

Report from the 2012 20th Ernesto Che Guevara Volunteer Work Brigade

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20th Che Guevara Volunteer Work Brigade, Plaza of the Revolution, Holguin, April 30th 2012

Its April 30, 2012, 28 Brigadistas of the 20th *Ernesto Che Guevara Volunteer Work Brigade* landed in Holguin, for three weeks of volunteering, education and fun. We are to join up with 17 more arriving from various parts of Canada for a total contingent of 45 Brigadistas.

It is 01:30 A.M., we are expecting a very quiet arrival. To our surprise TV cameras of Cuba's national television met us as soon as the cabin door opened, following us through customs, the baggage conveyor and onto the bus, interviewing Brigadistas for their opinions and expectations of the Brigade as they went. This was a reception fit for royalty. (See TV news clip of Brigade arrival in Brigade photos.).

Our friends from the Instituto Cubano de Amidad con los Pueblos (ICAP) - the planners and organizers of our every need while in Cuba - gave each Brigadista a flower, hugs and kisses for a big welcome, then assisted us through customs with all our donated aid. Soon we were checked into the Hotel Pernik in Holguin.

Being the 20th was just one thing which made this Brigade special: Another was to have 13 time past coordinator, Nino Pagliccia, join for the occasion. Judy Gallant, our travel agent of P & G Travel, joined for one week, adding to her extensive experience in Cuba.

Seven Brigadistas reunited from 2011, with as many more from previous Brigades, but most were meeting each other for the first time. They came from all over Canada:

British Columbia, 19; Alberta, 2; Manitoba, 8; Ontario, 14; Quebec, 1; and Nova Scotia 1. These numbers included 3 international friends from Croatia, Russia and Tunisia, currently living in Canada. One man, Mehdi Atri, of White Rock, B.C. returned after 18 years.

The Brigade had great diversity of ages, the youngest 17 and oldest, yours truly, turned 73 years on the Brigade. There were 18 people under 30 and 19 over 60 years old, made up of 21 women and 24 men.

As with all brigades many brigadistas have intense interest in becoming a part of the brigade but have very limited means requiring they raise their own funds. To assist many supporting groups have awarded partial scholarships. Below is a partial list:

- P & G Travel, (Brigade travel Agency)
- Canadian-Cuban Friendship Association (CCFA)-Toronto
- Canadian-Cuba Friendship Association (CCFA), Kingston
- Canadian-Cuba Friendship Association (CCFA), Niagara
- Manitoba-Cuba Solidarity Committee

This was my second year as coordinator of the brigade. I have to say it is a very satisfying job when after the first day people are saying the experience is well beyond their expectations.

The Brigade program is like that; just vague enough every activity becomes an adventure and a discovery. For example, May 2nd in the afternoon the program says: "Visit to School of Arts, Holguin". On arriving we hear a presentation on the school followed by questions. Then we are treated to several examples of the talents developed at this school: Piano soloist, vocal soloists, flutist etc. each prompting a spontaneous standing ovation so professional was each performance. Many people were stunned to hear teenagers perform at such a high level.

That same evening we are back in the city to Teatro "Eddy Sunol" treated to an opera of a very, very high quality production. Again first time Brigadistas were amazed..

Day after day of the brigade our program adventures unfolded:

- Visit to the Federation of Cuban Women. We learned how that organization supports women and families;
- May Day morning the Che Guevara Brigade staged for the parade in our distinctive red Tee shirts. During the staging brigadistas began meeting local Cubans: Some Russians who have made their home in Cuba and some Cubans of Chinese decent. The parade consisted of tens of thousands of workers;
- The Combatants Association. Talked to veterans of the Revolutionary War, Angola, Che's Bolivia Expedition, Battle against the Contras 1959 to 1970 and Playa Giron (the Bay of Pigs). A touching moment, the Combatants gave Brigade

presenter, Richard Best of Vancouver Island, an ovation for avoiding the draft during the Vietnam War;

- Visit to the tomb of Cuban National Hero, Jose Marti in Santiago. Saw changing of the guard. Brigadistas, Verinika Khvorostukhina of Vancouver and Darcy Robinson of Kamloops, B.C., had the honour of placing a wreath inside the tomb on behalf of the Brigade;
- Several visits to cultural festival “Las Romerias”: opening ceremony, 2 cultural events and closing ceremony where we got to party with the locals;



Placing a wreath, Tomb of Jose Marti, Santa Ifigenia Cemetery, Santiago

- Visit to the north coast fishing village of Boca De Sama where we learned what terrorism really means: Carlos Escalante Gomez, as head of the area coast guard, confronted armed Cuban exiles who landed in the village in the dead of night, 10:00 P.M., Oct. 12, 1971, from a U.S. Coast Guard mother ship. They opened fire killing his 2 officers and he took 8 bullets. Retreating, the terrorist ship fired its canon on the village for 2.5 hours, severely injuring 4 more. Carlos now has a new license to operate a restaurant built on the coral beach behind his home. A beautiful setting;
- We did volunteer work in construction building housing for those people who lost their house in Hurricane Ike. This gave us an inside look at the prefabricated construction. Simple but strong and efficient. Thirty 36 of the approx. 90 workers on the site were prison labour. It was impossible to tell who they were since they had no markings or restraints. Their pay is the same as any worker in the same job classification. Good work attitudes and performance can affect their prison sentences.
- We also worked at the local Urban Garden beside the hotel. This was a totally organic garden. It was impeccable in appearance: strong healthy plants in weed free raised beds. Some covered with a sun screen for optimum growing conditions. Workers share in the profits. Product is retailed at the gate kiosk and sold to institutions.
- Visited Santiago's water works for an inside look into the huge scope of work rebuilding the City's water supply and delivery pipelines so residents finally can enjoy clean water and reliable delivery.

There were many more visits and events on the program plus many took the opportunity to sample the local flavour during free time, especially during the Las Romerías cultural festival. Music and dancing were everywhere.

On the final night in Holguín we were treated to the music of Holguín's Banda América. Our own Janine Solanki of Vancouver and Maritza Jewett of Cantley, Québec performed a dance, James Plewak of Winnipeg read a native reading. Payvand Pejvack of Vancouver sang a solo. Another group sang a song composed on a previous Brigade calling on freedom for The Five and I read the English translation of Cuban poet José María Heredia's "Niagara Falls".



It was with great honour and humility, I, Dave Thomas, as Brigade leader, accepted from ICAP Holguín Director, Amaury Torno, an exact replica of the Axe of Holguín, given as a tribute to foreign or national personalities visiting the province. Holguín truly was a gracious host city.

Moving on to Hotel Camaguey the Brigade was received by ICAP Camaguey where we were treated to an aquatic ballet in the hotel swimming pool. The Brigade was presented with a beautiful certificate in recognition of "Our 20 Years of Productive Solidarity with the Cuban Revolution" by ICAP of Camaguey.

Friday, May 19th, departure day for home. But it's not over yet. We get a tour of the city and time to explore the main plaza before going to the airport for the inevitable tearful good byes.

Take heart 2013 is another year and another Brigade, just as exciting, just as unforgettable as the 20th but different as is the uniqueness of every Brigade. Life-long friendships are formed and everyone comes away with a new perspective of love and

solidarity with the Cubans we were able to share so much with on our journey. We come back ready to join the people of Cuba in the struggle against the US blockade and to free the *Cuban Five*, having learned so much about their reality and wanting to return as soon as possible!

Details for the 2013 Che Guevara Volunteer Work Brigade are coming soon.