

# Rebel Military Health in the Las Villas Campaign, Military and Political-Social Repercussions

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## Abstract:

This article addresses the origin and development of the military health of the Rebel Army, during the guerrilla struggle in the territory of the former province of Las Villas; an aspect little studied until now. Its objective is to assess the military, political and social repercussions of the military health of the Rebel Army in the former province of Las Villas, during the last war of national liberation. The organization of the military health of the Rebel Army was systematized, scattered and inconclusive information in historiography. The organizational capacity of this army and the validity of the strategy of Camilo Cienfuegos and Ernesto Guevara were demonstrated, which more than fulfilled its political-social objectives and its principles of health. It laid the foundations for the future development of the health system in rural areas of the central territory of Cuba.

**Keywords:** military medicine; social medicine; rural health

## Introduction

Among the most transcendental of the last war for national liberation in Cuba (1956-1959) is the campaign of the Villas; It is one of those feats that over time become legends. Its dimension was not only political-military, since the impact of the rebel military health care is contained in its social scope. The invasion had a guerrilla-doctor (Ernesto Guevara) as its superior leader, and the functioning of the military health system is one of the relevant aspects of the guerrilla strategy.

The organization of the military health of the Rebel Army during that campaign is a little-known topic, however, due to its importance, it is part of the footprint of the guerrilla commanders Camilo Cienfuegos and Ernesto Guevara (Che) in the central Cuban region.

The strategy applied became a masterful lesson in the tactical-military aspects and their logistical assurance. Efficiency went beyond the limits of the liberating war, when many of its elements were included in the administrative organization after the triumph of the Revolution. <sup>(1)</sup>

The aim of this paper is to assess the military, political and social repercussions of the military health of the Rebel Army in the former province of Las Villas, during the last war of national liberation.

## Development

Health in the guerrilla played a fundamental role, since it inherited the instructive passages of the Mambi health organization and left its efficiency for posterity with valuable contributions. In the case of Las Villas, health was not conceived as consultations, care and rapid response to emergency situations, but as a medical insurance system. The functioning of the military health system was reinforced with the arrival of the invading forces and several figures stood out in guerrilla medical care in the Escambray area, even before the arrival of the invasion. <sup>(1)</sup> Between 1957 and 1958 these

mountains were the scene of the work of doctors, clandestine fighters. Initially, the guerrillas were in constant movement and there was no unity of command, which is why health professionals attended to the wounded in the combat zones and at the same time provided care to the peasant population. With the improvement of health care, field hospitals were created, such as El Mamey, in the territory of the II Front (Revolutionary Directorate), in which Dr. Benito Pérez Maza provided medical assistance; and Dos Arroyos, attended by Dr. Humberto Castelló Aldanás. In both areas, doctors tended to locals and moved to remote places.

On several occasions the work of the revolutionary doctors was questioned, taking into account the speed with which they reached the sick peasants, or those wounded in combat. <sup>(2)</sup>

When Ernesto Guevara arrived in Las Villas, he brought the organizational experience of the war in the Sierra Maestra, and put it into practice in central Cuba. Camilo Cienfuegos did the same on the northern front. For this reason, in both areas, a material base was created for the stay of the troops for a long time, since according to the guerrilla conception, the war should last several months; and although it was not like that, that material base was formed.

In the design of military tactics, medical assistance always played a primary role and care for the wounded also included the psychological aspect. On the other hand, the medical resources that reached the guerrillas were generally kept in the hands of stable personnel. In addition, some doctors worked in the hospitals and others accompanied the troops to attend to those injured in the fighting. Rural people have always benefited from health care in these two ways. <sup>[3]</sup> The merit of medical care did not only lie in the response to ailments or diseases, but also in taking advantage of the role of professionals in their broad health scope. Ernesto Guevara promoted and applied his

conception of the doctor's function with a social approach, not merely a welfare one.

"... Work is... to organize public health in such a way as to serve to give assistance to the greatest possible number of people, and to prevent all foreseeable disease, and to guide the people." [4]

Santa Clara doctor Allán Rosell Anido, who joined Che's troop in 1958, was appointed by him to take charge of communications. Although this was not an exclusive function because health work was always practiced. Regarding the role of doctors in the guerrilla, he declared: "Che was very concerned that a work should be done in addition to being a warrior, of preparation in the peasantry; that we should worry about improving health care as much as possible there in that region... at Home Easel... we had a small polyclinic in which there was a nurse and I was the doctor, and also Ignacio Pérez Vigo, who was a teacher... and there we provided medical help to the peasantry, mainly treating parasitosis in children: we went to make medical visits ..." [5]

The medicines they received from the combatants in the cities were also distributed among the peasants for the medical treatments that these same guerrilla doctors prescribed. Under these humanist and inclusive principles, the Military Health of the Rebel Army in the territory was prestigious. <sup>(5)</sup>

During the offensive in Las Villas, the weather was less than planned and some field buildings were not completed, as was the case of Caballete de Casa. In each place where the guerrillas were permanently settled, there were field hospitals: Gavilanes, Caballete de Casa and Manaca Ranzola. The rebels settled in these mountainous scenarios, after their arrival in October 1958 to the hills of central Cuba. In Gavilanes, the wounded of the first combative actions were treated. [6]

In the area of Manaca Ranzola, Che appreciated that the characteristics of the place were ideal for creating a permanent camp and organized an infrastructure that allowed him to continue the irregular war. From the first days of November 1958, the command of the Las Villas front began to be established in that place. There the supplies, the workshop, the medical post and a communications house were established, which linked the command by telephone with the other two camps.

