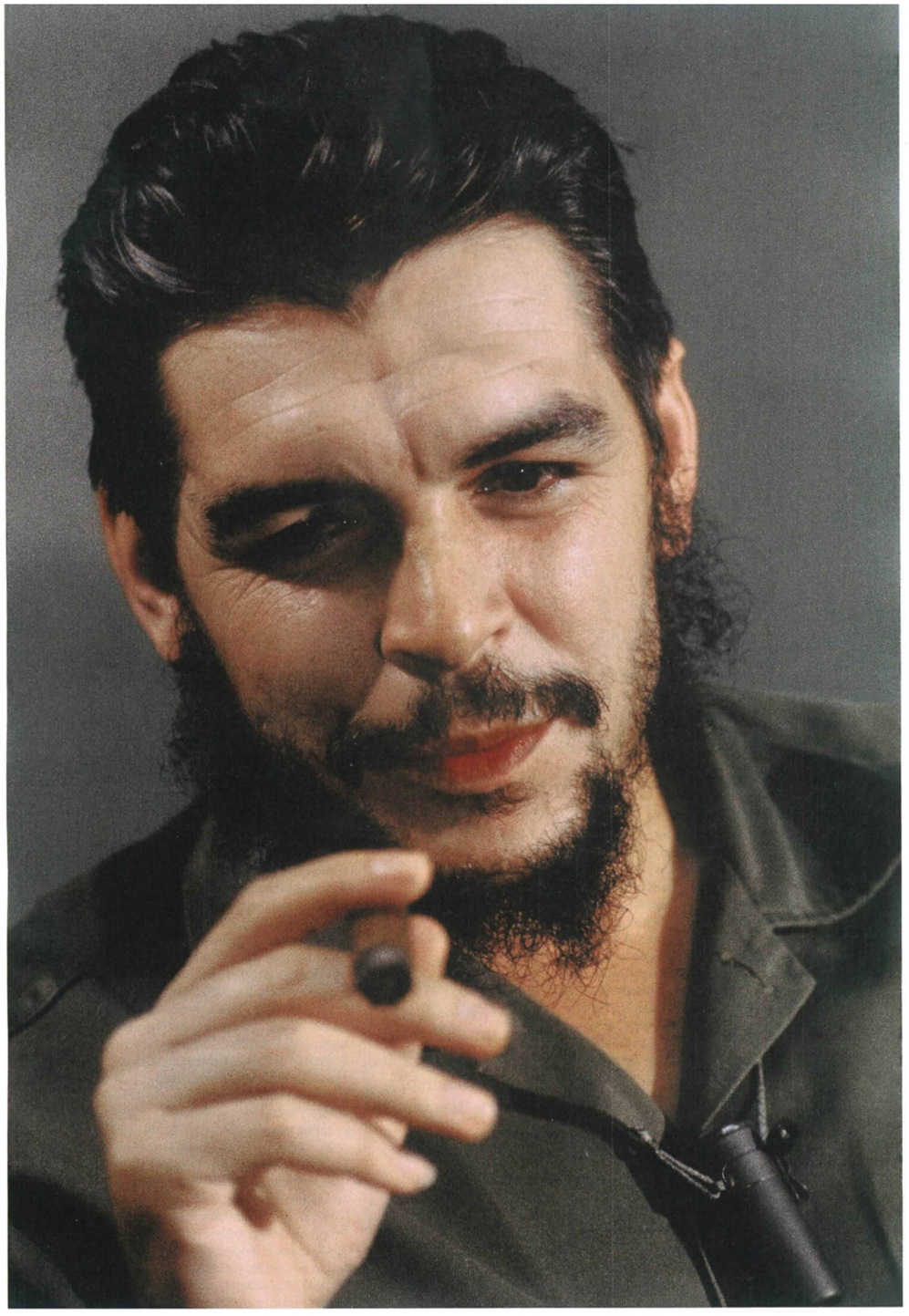
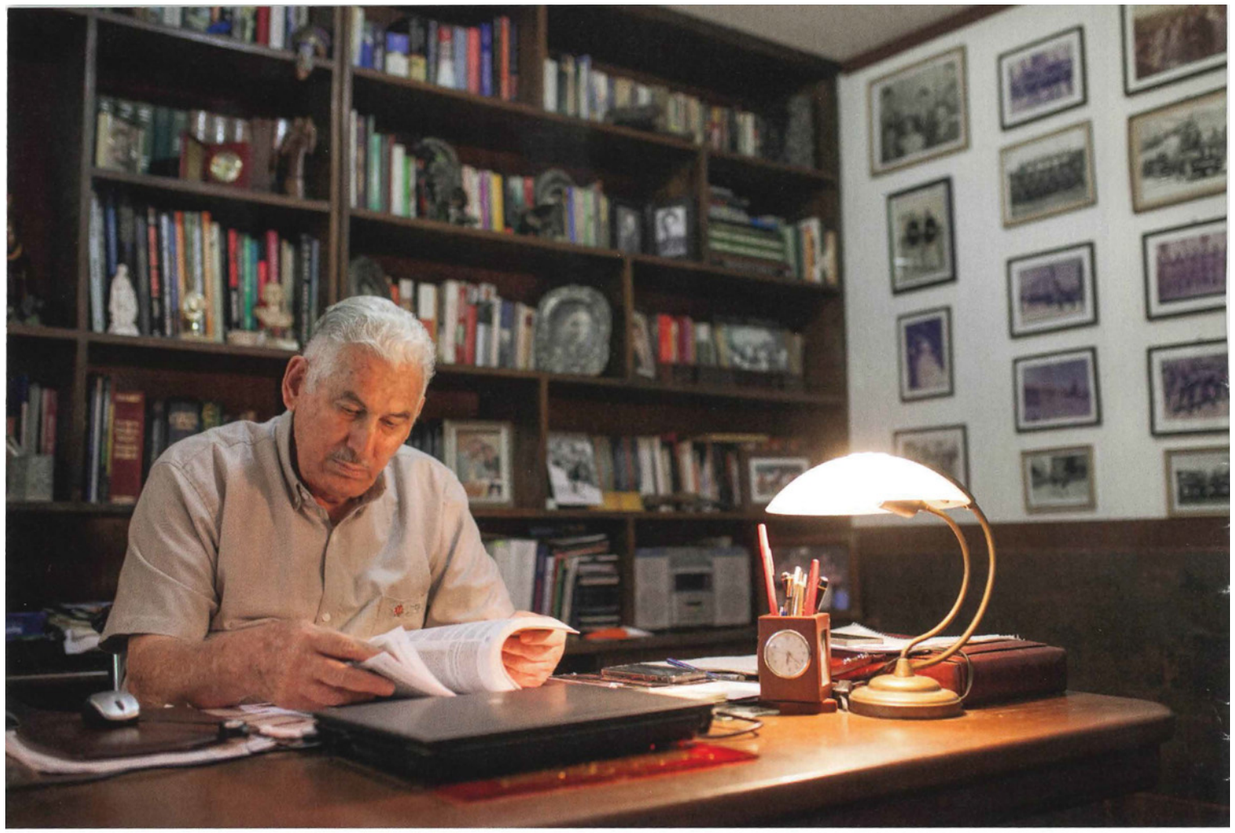
‘Don’t worry captain, this is the end. It’s over’

