



BOLIVIA

The Search For and Discovery of the Remains of Ernesto "Che" Guevara and Other Guerrillas in Vallegrande, Bolivia, 1995-1997

Argentine-Cuban revolutionary Ernesto "Che" Guevara

In November 1995, while conducting research for a biography of Argentine-Cuban revolutionary Ernesto "Che" Guevara, U.S. journalist Jon Lee Anderson interviewed a retired Bolivian general, Mario Vargas Salinas. In the interview, the general claimed that he had witnessed the burial of Guevara's remains under the landing strip of an airport at Vallegrande, a town in the interior of Bolivia. The general's statements promised to resolve a longstanding mystery, for Guevara's body had disappeared shortly after he was killed in October 1967 by Bolivian army troops.

Almost immediately after General Vargas Salinas' claims were made public the president of Bolivia at the time, Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada, announced that his government would create a special commission to investigate the events surrounding Che's death and recover his remains. At the request of

the Association of Families of the Disappeared and Martyrs for the National Liberation of Bolivia (ACOFADES), the commission invited EAAF to participate in the search for the bodies of Guevara and his companions. EAAF conducted two missions to Bolivia in 1995 and 1996, working in the country for a total of approximately six months. During these missions EAAF and a team of Cuban researchers discovered the graves of other guerrillas who had died during the same period, but not the one where Guevara had been buried.

In June 1997, after a year and a half of research, the team of Cuban specialists working in Vallegrande found a mass grave under the town's landing strip. Evidence suggested that the grave contained the bodies of Guevara and other guerrillas who died in combat or were summarily executed by the Bolivian Army during the 1960s. The Cuban researchers invited EAAF to return to Bolivia for a third time. Three EAAF members traveled to Vallegrande and participated in the exhumation and analysis of the remains of Guevara and six other individuals buried with him.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Ernesto 'Che' Guevara was born in Argentina, and studied medicine in Buenos Aires, where he graduated as a physician. In 1955 he joined a small, armed group in Mexico led by revolutionary Fidel Castro, and took part in its struggle against Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista. Guevara eventually became the rebel army's leading military commander, and by January 1959, when Castro's rebel movement had taken power in Cuba, he was widely recognized as the second most powerful man in the country. Guevara was passionate about what he perceived as the need for Cuba to support guerrilla movements in Latin America and Africa. He tried, unsuccessfully, to establish or assist international guerrilla movements: in Argentina in 1964, and in the Belgian Congo in

its support. The rebel group was betrayed to the army by suspicious peasants, and several key members were captured and killed, while others deserted. Combat losses, sickness, fatigue, and demoralization took a heavy toll on the remaining revolutionaries. In the meantime, Washington was alerted of the presence of Guevara in Bolivia, and sent Special Forces experts to train a Bolivian battalion in anti-guerrilla techniques. Several agents of the Central Intelligence Agency were also sent to assist in intelligence-gathering.¹

On October 8th, 1967, Guevara's guerilla army was ambushed in a canyon known as the Quebrada del Yuro in the department of Santa Cruz de la Sierra by the Bolivian Army. Four guerrillas were killed in the incident, and Guevara and Simon Cuba Saravia, a Bolivian miner nicknamed "Willi," were taken



Passport photo of Che in the guise of a Uruguayan economist when he entered Bolivia in November 1966



Photo of Che taken shortly after he was captured by the Bolivian army on October 8, 1967

1965. He disappeared from public view shortly after the failure of the insurgency in the Congo. He had not abandoned his support for revolutionary causes, however.

Shorn of his customary beard and beret and disguised as a middle-aged Uruguayan economist, Guevara entered Bolivia in November 1966 and was joined by 50 or so Cuban, Argentine, Peruvian, and Bolivian guerrillas at a base in southeastern Bolivia's desert. There he intended to train guerrillas from several countries to touch off a "continental revolution." But this project was troubled from its inception. Bolivia's pro-Moscow Communist party, on which Guevara depended for backing, withdrew

prisoner and transported to La Higuera, a nearby village. The following day General Rene Barrientos, then president of Bolivia, ordered Guevara's death, and Bolivian army troops executed the two captured guerrillas in the village school. On October 10, Guevara's body was publicly displayed in the laundry house of a hospital in the neighboring town of Vallegrande. Hundreds of locals went to see him, and photographers took pictures.

