

[Speech by the President of the Republic of Cuba, Fidel Castro Ruz, at the ceremony commemorating the 45th anniversary of the landing of the Granma expedition and the birth of the Revolutionary Armed Forces, in Antonio Maceo Square, Santiago de Cuba, December 2, 2001](#) **[1]**

**Date:**

02/12/2001

Compatriots:

Anxiety was running high. First there was the public news of the uprising on November 30, which was supposed to take place after our arrival, not before it. The fact that it happened in reverse was the result of the irrepressible energy of the combatants in Santiago, and the 48-hour delay in the long and hazardous journey of 1235 miles. Then a man fell overboard into the dark, turbulent seas in the early morning hours of December 2. He could not be left abandoned, even if it meant stealing those extra minutes of life or death from the already scarce time. These circumstances served to heighten even more our impatience to arrive before dawn at the exact point selected on the longed-for coasts of our homeland.

Greatly encouraged by the rescue, we had a glimpse of the land with the first light of dawn and a group of illuminated buoys where the eastern coast, coming from Santiago, turns north towards Manzanillo.

Then, new and unexpected obstacles. On two occasions, the skipper at the helm of the Granma, a former Cuban Navy commander who had joined our movement, tried to follow the correct route through the labyrinth marked by the buoys, and on two occasions he came back to the point of departure. He was trying a third time. It was impossible to keep up this exasperating search. There were only a few liters of fuel left. It was already broad daylight. The enemy was relentlessly searching by sea and by air. The boat was in grave danger of being destroyed a few kilometers off the coast, with all of the forces on board.

We could see the coast nearby, and the waters were apparently shallow. The skipper was ordered to head straight for this spot, full steam ahead. The Granma ran into mud and stopped 60 meters from shore. The men disembarked with the weapons, and struggled through the water over soft mud that threatened to swallow them up as they were overloaded. The shore appeared to be solid, but a few meters inland it was muddy again, just like before, a long coastal lagoon stretching between the point of arrival and solid land. It took almost two hours to cross that hellish swamp. Having just reached solid ground, the first heavy weaponry shots were heard firing at the landing point, near the now solitary Granma. Its presence had been sighted and communicated to the enemy command, which immediately responded with a sea attack on the expedition and machine gunning from the air of the area to which the small expeditionary force of 82 men was headed.

I will not add anything about the weakness, physical exhaustion and hunger accumulated over seven days. There is no need to dramatize what was obviously extremely dramatic, yet endurable for men prepared to either be free or be martyrs, as they had pledged.

All of this was taking place at this very hour exactly 45 years ago, on December 2, 1956. Of those of us who participated in that episode, only a few, due to the whims of fate, have had the rare privilege to live until today and continue fighting.

At a ceremony like this held in commemoration of that date, and at which my beloved comrades from those days have urged me to say a few words, a basic sense of modesty keeps me from extolling, and much less glorifying, the events and history that followed that day, which marked the resumption of the struggle initiated exactly 48 years, four months and six days ago, on July 26, 1953.

I will continue my account in an abbreviated form, the only way possible to speak as briefly as necessary at a ceremony like this one. It will be up to others to judge the events in which we became active participants.

December 5. A surprise enemy attack in a light forest where we were waiting for nightfall to continue the march to the Sierra Maestra. A terrible setback, total dispersion; a tenacious search and persecution of the scattered men; an enormous cost in the lives of combatants, the vast majority of them murdered after falling prisoner; almost all the weapons lost.

The fight would resume with seven armed men, who managed to reunite on December 18.

New comrades from the Granma gradually joined in. Each one had lived through his own dramatic odyssey. A few scattered weapons were recovered.

A small force of no more than 18 expedition members and a number of young campesinos from the Sierra achieved the first victories on January 17 and 22, 1957. Weapons were seized.

Strong enemy reaction. Hard days of relentless persecution and mortal danger of extermination. Tenacious resistance, invaluable support from Manzanillo in resources and personnel; campesinos joining in; reinforcements from Santiago de Cuba and several dozen weapons. Widespread exploration of the territory. Endless marching. Training for battle in the rough conditions of the Sierra Maestra.

Fierce and hazardous combat on May 28, 1957, five months after the landing, against fortified enemy forces on the seashore. A costly victory. Seizure of numerous weapons. Once again, a very strong enemy reaction. Successful resistance.

Creation of a second force with personnel from Column One, and the incorporation of a number of peasants, under Che's command, on July 17, 1957. Frank País dies on July 30. A major shock. Numerous battles in the Sierra throughout many months. Continuous learning.

Creation of a third column on February 27, 1959, under Raúl's command, with the mission of crossing the plain and establishing a Second Eastern Front in the mountain range in the northeast of the former province of Oriente. That same day, the creation of a fourth force under the command of Juan Almeida, with the mission of operating in the area of the Sierra Maestra, near Santiago de Cuba. Both forces, created with experienced and cherished combatants from Column One, marched eastward through the Sierra for a long stretch.

