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INSPECTOR GENERAL

75-2012 64

3 June 1975

MEMORANDUM FOR: Deputy Inspector General

SUBJECT: Statement by Benton H. Mizones concerning his assignment Bolivia in 1967 and his role in the capture of Ernesto "Che" GUEVARA de la Serna

REFERENCE: Memo dated 29 May 1975

1. The undersigned met with Benton H. Mizones, contract employee, on 2 and 3 June to obtain his story about his assignment to Bolivia in 1967. This query is based upon ref interview, during which Mizones mentioned that he had re-transmitted an order from Colonel Joaquin Zenteno Anaya, Commander of the 8th Division of the Bolivian Army, to a Bolivian sergeant, which resulted in the execution of Ernesto "Che" GUEVARA de la Serna, Cuban leader of the guerrillas then operating in Bolivia.

2. Mizones said that his assignment came about after an interview held in Miami in June or July of 1967, at which time he was a case officer working for the Miami office. He had been selected for the job interview because of his paramilitary training and experience. He was asked if he would agree to serve with Gustavo Villolbo, a fellow Cuban. He accepted. He was told that he was to go to Bolivia with Villolbo where they would be engaged in training intelligence teams for the 2nd Ranger Battalion of the Eighth Division of the Bolivian Army. He was also told that he and Villolbo would be assigned to the 2nd Ranger Battalion as advisors and would be based in the town of Esperanza. While in Miami, he and Villolbo were given briefings about the political and guerrilla situation in Bolivia, and he was given a refresher course in communications. Mizones and Villolbo were told that there were strong indications that Guevara was leading the guerrillas. Among the instructions given them was a clear one that in the event that the Bolivian Army captured Guevara, they should do everything possible "to keep him alive."

3. They were introduced to their future case officer in Washington, who was to be in liaison with the Bolivian forces in Santa Cruz.

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4. Prior to their departure, both Mizones and Villalbo were issued false U.S. re-entry permits in the names of Felix Ramos and [redacted] respectively. These were received in New York City just prior to their departure on 30 July for La Paz on a Braniff Airline flight. Their case officer had preceded them and met them on 31 July at 7 a.m. at the La Paz airport. Mizones believes that Bolivian visas were stamped in their re-entry permits.

5. The case officer and another American took them to meet President [redacted] to whom they were introduced as experts on guerrilla warfare. He issued each a personal card in which were handwritten his instructions to all civilian and military officials that they be given full support. At ten that morning, they met General Ovando, Commander-in-Chief of the Bolivian Armed Forces. (It wasn't until about a month later that Mizones met the COS in Santa Cruz.) While in La Paz, no new instructions were issued to them about their mission. After about a week there, they were flown to Santa Cruz de la Sierra for a few days and introduced to Colonel Joaquin Zenteno Anaya, Commander of the Eighth Division. Zenteno arranged for Captain "Poppie" Shelton, the American officer in charge of the military mission training the 2nd Ranger Battalion, to come to Santa Cruz to meet Mizones and Villalbo. They were also introduced to Major Arnaldo Saucedo, G-2 of the Eighth Division. After 3 or 4 days in Santa Cruz, Mizones and Villalbo went to La Esperanza, where they were quartered at the Bolivian officers' compound. In La Esperanza they met Major Ayiroa, the Commander of the 2nd Ranger Battalion, and Captain Gari Prado.

6. Prior to their departure from La Paz, Mizones and Villalbo were issued Bolivian uniforms and credentials as captains in the Bolivian Army. Nevertheless, they did not receive Bolivian Army insignia. Later, Mizones was given by Major Saucedo a Bolivian tri-color cap-insignia which he wore (escarapela). Mizones and Villalbo were issued Smith and Wesson double-action automatic pistols. During their activities as instructors and advisors they assumed the role of Bolivian officers, although they were known as foreign advisors to a number of Bolivian officers. (Mizones said that he learned later that the American Ambassador had prohibited anyone other than he and Villalbo from becoming involved in the anti-guerrilla activities in the field.)

