps near the town of San Antonio de los Baños. Like all new soldiers, Ernesto encountered arduous training days that began early and ended late. Introduced to close order drill, physical training and weapons and marksmanship skills using the AK 47, the training company was also under the supervision of the very visible political officer. This officer conducted sporadic classes on Marxist-Leninist theory which were scored just as critically as marksmanship.

Ernesto and his colleagues were introduced to the RPG 7 and the older RPD5 machine-gun. The RPG-7 is a shoulder-fired, muzzle-loaded, anti-tank and anti-personnel grenade launcher which launches a variety of fin-stabilized, oversized grenades from a 40mm tube. The RPD light machine-gun was one of the first weapons designed to fire the new Russian 7.62x39mm intermediate cartridge, which became the standard round of the Soviet small arms arsenal. The weapon, developed in 1944, became the standard squad automatic weapon of Soviet army until the 1960s, when the Warsaw Pact generally replaced it with the RPK light machine gun. The RPD was extensively exported to pro-Soviet countries and regimes around the world. Cuba always received its share.¹⁴

“They Gave Us Ice Cream”

Training in “*la previa*” continued for Ernesto and his companions at San Antonio de los Baños. The training, similar to the US Army COHORT system, prepared the recruits to be tactically indoctrinated and then technically skilled and subsequently integrated into a communications battalion assigned to a mechanized infantry regiment. Ernesto’s company was tasked with the upkeep of the R-105 family of Soviet made backpack radio sets. These radios were by far the most common of all the Russian radios found throughout the world. The radio was relatively primitive by contemporary military standards and, unlike most Soviet equipment, was not easy to use. These radios were of the glass tube type design; the only transistors were in the radio’s internal power supply. Introduced in the early 1950’s, it was revamped in the 1970’s, with more modern materials. Like most Soviet equipment of the Cold War period, the radio set was an updated copy of captured WWII German sets.¹⁵

Near completion of training, Ernesto’s group was unexpectedly assembled and informed they had been selected for a “special military course.” Things began to change shortly thereafter. Ernesto remembers “weird things going on . . . stricter custody, more security, and the military maneuvers began to get more complicated and more exhausting. We were taken to the medics for all sorts of tests and vaccines. We understood nothing of what was happening.” It was during this period that Ernesto was issued his first international passport, showing him attired in civilian clothes. The civilian suit was issued to him solely for the purpose of the passport photo, then removed and given to the next soldier his size. Phony civilian occupations were listed on the passport. Ernesto and his companions, just months out of high school, abruptly became architects, engineers and science professionals. “The whole process took about a month and we had absolutely no contact with the outside world. That was forbidden. However they treated us better, with more respect. They even gave us ice cream.”

Departure for Places Unknown

The atmosphere at San Antonio de los Baños had quickly turned from conscript training to tactical. The new troops were in for some surprises, when one day “. . . beautiful air-conditioned busses appeared out of nowhere and we were taken to a large building. There, in front of us, were none other than Fidel and Raul Castro. They told us the story of Angola and its military situation. They told us that some 200 Cuban “special advisors” supporting the MPLA were now surrounded by FNLA troops who had come from Zaire .

. . the imperialists were invading Angola, so the president of the MPLA had asked Cuba, based on the principles of Marxism-Leninism and proletarian internationalism, to give him military support. We were told the country would be proud of us because we were going to accomplish one of the three major principles of Marxism-Leninism, which was proletarian internationalism.”¹⁶

For the past three decades it has been debated whether *Operation Carlotta* was a Soviet designed operation or, as Castro maintains, an independent Cuban initiated response to a plea from Agostino Neto, the president of the MPLA.¹⁷ Castro has long held that the Kremlin was never consulted prior to the operation, a contention which considering the players and proxies of the Cold War, is improbable at best. According to Ernesto, Fidel addressed the issue during this briefing, telling his soldiers that the Soviet Union was supplying modern and efficient weapons but . . . “because of their Warsaw Treaty obligations they could not bring their troops to Africa . . . it was our duty to support and liberate Angola from the imperialist enemies.”

Within three hours of meeting with Fidel, the entire brigade was taken to an assembly point called “El Chico” close to Havana. Here, the troops were issued weapons and civilian clothing. “They gave us civilian clothing and we packed our military clothes away. We looked very strange because the civilian clothes were tailored the same, so we were all dressed almost exactly alike.” Three brigades were then marched to the port of Mariel where three Russian built cargo vessels, “*30 Aniversario*,” the “*Playa Giron*” and the “*Primer Congreso*” awaited.