An increase in the number of battles, now in four important zones of operations.

A small force under Camilo's command is sent to operate in the plains of Cauto and the area around Bayamo.

General strike in April. Heroic conduct. A major setback. Nevertheless, in support of the strike, the forces of all the columns carried out resolute and successful military actions.

The enemy, spurred on by the failure of the strike and the resulting discouragement in the ranks of the

people, believes the time has come for a decisive blow against the guerrilla forces. It plans and organizes what would be its last strategic action. It brings together 10,000 men supported by tanks, artillery, and air and sea craft, and launches a powerful offensive on May 25, 1958. The offensive is aimed against Column One, from which all the other columns were formed; the General Headquarters, Radio Rebelde, an important hospital, and other valuable facilities and services were also located in the area.

Almost simultaneously, another offensive is launched against the Frank País Second Eastern Front, with heavy attacks from two main directions, repelled after several weeks of combat with a high number of casualties and lost weapons on the enemy side.

On the Column One front, around 300 men --including reinforcements from Che's and Almeida's columns and Camilo's men summoned to this area-- in 74 consecutive days of battle, first defensive, then in a vigorous counterattack, crush the offensive and cause more than 1000 casualties for the enemy's elite forces. A total of 443 prisoners are captured, along with over half a thousand valuable weapons and tens of thousands of bullets.

The old and new columns of the Sierra Maestra and Second Eastern Front expand through the whole of the eastern region, where new areas of operations are established.

Two columns under the command of Camilo and Che, respectively, are sent to the central region of the country, one with 94 men, the other with 142. After the feat of traveling over 500 kilometers across flat, swampy, difficult and hazardous terrain, they successfully reach their goal.

In the month of September, the first women's combat platoon, the Mariana Grajales platoon, is created at the La Plata General Headquarters and fights together with Column One that same month.

A major offensive begun by the Second Eastern Front in October leads to the occupation of important enemy positions and the seizure of numerous weapons.

With Che's and Camilo's strong and experienced columns already in central Cuba, on November 11 Column One advances along the north of the mountain range towards Santiago de Cuba, preceded by a small armed advance guard and accompanied by a thousand young unarmed volunteers from the Recruits School. Small units join in along the way. Two platoons from the enemy forces voluntarily surrender their weapons.

Along the way, there is a battle in Guisa, very close to Bayamo, the headquarters of the enemy operations forces. Once again, 180 men, whose numbers grow as they seize more and more weapons, fight for 10 days and defeat the elite enemy forces. Guisa is occupied on November 30. This time the battle is waged on predominantly flat terrain and paved highways, against forces that total 5000 troops, with the support of light and heavy tanks, artillery and aircraft.

In the early days of December, the forces of Front Number One link up with the forces of the Third Front and the Second Eastern Front. In that last month of the year 1958, all of the rebel columns in the eastern and western regions, in an audacious, all-out offensive, occupy numerous cities, surround Santiago de Cuba, and attack the city of Santa Clara.

Just 24 months after the landing, that small army had gained colossal experience. By the end of December, that small army, which at the time comprised barely 3000 men equipped with weapons --the exact figure still has to be determined--succeeded in defeating the enemy. It is worth noting that over 90% of those weapons were taken from the enemy in combat, and fighting against well-trained forces with all manner of armaments and around 80,000 men.

At a meeting held with the rebel high command on December 28, 1958, the commander in chief of the enemy operations forces recognized that he had lost the war, and requested a formula to bring the

fighting to an end. Such a formula was drawn up in detail and accepted by him. His failure to comply with it led to the final denouement with the participation of the workers and all the people, who had always been by our side in the struggle. On January 1, their decisive support for the unstoppable force of the rebel troops helped to quash the final attempt by the oligarchy and imperialism to prevent the triumph of the Revolution, that is, the coup d'état in the capital.

The immediate response was to instruct the revolutionary troops to continue advancing, refusing to accept a cease-fire, and to call a general strike. The country was paralyzed from one end to the other. Radio stations hooked up with the rebel radio broadcast the instructions of the revolutionary command. This made it possible to deal a devastating counterstrike to the blatant and desperate maneuver to rob the revolution of its victory. In 72 hours, all of the cities had been occupied, and approximately 100,000 weapons –also a figure that still must be determined exactly by historians– and all of the heavy air, sea and land military equipment were in the people's power.

Those who fought in the clandestine movement merit special mention in this brief summary, for their unsurpassed courage and quiet, anonymous contributions. The names of Frank País, Celia, Vilma, Haydée, Melba and many others justify this well-deserved recognition on a date like December 2.