Exactly 50 years ago, Ernesto “Che” Guevara was captured by Captain Gary Prado Salmón in the rugged Yuro ravine in Bolivia. A key player in the 1959 Cuban revolution and author of a manual on guerrilla warfare, Guevara had travelled to Bolivia in the hope of turning it into one of the “many Vietnams” he’d called for in his 1966 “Message to the Tricontinental”. Accounts of the events surrounding Guevara’s death have varied, and some details remain contested. But here, in a rare interview, Prado tells *Clare Hargreaves* what he recalls of the revolutionary’s final hours. ▸



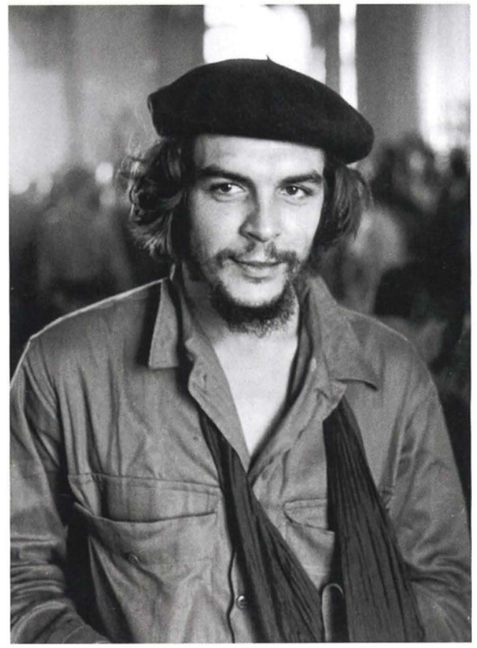
FACING PAGE: CHE GUEVARA PHOTOGRAPHED BY ELLIOTT ERWITT IN HAVANA IN 1964



LEFT: GARY PRADO SALMON PHOTOGRAPHED LAST MONTH AT HIS HOME IN SANTA CRUZ, BOLIVIA. PORTRAIT BY GONZALO PARDO

ABOVE: PRADO (CENTRE) WITH FELLOW SOLDIERS IN THE YURO RAVINE, OCTOBER 9 1967

RIGHT: GUEVARA, WITH ARM IN SLING AND FAMOUS BLACK BERET, IN HAVANA, 1959



On October 8 1967 my soldiers were controlling the route out of the Yuro ravine, an area that was covered with thick underbrush, rocks and trees. At around one o'clock they shouted that they had two prisoners. I ran 20 metres uphill to see them and asked one of the captives to identify himself. 'Che Guevara,' he said. The other was 'Willy' [Simeón Cuba Sarabia, another guerrilla].

There were confusing rumours about three or four possible 'Che Guevaras' being in the region at that time, so it was essential to check his identity. I asked Che to show me his right hand because, according to the information I had, he had a scar on the back of it. The scar was indeed there. He didn't look much like the photographs. He presented a pitiful figure, dirty, smelly and run-down. He'd been on the run for months. His hair was long, messy and matted, and his beard bushy. Over his uniform he was wearing a blue jacket with no buttons. His black beret was filthy. He had no shoes, just scraps of animal skins on his feet. He was wearing odd socks, one blue, one red. He looked like those homeless people you see begging in the cities pushing a supermarket trolley. I noticed that he was carefully carrying an aluminium pan with six eggs in it – it showed he'd had contact with the locals.

Che had been wounded in his right calf when trying to escape capture by running down the ravine. I had placed a machine gun to cover the area, plus a 60mm mortar to support it. My soldiers had opened fire on Che, hit him in the calf, made a hole in his beret and broken the M2 carbine he was carrying.

'He presented a pitiful figure, dirty, smelly and run-down... He had no shoes, just scraps of animal skins on his feet'

Che was depressed, completely demoralised. He was seeing the end. He'd had five guerrillas killed, so he wasn't happy about that. He saw me calling up more troops to secure the area and said: 'Don't worry captain, this is the end. It's over.' I said: 'It may be over for you, and you might be a prisoner now, but there are still some good fighters in the ravine.'

He asked me for some water. He had a canteen but I worried that he might have some kind of poison and try to kill himself, so I gave him water from my canteen along with some of my cigarettes. I confiscated everything he had in his pockets and rucksack, including some money and his diaries. Che was totally resigned and offered no resistance. He had a pistol but it had no clips to carry ammunition. So basically he was unarmed.

Che also had two Rolex watches, one on his wrist, one in his pocket which he told me had belonged to 'Tuma', a guerrilla who had died a couple of months before. He said the whole Cuban group had been given watches by Fidel Castro as a farewell gift.