On the night of October 10, the military ended the public spectacle by sealing off the hospital. The Bolivian government had decided to "disappear" Guevara's body, apparently to deny him a burial site that could become a place of public homage. But first,

¹ Anderson, Jon Lee. "Where is Che Guevara Buried? A Bolivian Tells." *New York Times*, November 21, 1995.

mindful of the lingering disbelief in Cuba and elsewhere at the reports of his death, steps were taken to preserve evidence of his identity. General Vargas Salinas said he witnessed the grisly events that followed: the making of a wax death mask of Guevara, the amputation of his hands by Argentinian agents, and his nighttime burial.²

Argentine agents checked fingerprints from the corpse against those on file in his native Argentina and confirmed the identification. The Bolivian soldiers then took Guevara's remains to a secret burial place. For years, the location of the site remained a mystery, and over time a number of stories about the revolutionary's final resting place began to circulate. According to some accounts Guevara's body had been dumped from a helicopter into the Bolivian jungle; others suggested that it had been cremated; while still others claimed that it had been buried in one of many sites around Vallegrande in an individual or a mass grave.

The bodies of most of the other guerrilla soldiers killed in combat during the campaign Guevara led were also buried by the army in unmarked graves, the locations of which had remained a mystery.

In 1995, Mario Vargas Salinas, a retired Bolivian Army general who had helped direct operations against Guevara's guerrilla group, gave an interview to American journalist Jon Anderson, who was doing research for a biography of Guevara. During the conversation Vargas Salinas told Lee that he had been one of the three military officers who participated in the disposal of Che's remains – a claim official sources did not deny.

After 28 years of silence, Vargas Salinas had decided to speak out. "Enough time has passed, and it's time the world knows," he told Anderson. "He is buried under the airstrip of Vallegrande."³

Lee published excerpts from the interview with Vargas Salinas, including the general's statements about the burial site, in the New York Times in November 1995. The response was immediate. Lic. Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, president of Bolivia at the time, addressed the country by television, and announced that his administration would create a Government Commission of Inquiry to investigate these allegations. The special commission, which he created through executive order "to corroborate the

statements of retired General Vargas Salinas," consisted of Lic. Hugo San Martín, National Secretary of the Interior; Brigadier General Armando Balcázar, Inspector General of the Army; and Divisional General Remberto López Valle, Vice-Minister of Defense.

Soon after, the Association of Relatives of Disappeared Persons of Bolivia (ASOFAM) requested EAAF's assistance in searching for the remains of Che Guevara and investigating the locations of approximately 30 other guerrillas from Bolivia, Argentina, Peru, and Cuba whose bodies had been secretly buried. At ASOFAM's recommendation, the Bolivian Commission of Inquiry accepted EAAF



Photo of Che taken shortly after his death

members as its official forensic experts. EAAF conducted three missions to Bolivia: the first from late November 1995 to April 1996, the second in June 1996, and the third from late June into July, 1997. The Commission and EAAF sponsored EAAF's work during these missions.

THE FIRST MISSION (NOVEMBER 1995-APRIL 1996)

Shortly after being contacted by ASOFAM, three EAAF members traveled to Bolivia. By the end of November 1995 excavations were underway at the Vallegrande landing strip. EAAF supervised and

² Anderson, 1995.

³ Anderson, 1995

directed this initial research, while much of the work was carried out by Bolivian youths as part of their obligatory military service.

At the end of 1995, a group of Cuban scientists led by Dr. Jorge González Pérez, Director of the Havana Medical Legal Institute, joined the search. Dr. González Pérez represented the families of the Cuban guerrillas who disappeared in Bolivia.