7. Despite their apparent status as Bolivian officers, Mizones said that they never were given orders by higher-ranking Bolivian officers (One exception to this rule was the order which Colonel Zenteno issued to Mizones on the day of Guevara's execution, if Mizones story is to be believed.)

8. Mizones was assigned to Santa Cruz and ~~Villalobos~~ was assigned to La Esperanza, where the latter conducted most of the intelligence training. As time went by, Mizones' own duties gravitated to becoming basically those of an advisor. He said that his case officer was aware of and approved of this development. Among the things which Mizones and ~~Villalobos~~ attempted to accomplish was the preservation of the lives of captured guerrillas, for the collection of intelligence about the guerrilla's locations, as well as for humanitarian reasons. Mizones said that he saved the life of Jose Castillo Chavez, traveling for that purpose to Vallegrande from Santa Cruz, where he spoke briefly to Castillo at the Nuestra Senora de Malta Hospital. At this time Mizones learned of the intent of Colonel Selich, of the Rangers, to have the prisoner executed. Mizones prevailed on Major Saucedo and General La Fuente to take his side. The prisoner was flown to Vallegrande where Mizones covered all medical costs and carried out a two-week interrogation. The resulting twenty-page interrogation report provided the Bolivians with a complete concept of the guerrilla's strategy, which turned out to be the key to Guevara's capture, according to Mizones. This report was attributed by the Bolivians to be from their own people.

9. This important development was followed by an encounter in late September between a unit led by a Lt. Galindo and the remnants of the guerrillas. During this action, a Cuban lieutenant named Miguel; the Bolivian Coco Peredo; and a Bolivian physician named Jose Gutierrez Ardaya were killed. Mizones travelled by jeep to Pucara, where the bodies were located, and through the information he had learned from Castillo, he was able to establish that the men were from Guevara's forward element. Upon his return to Santa Cruz, Mizones advised Colonel Zenteno that the 2nd Ranger Battalion should be immediately deployed, with the remaining two weeks of their training cancelled. Zenteno accepted this advice and the Rangers were moved to Pucara, and the Headquarters of the Eighth Division were moved to Vallegrande. Mizones continued in his advisory role, suggesting areas for troop deployment as well as the deployment of the intelligence teams. On the 8th of October, contact was established with Guevara's remaining forces. (At this time Mizones was in Vallegrande and ~~Villalobos~~ in Esperanza.) On the 8th, Major Saucedo reported over the radio that "the chief" had been captured. Mizones then flew over the area in a PT-6 carrying with him a PRC-10 radio with which he was able to communicate with the Bolivian forces. He then confirmed that Guevara was "the chief" who had been captured. He returned to Vallegrande where he told Col. Zenteno that Guevara had been wounded and captured.

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10. That day Major Selich was sent to Higueras to interrogate the guerrilla prisoners and assembled the captured documents. Since Colonel Zenteno was planning to fly by helicopter to Higueras on the 9th, Mizones asked him on the evening of the 8th if he could accompany him to interrogate Guevara. Zenteno consulted his staff and agreed. (The helicopter had room only for a pilot and two passengers.) Mizones prepared a 100-word message to the La Paz Station in code reporting Guevara's capture and asking that an Embassy representative be sent to the area to prevail upon the Bolivians to spare Guevara's life, since he did not believe that he could succeed in doing so. This message was prepared for the scheduled 10 a.m. transmission of 9 October, and was not transmitted to the relay point in Asuncion, Paraguay, until about 10:30 a.m., after Mizones arrived in Higueras and set up his radio transmitter an RS-48.

11. Zenteno, Mizones and the pilot, Nino de Guzman, set out by helicopter from Vallegrande at 7:15 a.m. on the 9th, and arrived in Higueras at about 7:40 a.m. Mizones accompanied Zenteno and Major Ayiroa when they visited Guevara in the school room which was his improvised jail. Guevara would not answer Zenteno when spoken to. He was bound, hand and foot, and had a leg wound.

12. Mizones and Major Selich then reviewed the captured documents and Mizones obtained permission from Selich to photograph all the papers, including Guevara's diary, and also Selich's permission to retain the original accommodation addresses found.