By five in the afternoon it was starting to get dark, so I decided to call off the operation and take all my dead, wounded and prisoners to La Higuera, two kilometres away, and spend the night there. La Higuera was a village of around 20 adobe houses with straw roofs, inhabited by poor peasants who survived by cultivating the land they owned around the village.

My soldiers helped Che walk, because of his wounded calf. As we walked, Che said to me: 'I'm more use to you alive than dead.' The local peasants helped us get everyone to La Higuera; they were keen to help us fight the guerrillas, whom they distrusted, as they believed they were trying to invade their country.

We spent the night in the tiny schoolhouse in La Higuera. In one room we kept Willy and the dead bodies, and in the other Che, with one of my officers sitting with him in two-hour shifts. We fed both prisoners a meal of meat, potatoes and rice, and gave them coffee and cigarettes. I did not sleep that night as I was checking the security both of the village and the prisoners.

During the night I conversed with Che seven or eight times, and after two or three talks he seemed to perk up a bit, as if he was interested in what was going to happen to him. He recovered some of his character.

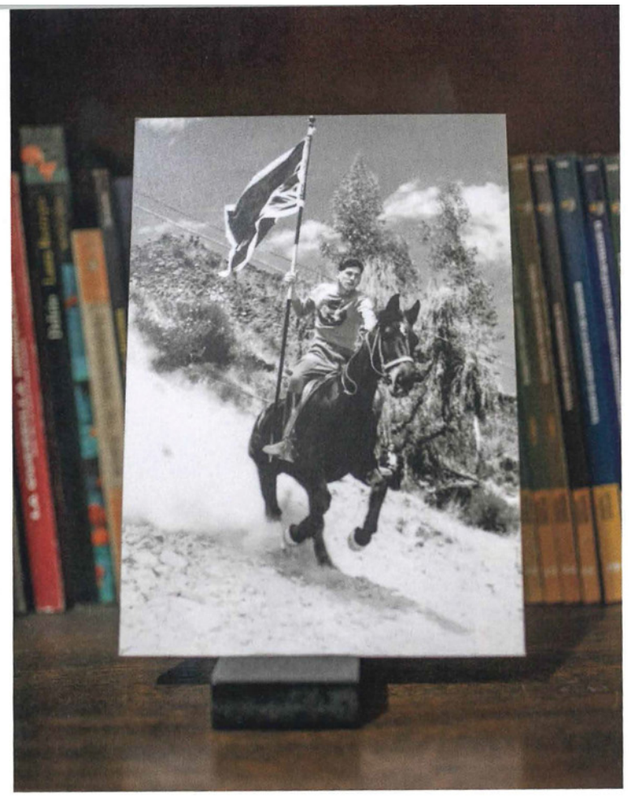
Both of us were trying to understand the situation. I asked him: 'Why did you come to Bolivia? One of the things you say in your book on guerrilla warfare is that if any country has a democratic government, even with some problems, it's very difficult to foment revolution there.' (We had a democratic government in Bolivia – President René Barrientos had been elected one year earlier – and we had a parliament, a free press and so on.) He didn't reply, so I asked again: 'Why did you come here?' He said: 'It wasn't just my decision, it was a decision taken on other levels.' 'What levels? Fidel?' I asked. 'Other levels,' he replied, and we left it at that. Of course, it was clear the command had come from Cuba.

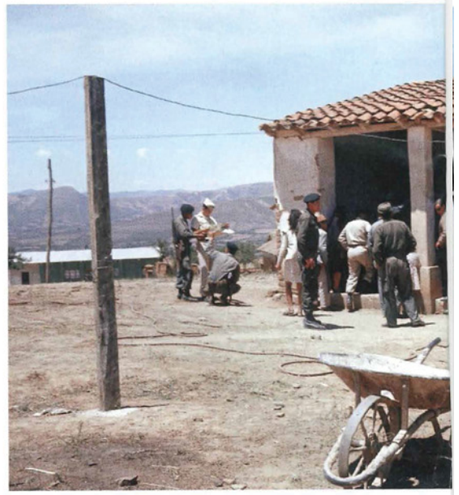
I asked him if he'd heard about the national revolution we'd had in Bolivia in 1952 and he said, 'Yes, I was here.' So I asked: 'Why did you come here to offer people land when we've had a very profound land reform already? That's why no peasants are joining your movement.' He replied: 'Yes, we were wrong about that, we had the wrong information.'