When Che arrived in this area, there was already a camp of the 26th of July Movement on the site; he ordered Olo Pantoja to take charge of those troops, since it was a strategic point within the mountains, which was also used in the independence struggles and the struggles against Gerardo Machado. <sup>(6)</sup>

The camp of Caballete de Casa was built in stages along the slope of the mountain, in an extension of about 2000 meters and later, it functioned as a school for recruits, along with the other camps; Gavilanes, as a captaincy and Manaca Ranzola, as the commander of the Las Villas Front. The organization of a healthcare network in rebel areas also required a logistical system that stored and distributed the necessary resources, and involved more medical workers. <sup>(6,7)</sup>

In the northern region of Las Villas, before the arrival of Camilo Cienfuegos, the guerrillas had a more nomadic character, as well as medical care; therefore, initially, no hospitals were created. Then, with the arrival of Dr. Manuel Bravo Yañez, sent by the Popular Socialist Party (PSP), a field hospital was organized in the area of Jobo Rosado. The work of this doctor, according to testimonies, was effective in several aspects: "This professional activity allowed us to bring the revolutionary message to each home... the plan to care for the civilian population was a success." In the area of

Montalvo located another place of health care, where they worked: "A doctor, a medical student, another guerrilla who worked as a nurse and a health worker, attended a small hospital." [7]

Camilo Cienfuegos camped at Jobo Rosado, a camp of the PSP guerrillas, led by Félix Torres González; he then established his camp in the mountains of Juan Francisco, less than 1 km from the town of the same name and 8 km west of Yaguajay. This last camp contained several buildings: hospital, electric plant, the commandery (a peasant's house), shelter and a drinking

water well. It was the last guerrilla camp in the area, established in October 1958, after Column No. 2 "Antonio Maceo" concluded the invasion. From there, Camilo Cienfuegos made contacts with Jobo Rosado and Alicante, where the "Marcelo Salado" detachment of the 26th of July Movement was based. [8]

Before his meeting with Che Guevara in the central region, Camilo Cienfuegos carried out a masterful military and political-ideological work. For Che's arrival, he wanted to hand over a well-organized territory, since his column arrived on October 7, 1958, nine days before the arrival of Column No. 8 "Ciro Redondo", commanded by Che. Camilo conceived and executed a plan that contained aspects of rapid execution:

1. Structure the information service.
2. To organize the supply of the entire troops; it included the peasant population and the collection of taxes.
3. To organize hospitals for the care of the wounded and sick, both of the troops and of the peasant population.
4. Organize revolutionary propaganda. <sup>(7)</sup>

On the other hand, during the main battles developed in the Las Villas campaign, hospitals were organized in the areas near the military actions and in the liberated villages. There was even a mobile hospital, with all the equipment and instruments to perform surgical procedures. A clear vision of the strategy followed in this regard was the organization of medical services during the battles of Yaguajay and Santa Clara.

In Yaguajay, all the existing health resources in the town were available, whether public or private. This was essential in the adequate care of the wounded of both contenders and in the same way, civilians or military personnel were helped. This inclusive conduct of revolutionary military medicine constitutes one of the most valuable ethical elements. The wounded inflicted on the enemy army between December 21 and 24 were evacuated to the hospital in Yaguajay, and those who were wounded from December 24 to 31 remained in the barracks. When the rebel troops began the siege of Yaguajay, Commander Félix Torres González set up his medical post on a small mountain, 2 km east of Yaguajay, under the care of the doctor, Captain Manuel Bravo Yañez and the combatant Paulina Arzola. This post operated until the day of the liberation of the town of Yaguajay. <sup>(8)</sup>

The rebel command decided to install its medical services, as of December 22, in the "Martín Marrero" municipal hospital, located in the extreme west of Yaguajay. Medical Captain Sergio del Valle Jiménez foresaw a large influx of wounded, so he ordered the occupation of the ONDI (National Organization of Children's Dispensaries) dispensary, located about 100 meters away from the hospital, which was established as a reserve for the general medical post. [9]

In the battle of Santa Clara, the headquarters of the revolutionary forces was located at the Central University of Las Villas (UCLV). A field hospital was organized there, headed by the medical commander Oscar Fernández Mell. In Camajuaní, on the instructions of Dr. Osvaldo Fernández López, a blood hospital was established in the Sociedad Colonia Española and another in the private clinic. Blood donations were also scheduled; as the rebel troops advanced, the UCLV hospital and its doctors were established in the Medical Surgical Clinic already within the city of Santa Clara. Many health workers, both at the San Juan de Dios hospital and at existing clinics, provided medical care during the battle. [10]

Of the doctors who participated in the organization of the military health of the Rebel Army at this stage, some were natives of the current territory of Villa Clara, others came in the invasion from the East, and others joined the guerrillas, coming from Havana, Sancti Spíritus or Cienfuegos. Within the guerrilla doctors or the clandestine struggle, there were professionals who after the revolutionary triumph had a special bond with Villa Clara, such as Guillermo Rodríguez del Pozo, Pedro Orlando Fernández Adán, Serafín Ruiz de Zárate Ruiz and Juan M. Diego Cobelo, among others. [11] Military health in the Las Villas campaign demonstrated its effectiveness, as well as

that of one of its most valuable components: the conception of a social and inclusive medicine. It laid the foundations of the rural medical service and forged professionals as future cadres of the revolutionary health system. [12]

### Conflicts Of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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