Ernesto’s company was put aboard the rusting “*30 Aniversario*.” There was no time for goodbyes. Three thousand Cuban troops, without fan-fare, embarked on each of the three ships which sailed at daybreak on the morning of November 6, 1975. Ernesto remembers, “Most of us were adolescents, innocent and really had no idea what would happen to us. However, we really didn’t have the time or the space to think about it.”

Voyage to Angola

The voyage from Mariel to the Congolese coast took 23 days. The 3,000 troops were never allowed above deck for fear of detection by American aerial intelligence. The troops were quartered in the cargo holds that had been used for shipping raw sugar. According to Ernesto, “. . . it was an unbelievable mess down there. Caring for natural necessities was difficult.” There was not much to do below decks during these sailing days. Ernesto remembers the voyage full of sea-sickness, vomiting and unsuccessful attempts to adjust to stiflingly hot, cramped and nauseating conditions aboard the ex-sugar freighter.

The vessels arrived off the Congolese coast on November 29, 1975 and the troops began the welcome debarkation from the ships at Pointe Noir around midnight. Ernesto’s company was then assigned to a mechanized infantry company equipped with the Soviet BMP-1 vehicle.

The BMP-1 was a fully armored amphibious infantry combat vehicle. Its low silhouetted hull had a sharp sloping front with a conspicuously ridged surface. It mounted an extremely flat, truncated cone turret that housed a 73-mm smoothbore, low pressure, short recoil gun which was fed by a 40-round magazine. A top-side gunner operated a 7.62-mm coaxial machine gun. A launching rail for SAGGER missiles, an anti-tank wire-guided missile system, was attached just above the gun. The BMP-1 was powered by a 290 hp, water-cooled, 6-cylinder diesel engine and when driven on easy terrain could reach speeds of 35-40MPH. The vehicle held a three-man crew, including the vehicle commander, who became a squad leader when carrying an infantry squad that dismounted through the rear doors. Firing ports in the sides and rear of the troop compartment allowed the infantrymen to fire assault rifles and light machine guns from inside the vehicle when on the move.¹⁸

Departure for Landala

Within hours of arrival, the Cuban brigades were en route through Congo-Brazzaville. The convoy traveled throughout the day arriving at the Angolan border late the next evening. "It was there we got off and changed into our military clothing. We broke out ammunition and loaded our weapons and continued down the road into Angola." Their destination was the abandoned Portuguese military post at Landala about 30km north east of the capital city of Luanda.

Ernesto's brigade composed of raw recruits and commanded by inexperienced officers entered into the combat zone. "That first night I remember we had no idea where we were sleeping. We didn't even set up a proper camp. . . The next day we were surprised to see that we had slept in a sort of a plain surrounded by high mountains. The enemy could have killed us with a few rocks, as we had absolutely no protection." Basic combat intelligence was slim. Maps issued from Cuban military headquarters in Luanda became suspect. Most showed non-existent rivers that disappeared during the Angolan dry season. Cuban commanders planned routes down long-vanished Portuguese colonial roads passing over bridges and through villages which no longer existed.

Attacks on the Landala outpost by FNLA and its allies, became frequent. Ernesto's company was tasked with establishing a defensive perimeter around the post. This required an almost daily reconnaissance patrol of outlying villages. Ernesto observed, "We saw the great needs of the people. They were very poor and without education. We tried to help them. We gave them our food and much needed medical attention by allowing them to come into our fortified camps. Ironically, the people we helped were the same ones who would help the enemy to attack us. They knew our troop strength, our movements and because they lived close to the camp they became valuable informers to the enemy, they were easily bribed."

