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07Jul89 CUBA: RISE AND FALL OF A MILITARY STAR.

By Lionel Martin

HAVANA, July 7, Reuter - In 30 years, Arnaldo Ochoa Sanchez rose from poor farmhand to three-star general in the Cuban army. In just 25 days, he was arrested, stripped of the highest decorations, sacked from his post as a member of parliament, ousted from the Communist Party's Central Committee, cashiered from the army and on Friday sentenced to death for drug-trafficking. Born into a poor family of farmers in the eastern mountains of Cuba, Ochoa, believed to be 57, joined Castro's revolutionaries in March 1959.

Only nine months later, he took part in a legendary takeover of the city of Santa Clara in central Cuba, one of the milestones which led dictator Fulgencio Batista to flee on New Year's Day in 1959.

In the 1960s, Ochoa, by then a full member of the new Cuban army, was sent to Venezuela on a special mission to help guerrillas there at a time when Castro was giving full support to armed revolutionaries in Latin America.

After serving as army commander for eastern Cuba, Ochoa was sent to Ethiopia as chief of the Cuban forces there in 1978.

By the time he returned home, he had become one of the most popular generals in the eyes of his men.

He won all of Cuba's major decorations, including the rare medal of Hero of the Republic of Cuba which has only been bestowed on half a dozen men.

After the Sandinista rebels ousted Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza in 1979, Ochoa was sent to Managua as head of the Cuban contingent of advisers to the Sandinista government.

Early last year, he went to Angola to head support operations for Cuba's forces there.

During his trial, he pleaded guilty to charges that while in Angola he became obsessed with money and started dealing on the black market, trading in everything from diamonds and television sets to ivory, precious woods and sugar and flour diverted from Cuban army stocks.

The corruption scandal thwarted Ochoa's next career step: He was about to be appointed commander of the armed forces for the western third of Cuba, an area which includes Havana.

Ochoa, renowned for his readiness to spring jokes and his outgoing personality, faced his accusers candidly.

Video tapes of the trial, aired nightly on Cuban television, showed him accepting all charges and trying to analyse the reasons for his own behaviour.

While other defendants were visibly shattered by the questioning, Ochoa calmly explained that he thought his cooperation with Colombian drug traffickers using Cuba as a trans-shipment point to the United States would help the state.

He said he was negotiating with Medellin Cartel kingpins to launder their drug money in Cuba by investing it in tourist hotels being built on the beach at Varadero, near Havana.

Declaring himself a true revolutionary, Ochoa derided the foreign press for suggesting he was on trial for opposing Castro.

Subjected to daily humiliations as his medals, titles and uniform were peeled off in slow motion, Ochoa stood trial in checkered shirts and baggy trousers.

Proud and dignified throughout the proceedings, he still calls himself a revolutionary.

Married twice, he says he told his three children when they visited him in jail on Fathers' Day to respect Castro and the revolution.

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