'We spent the night in the tiny schoolhouse in La Higuera... I conversed with Che seven or eight times... Both of us were trying to understand the situation'

Che came to Bolivia because he had nowhere to go. After his failure in Africa [he had not been able to bring 'revolutionary war' to the Congo] he went to Prague. He was trying to patch up things with Fidel but he had given up his Cuban nationality and his position as commander of the Cuban army. He couldn't go back to Cuba so he went back underground. He talked with Castro and that's when they decided on South America. But I believe it was just the solution that Fidel found to get rid of him because he had no use for him in Cuba. Che was a problem for him, for Cuba and for the Cuban Communist party, because Che was advocating revolutionary action at a time when Fidel had agreed to another approach to the Soviet Union. The idea of peaceful coexistence had been agreed between the two superpowers, so they had agreed not to help guerrilla movements in Latin America. So Che was a problem and the best way to get rid of him was to send him on an adventure in Bolivia and cut off all support. Once Che was here, he got no support at all from Cuba. No people, no contact, nothing. Che told me they'd lost all communication [with Cuba] when they had left their base camp in south-east Bolivia, after it was taken by the army, so they were completely isolated.

Che was clearly worried about what was going to happen to him. I told him he'd be put under a military court because at that time [the French journalist] Régis Debray and other foreigners were under court martial in Camiri for being part ▶





LEFT: A PHOTOGRAPH IN PRADO'S STUDY SHOWS HIM AS A CAVALRY CADET IN 1959

ABOVE: BOLIVIAN SOLDIERS SURROUND THE MAKESHIFT MORGUE HOLDING GUEVARA'S CORPSE, OCTOBER 10 1967

RIGHT: CHE'S CORPSE IS PUT ON DISPLAY FOR THE PRESS IN VALLEGRANDE

BELOW: PRADO IN SANTA CRUZ. PORTRAIT BY GONZALO PARDO

◂ of Che's revolutionary group, and I assumed it would be the same with Che. We started talking about what his trial would be like. Debray's trial had attracted a lot of publicity, it was quite a show, and Che had heard about it on Bolivian radio, so he probably thought a trial would be a good opportunity for him.

We talked about the Cuban revolution, too. Each of us was trying to find out what the other thought. 'You've been trained by the Americans,' he said. 'Yes,' I said, 'and you've been trained by the Russians, so we are both puppets of the superpowers and have to find our own way.' He agreed.

During the night I looked at Che's diaries and asked him about some of the things he said in them. A bit later Che told me that my soldiers had taken his Rolex watches, so I called them and told them to give them back. I handed them to Che but he said, 'Tomorrow another soldier will take them off me, so please keep them for me.' He took a small stone from the floor and scratched a cross on the back of one of the watches. 'That's mine,' he said, handing it to me. After Che was dead I took it to my battalion commander but he told me to keep it. I kept it until 1985, when we re-established democracy in Bolivia and restored diplomatic relations with Cuba. I sent it to his family via the Cuban embassy.

At dawn, the commander of the 8th Division, Colonel [Joaquín] Zenteno, arrived by helicopter from Vallegrande, the provincial capital 60 kilometres north. I gave him a report of the situation and handed the prisoners to him – including Che, who was calm and quiet. Zenteno was accompanied by CIA agent Félix Rodríguez.

I left La Higuera to return to the ravine with fresh troops to try to capture the rest of the group – there were still five

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left in the area. When I returned to La Higuera at around noon, after capturing two more guerrillas, I found Che dead. My battalion commander, Major Ayoroa, told me he'd been executed. The division commander had left for Vallegrande but had left instructions to send Che's body by helicopter. So at around 1.30pm we strapped his stretcher to the runners of a chopper, and that was the last time I saw him.

