

1968

PA-84

ON THE PRODUCTION FRONT IN ORIENTE

by Lionel Martin

In the final days of October Prime Minister Fidel Castro inaugurated a vast project to extend the cultivable area of Cuba and to prepare the ground for modern agricultural practices in the plains and rolling hill country on both sides of the Camaguey-Oriente border in the eastern half of the island. By the end of this year 134,300 acres will be ready for planting, a fourth to the textile fiber kenaf and the rest to rice. By the end of the coming year more than one half million acres will be won to industrial type agriculture.

This epic plan to create a California valley type agriculture in Cuba with a few years will employ large numbers of modern heavy equipment and a unique work organization, for both its composition and method.

To carry out the project a work force called The Comandante Che Guevara Brigade of Invaders was organized. At present the Brigade numbers 1100 men; within a few months it will reach 3000. Most of the Brigade are members of the Armed Forces. Skilled civilians also participate in the project.

On the launching date, the Brigade had 159 tractors and 500 ten-ton dump trucks, accessory equipment and all the other supplies necessary to maintain and repair them. In January 1968 a hundred more tractors will be added and in April 250 more making a total

509. The equipment is Soviet and French, the latter manufactured

by the Richards company.

The revolutionary army in Cuba has always participated in the production tasks of the country, not only on the ground, but even in the air (the airforce operates 60 crop dusters). In a country with Cuba's small population it is an absolute necessity that those in the armed forces do their bit in the productive effort. Castro touched on this theme in his speech inaugurating the Brigade:

"It is known that our country, being small, has been obliged to keep an extraordinarily numerous contingent of men in its military service, unquestionably above the relative number that any other country has under arms. The size of our Army corresponds to the magnitude of our task of defending our country and our revolution against an aggressive and powerful enemy. But, at the same time, the men of our army have not been absent from the production front; tens of thousands have been participating in these years of hard work in the cane fields..."

Instead of being a huge drain on the economy the army thus serves to produce for the nation. Furthermore the use of transport and tank units in productive labor allows the men to keep themselves in condition and to improve their skills.

The plan includes the preparation of land as well as overall road and irrigation projects in vast areas that never had the benefits of either. The entire geographical area, crossed by Cuba's major rivers has always been the victim of floods during the rainy season and drought during the rest of the year. With this project,

the vast run-off to the sea will be ended and the water controled and dammed for all year use. Before the revolution only 30,000,000 cubic meters of water was dammed in all of Cuba. With the just completed dams at Paso Malo and Contramaestra almost 300,000,000 cubic meters of water have been added to the reservoir capacity. Castro said that it is feasible to dam up to 15 billion cubic meters of water in Cuba, most of it coming from the thousands of small streams that normally overflow their banks during the rainy season, flooding the surrounding countryside and running off, wasted, into the sea. It was precesely the project area that Hurricane Flora wreaked so much human and material havoc in 1963. It was then that Fidel proposed the idea of turning the entire zone into an agricultural garden of eden instead of a subsistence agricultural area plagued by periodic floods and droughts. Part of Cuba's master economic plan is aimed at taking advantage of these lowland plains and discarding small scale farming in the Sierra Maestra mountains further to the west. The mountains, with their tree cover almost completely destroyed during Cuba's colonial and semi-colonial period will be sown once against to lumber producing trees.

The organization of the "Che Guevar Brigade" is unique. The technical planning is under the supervision of the Ministry of Agriculture, the Water Resources Institute and the Ministry of Construction. The actual work organization and execution is under the direction of the Army. The "general staff" will include civilian and army engineers and technicians. The chief of operations is

is Comandante Raul Guerra Bermejo who before the revolution was a heavy equipment operator in this very zone. During the insurrection period he fought in the same area with troops under the command of Comandante Guevara.

The work conditions are rough but the men's morale is extremely high. The operators will have a work month of 200 hours plus 50 hours of technical and cultural studies. They will work 25 days straight and then have 5 days of rest. Clothing, food, shelter and travel expenses on rest days will be paid by the government. The men will be paid wages in accordance with civilian rates. The men will have a 1 month paid vacation every year.

The project is one of the biggest of a whole host of big projects now being carried out in Cuba to diversify and raise agricultural production of this formerly one-crop and technically backward country.