Cabinda

Most of the resistance encountered by the Cubans at Landala was from another armed group backed by the FNLA called the Front for the Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda

(FLEC). The FLEC had actively fought Portuguese colonial authorities, subsequently formed a provisional government and on August 1, 1975, declared Cabinda independent. After Angolan independence in November, Cabinda was invaded by the MPLA with Cuban support. Eventually, the MPLA overthrew the provisional FLEC government and incorporated Cabinda into Angola.¹⁹ In December, Ernesto's brigade was moved into arid Linche province, near the Zairean border, in order to reinforce MPLA forces under siege by the FLEC. "We left Landala around midnight," he recalls, "using the roads on the northern route toward Zaire. At dawn, around 5am, we heard the sound of drums. Drums! Just like in the films. We thought the drums were coming from a nearby village, and that the tribe was happy at our appearance and was playing them as a welcome." Nobel Prize winning Marxist writer, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, in his history of *Operation Carlotta* described the action in Linche:

It was an atrocious war in which one had to keep a lookout for mercenaries and snakes, rockets and cannibals. One Cuban commander fell at the height of battle into an elephant trap. The black Africans, conditioned by centuries of hatred of the Portuguese, were initially hostile to the white Cubans. Especially in Cabinda, Cuban scouts often heard their presence reported by the primitive telegraphy of the drum, whose tom-tom could be heard everywhere within a radius of some 35 kilometers.²⁰

The drums signaled FLEC fighters of the Cuban's approach. At the bottom of a canyon, known as *Bukusau*, Ernesto's column was ambushed. Enfilading fire from machine guns and RPG's hidden in the canyon's walls wreaked havoc on vehicles and men. Grenades rained down from hidden positions. Ernesto remembers, ". . . they threw a tremendous number of grenades at us, there was no cover. Of our soldiers, 47 died and more than 60 were seriously wounded. The ambush lasted 35 minutes, but we sustained a very large amount of casualties. I was personally wounded on that terrible day." Ernesto watched from behind an overturned truck as his company commander and a few others tried to seek cover. ". . . He hid beneath a truck loaded with gasoline. That was a mistake. The truck was hit with a rocket. They became ashes almost immediately."

Ernesto sustained shrapnel wounds. He and other wounded Cubans were sent to Americo Boavida Hospital in Luanda where Cuban doctors treated him. While recovering in the hospital, soldiers read "*Olive Green on an International Mission*," the weekly newspaper for the Cuban military in Angola. Its pages were filled with stories stressing "socialist self-sacrifice." One issue, translated by a *Carlotta* survivor, contained the story a Cuban tank driver who explained why he had left his job in a metalworking shop to answer the call of duty in Angola: "In my house, to be an internationalist is something great," he was quoted as saying. "I was in too much pain in the hospital to read anything," replies a *Carlotta* veteran. "If I would have seen that article I would not have needed toilet paper."²¹ Even the *Operation Carlotta* military commander in Cabinda, General Ramon Espinosa Martin was severely wounded in Angola in 1976 and spent a year recuperating.²²

The Road Home

By August 1976, more than 100 of Ernesto's comrades from Havana Province were either dead or missing. Now recovered from his wounds, he and the other *Carlotta* survivors looked forward to the day when they would be going home. Patrolling and MPLA support missions occupied most of their time. They were bombed and strafed by South African Air Force fighter-bombers, and by "unmarked aircraft," most likely of mercenary origin from Zaire. Crack South African commandos ambushed the Cubans by night. Ernesto echoes what might have been said by an American soldier during another counter-insurgency of the 1960-1970's, "The longer we were there, the more I saw good comrades fall.

There was no talk of ever leaving Angola. We began to feel somewhat depressed. Medical attention was always good. But our equipment began to break down, our clothes were not being replaced and our food supply was sometimes unpredictable" One day Ernesto's unit was sent to ostensibly provide security to another port called Lobito, near Benguela. Benguela is Angola's deep water port and sea terminus for the Benguela Railway, the fabled diamond route into the Congo's Katanga Province. During the war, the bay had been used by Soviet freighters offloading military cargoes for the MPLA.²³ ". . . They assembled us, took away our weapons and loaded us on-board ships bound for Cuba. It was a shock. Within a day, with the dust of Angola still in our hair, we were again at sea, going home, it was that simple."

When the ships approached the Cuban coast near the city of Cienfuegos, ". . . Several boats came toward our ships. They were full of barbers, doctors and dentists sent to fix us, because we were a mess. It was during our clean-up that they gave us a check for 100 Cuban pesos, the equivalent of more or less six dollars. We were all happy because it had been a while since we had seen Cuban money and we were never paid while serving in Angola." The pay amounted to seven pesos for privates (.71 cents per month) and fourteen pesos for sergeants (\$1.43 cents per month). A revolutionary-internationalist, if he returned home alive, received less than \$10.00 for the entire operation.