The man who shot Che, NCO Mario Terán, later told me what had happened. After the order had come from the president and the military high command to kill Che, Colonel Zenteno had asked for volunteers from the NCOs who were around at that moment – there were seven. [Some of the many varying accounts claim that Prado himself was present when the order was received. Prado strongly denies this.] Contrary to the myth that no one wanted to pull the trigger, all the soldiers volunteered. So he selected two at random, saying, 'OK, you do that room [where Che was] and you do that room [where Willy was].' So they entered and fired their M2 carbines. It happened very fast. From what Terán told me, Che died from a single burst. There were no speeches, no goodbyes, nothing.

When Che's body arrived in Vallegrande it was washed and groomed in the hospital following instructions from the army. The military wanted him to look like the Che Guevara people have an image of; if you'd seen Che the way he looked when captured, you wouldn't have recognised him. There were other bodies on the floor but they weren't cleaned or anything; Che was the only one who got this treatment because of the importance of showing it was the real Che Guevara.

MAGNUM PHOTOS; AFP/GETTY IMAGES; GONZALO PARDO; LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES

He was then laid out on a concrete slab in the little laundry behind the hospital and around 30 press photographers from all over the world were invited in to shoot images of the body as it lay in state. It was important for the government and the military to show Che dead as a lesson to anyone intending to invade or threaten the Bolivian way of life in the future.

To prove Che's identity we needed fingerprints and documents with Che's handwriting, so the Bolivian government asked the government of Argentina [where Che was born] to send proof. They sent two police experts, who brought the fingerprints from his 1952 passport and examples of his writing. Transport was slow in those days, so it took them quite a while to get to Che's body. In the meantime the body was in a serious state of decomposition; it had a terrible smell and there was nowhere to store it. So the decision was made to bury the body and keep the hands in formaldehyde.

When the experts finally arrived they took the fingerprints from the hands and certified that it was indeed Che, and they did the same with the writing. The hands were kept by the minister of the interior, who later gave them to a communist friend of his, who sent them to Castro. They've since been returned to Che's family.

I was shocked about the execution, I didn't expect that. I thought Che would have been tried like other prisoners. The whole thing was badly managed. The Bolivian government put out the misinformation that Che had died in combat, but then came reports that he'd been seen walking to La Higuera, so finally the president had to come clean. I think he made the decision to execute because if Che had been taken prisoner he'd

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have been put on trial and the trial would have been a *cause célèbre*. They were already tired of the show with Debray, and a trial of Che Guevara would attract thousands of journalists, so that had to be avoided. Also, if we'd tried him he'd have been condemned to 30 years in jail – we have no death sentence in Bolivia and the maximum jail term is 30 years. But where would we keep him for 30 years? We have no secure jails in Bolivia, so we'd always have the problem of people trying to liberate him. So we executed Che to get rid of the problem. But it was badly managed. It would have been fine if they'd managed to sustain the idea that he'd died heroically in combat, but the truth – that he'd been executed – had become public.

As for Che's achievements, he committed a lot of mistakes here as a guerrilla leader. He contradicted everything he'd written in his books. That's what led him to fail. You see his image on posters everywhere, something I don't think Che would have liked. But most people don't know who he was, or what he did. He was good at theory but when the chance came to practise his ideas [in Bolivia], he was a total failure.

After his role as a captain in Bolivia's elite US-trained 2nd Ranger battalion, Gary Prado Salmón became a minister in the Bolivian government. In 1981 he was paralysed and confined to a wheelchair after being accidentally shot in the back. He went on to serve as Bolivia's ambassador to the UK and Mexico, and now teaches at a private university in Santa Cruz, Bolivia. Clare Hargreaves lived in Bolivia (and met Prado) while researching "Snowfields", a book about South America's cocaine trade; clarehargreaves.co.uk