Our people, the vast majority of whom did not possess the high degree of knowledge and political conscience we see today, but whose courage and patriotism knew absolutely no limits, were free for the first time. Our nation, already fully formed and with considerable historical traditions, was independent for the first time. A new struggle then began, one that continues today with growing force, and whose future fate has yet to be determined, for it is now tied to the fate of the world.

The Escambray Mountains, the Bay of Pigs, the total defeat of the dirty war, the neutralization and dismantling of hundreds of counterrevolutionary organizations, the reduction to a minimum of acts of sabotage and terror promoted and backed from abroad, the successful confrontation of hundreds of plots to physically eliminate the revolutionary leadership, the consistent practice of internationalism, from Algeria to Cuito Cuanavale, the tens of thousands of doctors, teachers and other professionals who have provided their services to poor sister nations throughout 40 years, and the thousands who continue to do so, even during the special period, are all victories inspired by the same philosophy that guided us that December 2, just 45 years ago.

We managed to continue forward, when a whole sector of the progressive world born of the profound social revolution that took place at the beginning of last century, in spite of its epic achievements, collapsed before its old capitalist adversary. It was unable to overcome its own errors and successfully confront the anachronistic ideology and dirty tricks of the oppressive and exploitative system that it had set to overcome in order to change the world.

With the experience I have derived from the exceptional privilege of having lived through a revolution carried out in conditions that could not even be imagined by the great ideologues and protagonists of socialism, and with the utmost modesty and humility of someone who is very much aware of the limited role played by individuals in history, I would dare say to our children, our students, the students and teachers in our military schools, our young soldiers and officers, all our courageous veterans and commanders and soldiers in active duty or the reserves, that nothing is impossible for our people today in the political and revolutionary fields. Just ideas have greater power than all the reactionary forces put together.

The most sophisticated technology they employ to try to turn us into slaves or subjects of a universal imperial power are not and never will be able to defeat the conscience and intelligence of human beings.

When we resumed fighting with seven weapons, no one could have ever even dreamed that we had any possibility of success. But we adapted to the enemy's technical resources and enormous power despite the insignificant forces and means available to us. Ideas are and always will be the most important

weapon of all. Our experience has taught us that if one day our country were to be attacked and even occupied by powerful forces, each and every man or woman, wherever they may be, can be an army. When a combatant or group of combatants are left cut off or isolated, they can and should assume responsibility for their own actions and continue fighting. The invader will then be forced to fight against an army, ten armies, a hundred armies, a thousand armies, a million armies.

There is no weapon more powerful than a profound conviction and clear idea of what must be done. It is with these kinds of weapons, which do not require enormous sums of money, but only the capacity to create and transmit just ideas and values, that our people will be increasingly armed.

The world will be conquered by ideas, not by force, whose power to subdue and dominate humanity will become ever more diminished. Only peace and cooperation among peoples will save humanity from the threat of death posed by the route of plunder, exploitation, wars, and the destruction of conditions for life on the planet.

It is you who will live in the most difficult and decisive century of human history. Your most sacred duty is to prepare for that; thus, expanding your professional and political knowledge is an indispensable requirement. A comprehensive and massive general culture, something never before dreamed of in any society, is now a real possibility within reach of all Cubans.

A profound education in ethics, humanitarianism, solidarity and internationalism is an essential part of that culture.

Those of us who attempted to seize Cuba's second most important military fortress, in this very city, one July 26, and then landed in the Granma three years, four months and seven days later to carry out the task that I have just summarized for you, would be envious of every one of you for the struggle that now lies before you, with much more transcendental objectives, that is, to defend and develop what has been achieved and, to the extent of our abilities, do for humanity what we believe we have done for our homeland.

The time has come for you to fight guided by that visionary idea expressed by José Martí, when he said: "Humanity is Homeland." For him, in his struggle for the independence of a small and colonized island, this could not have been more than a dream, a lofty, beautiful and distant concept. But, today, it has become a vital necessity for all the peoples of the world, since without it no one will have a homeland. The Revolution has already made considerable efforts in pursuit of that dream. The prestige gained by Cuba in its support for the most just causes of the Third World countries is tremendous, and greater than ever. Every day, our people will possess greater experience and knowledge in many fields. Above all, they must be an example of full social justice, more perfect and profound every day, and they must share their experience with the rest of the world. Our strength will come from our ideas, and the strength of our ideas will come, above all, from our example.

Our time is limited, and so I must end here. On behalf of all those who have given their lives for these ideals throughout half a century of struggle, I share the fervent wish and profound conviction that you will fight to make those ideals a reality, as we ourselves have fought since that December 2 whose 45th anniversary we are commemorating today.

We will fight restlessly ever onward to victory!

Patria o Muerte!

Venceremos!

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