Ernesto's brigade returned to Mariel on September 5, 1976. They were met at the port by a convoy of busses and taken to the Carlos Marx Theater in Miramar. In dramatic fashion the lights came on, the curtain opened and Fidel appeared. He congratulated the men and, ". . . Talked about everything that happened . . . how we had survived in Angola with the strategies that he personally had devised."

From there they were taken to a place called *Cristino Naranjo*. This was an elite social club for the Ministry of the Interior. Once inside the guarded compound the veterans found themselves staring at tables laden with huge amounts of steaming food. "It was incredible the way we ate and drank. Strict security surrounded us and nobody else could get in. I lived very close to this place, and so, when we were finally dismissed, I simply walked home. I received so many hugs and kisses from my family . . . they were never sure where I was . . . the government told relatives we were in the Soviet Union. This was common for soldiers during this time. But my grandmother didn't believe it. She listened

to the international news broadcasts and knew that we were in Angola. My mother had always refused to believe her.”

Aftermath: The Carlotta Legacy

From 1975-1988, Cuba was the main provider of combat troops, pilots, advisers, physicians, engineers, and technicians to the MPLA. As the insurgency expanded, so did Cuba's military presence. By 1982 there were 35,000 Cubans in Angola, of which about 27,000 were combat troops and the remainder advisers, instructors, and technicians. In 1985 their strength increased to 40,000, in 1986 to 45,000, and in 1988 to nearly 50,000. Angola paid for Cuban services out of oil revenues, at an estimated rate of \$300 to \$600 million annually.²⁴ The last Cuban forces left Angola in 1991.

Cuban forces, despite their numbers, generally did not engage directly in combat after the bloodshed of *Operation Carlotta* in 1975-1976. Following *Carlotta* Cuban missions were designed to protect strategic and economically critical facilities, like the giant Chevron facility at Cabinda. They provided combat service support, such as rear-area security, air defense, security for major military installations and the capital city of Luanda. Cubans also trained Angolan pilots and flew some combat missions against UNITA and the South African Defense Forces (SADF).

The Angolan conflict also produced strange bed-fellows. In 1984, the United States brokered a proposal for a step-by-step Cuban withdrawal from Angola in return for a reciprocal step-by-step South African withdrawal from South-West Africa, a forerunner to Namibian independence. Talks broke off after a South African commando unit was thwarted in an attempt to destroy the Chevron refinery complex in Cabinda. A few months later, the United States lost its role as an "honest broker" in the eyes of the Angolans by openly giving aid to Jonas Savimbi's UNITA forces. That decision created a paradoxical Cold War dilemma: proletarian-internationalist Cuban troops were protecting an oil refinery, owned in part by capitalist Americans, while the United States was aiding belligerents bent on destroying the complex.²⁵

Castro's reputation was at first enhanced by the purported independence of the Angolan intervention. Yet, as Cuban dependence on massive Soviet military, financial and logistical assistance became known, his claim that *Operation Carlotta* was a Cuban initiated operation undertaken without the Kremlins' pre-approval was debunked. The indisputable fact remains that without Soviet military hardware, supplies, aircraft, transport ships, and vast sums of hard currency pumped into the Cuban economy, there would have been few, if any, Cuban troops in Angola. Yet, despite these facts, when Soviet support is factored, one cannot overlook the Cuban military successes in the mid-1980's. The experiences and the hard lessons learned of *Operation Carlotta*, paved the way.²⁶

Ernesto now lives within the sizable Cuban expatriate community in the Republic of Panama. Life after the army included, marriage, defection and resettlement. Like most expatriates he stays updated on Cuban domestic politics, and considers the fate of the

island without Fidel. There can be no doubt that significant change will occur in Cuba in the near future. How those changes reflect the history of Cuba during its “internationalist proletariat” era that began with Che Gueverra and ended rather ignominiously in Africa remains to be seen. How will the Cuban people view “*Operation Carlotta*?” A circumspect Ernesto describes his feelings on the matter:

“At the time we were heroes. We absolutely believed that what we had done was productive and necessary for Angola . . . we have come to realize that it was truly a useless mission. So many comrades died without achieving any real objective. So many families were affected. The whole business was based on the absurd concept of the international-proletariat, where the poor of Cuba needed to help other poor people in different countries on their way to revolution and social development. I personally was affected in many ways. My nerves were affected. I was badly wounded and nearly lost my life. I never received compensation for my wounds. I was simply one of the internationalist-proletariats.”

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