13. While Zenteno and all the other Bolivian officers (with the exception of a Lieutenant Perez) were outside of the village attending to other military affairs, Mizones remained in Higueras as the highest ranking "Bolivian officer". In this capacity he answered a call received on the military field telephone and answered as Captain Ramos. He was given the code numbers 500 and 600 as orders which were to be implemented by command of "higher authorities". He said that the connection was not clear and he could not recognize the voice but it could have been that of Major Saucedo. In any case, Mizones said that since it was a line only available to the military he was confident that it was order re-transmitted through military channels. He said that he knew that 500 referred to Guevara, 600 to the word execute and 700 to the preservation of Guevarra's life. These simple codes had been identified to him previously.

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14. Upon Zenteno's return, Mizones told him of the message and Zenteno took it as an authentic order and made no effort to have it confirmed. Mizones asked if Guevara's life could be preserved since he had these instructions. Zenteno replied that his own position would be placed in jeopardy if he did not comply. Mizones asked him to make the attempt anyway. (Mizones believes that Zenteno had already resigned himself to the inevitability of Guevara's execution.) Zenteno said that he was in sympathy with Mizones' wish but that it was not in his power to reverse the order. He told Mizones that he was well aware of the treatment which Fidel had meted out to Cubans and told him to execute Guevara in any manner which he might choose. Zenteno said that he had to leave for Vallegrande at 10:00 a.m. and would send a helicopter back to pick up Guevara's "body" at 2 p.m., and "as a friend", asked that the body be ready. Mizones reiterated his request that the order be appealed and Zenteno agreed to make the attempt, and said he would advise if he were successful.

15. Failing a counter-manding of the order and as the senior "Bolivian officer" left in Higuera, Mizones said he was left with the implementation of the execution. After Zenteno left, Mizones was able to talk to Guevara, who identified Mizones either as a Puerto Rican or a Cuban working for U.S. intelligence. He said he made this judgment on the basis of the questions asked and on Mizones' accent. While Mizones was with Guevara, shots were fired in adjoining rooms and Mizones later determined that these involved the execution of two other prisoners. Recognizing these shots for what they were, nevertheless, Guevara blanched when Mizones confirmed that he too would be executed; although later composing himself.

16. After leaving Guevara, Mizones told a sergeant of the order to execute Guevara and entrusted the mission to him. He was told to fire below the head. The order was given to the sergeant at 1:00 p.m. and Mizones heard the shots fired at Guevara at 1:20 p.m. At 2:00 p.m., the helicopter returned to Higuera. A Father Shiller performed the last rites and Guevara's remains were strapped to one of the helicopter's skids and Mizones accompanied them to Vallegrande, where they landed at 2:30 p.m. Mizones said that he lost himself quickly in the crowd gathered at the airport, but that Villolbo took charge of the remains and was photographed. Mizones said that the title of the photograph, which appeared in the press, gave an incorrect identification of Villolbo; the name Mizones used, Ramos.

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17. Mizones said he reported the executions to Major Saucedo and the Chief of Operations, a Major Gutierrez, and then was taken back to identify the bodies of the three executed guerrillas. They then drove to Santa Cruz with the documents, films and equipment and then flew to La Paz, where Mizones contacted his case officer. He was taken to a home where the DCOS and other Americans were briefed by him. Everything which he had been able to retain was turned in then to be carried by a special courier to Washington. Mizones then flew back to Santa Cruz where a C-130 ordered by General Porter, CINCSOUTH, was to pick him and Villolbo up for a flight to the Canal Zone. This plane arrived with a flat tire on the 10th or 11th. The U.S. Mission aircraft, a C-54, was then flown to Santa Cruz and he and Villolbo were flown back to La Paz. After overnighing there, another C-130 carried them to Panama where Mizones was asked to relate his story to General Porter. After 2 weeks in Panama, Mizones and Villolbo were documented as GS-16s so that they could board a over-booked military flight to Charlotte, South Carolina. After their arrival there, they journeyed to Miami, where Mizones briefed General Cushman. (Mizones believes that in both high-level briefings he mentioned his own personal role in the execution of Guevara.)


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