After his statements were published, General Vargas Salinas had accompanied members of the special commission to the Vallegrande airstrip, and confirmed that the bodies were buried there. He did not specify precisely where the grave was located, however. The airstrip covered a large expanse of terrain, and to excavate it all would have been



First excavations at the landing strip of the Vallegrande airport, December 1995

practically impossible.

The team therefore decided to employ other investigative strategies. It requested the assistance of "Area Geofísica," a private Argentine firm. This company provided georadar equipment and personnel, free of charge, to aid the investigation. A georadar is a high-resolution instrument capable of rapidly surveying the subsoil of an area. It is capable of identifying the location of structures, tombs, pipes, wells, and other natural and artificial discontinuities beneath the surface of the earth.

EAAF also conducted extensive interviews with persons, including farmers, local residents, soldiers formerly stationed at the local military barracks, and others, who might be able to provide information relevant to the investigation. Using the information they provided was complicated by the fact that during the three decades since the events under investigation took place the landmarks in the terrain

to which witnesses referred had changed substantially. Eventually, by consulting aerial photographs from 1959 and 1984, some roads and other landmarks that no longer exist were reconstructed. These alterations in the terrain allowed the investigating team to situate information provided by the witnesses more precisely.

While conducting this historical research, EAAF interviewed a local peasant, who recounted that on a night in late 1967 Bolivian army troops had buried bodies on his land. On the basis of this information, EAAF began another investigation on a farm in the Cañada de Arroyo area, about five kilometers from Vallegrande. On December 12th human remains were found on the farm.

Historical information suggested that these bodies belonged to three of four guerrilla fighters from Guevara's army. After Guevara was captured on October 8th, 1967, the guerrillas who survived divided into two groups and fled in different directions. A few days later, on October 12th, one of the groups clashed with the Bolivian army at Cajones, at the confluence of the Grande and Mizque rivers. Sources differ as to what precisely occurred: some sources stated that the guerrilla were captured and executed, while military sources suggested that they died in combat. The names of these four guerrillas were Octavio "Moro" Concepción de la Pedraja, a 32 year-old Cuban military doctor; Jaime "Chapaco" Arana Campero, a Bolivian and former Communist Youth member; Lucio "Eustaquio" Galván, a Peruvian guerrilla radio technician; and Francisco "Pablito" Huanca, a young Bolivian student.

In March 1996 EAAF and Cuban researchers resumed excavations and found the fourth skeleton close to where the first three bodies had been buried.

Anthropological analyses were conducted to determine the identities and causes of death of the four individuals whose bodies had been found. All four were adults males, and they exhibited bullet wounds in the head, thorax, upper limbs, and abdomen.

On the basis of premortem information provided by his family, one of the four individuals was identified as the Bolivian youth Jaime Arana Campero. His remains were returned to his family, who decided to re-inter them in the cemetery of Tarija, Bolivia, his hometown.

On the basis of the identification of Arana Campero and the historical information, it was

charge of the historical research in La Paz located the person who had led the army into the La Poza area. After several visits, this witness was able to locate the site of Coello's second grave. Two EAAF members, Patricia Bernardi and Dario Olmo, traveled again to Bolivia for several days in June 1996, and were authorized by the Governmental Commission to exhume and identify the remains found at Laguna Seca.

By comparing pre-mortem information provided

Sergio Katabian of the Argentine firm Area Geofisica and two Bolivian soliders using the georadar equipment during the search for grave sites



by his family, EAAF members positively identified Coello's body. It was not possible, however, to determine cause and manner of death from the bone remains or associated evidence. According to historical data, Coello had been wounded in the abdomen; his liver was damaged and his intestines were ruptured. The skeleton did not present any evidence that would confirm or deny this information. If the location of the wound was described correctly in the historical sources, it could well be that the gunshot wound did not affect skeletal remains.

The remains of Carlos Coello were transported to Cuba and returned to his family, his wife, and a son whom he never knew.

THE THIRD MISSION (JUNE-JULY 1997)

Near the end of 1996, a large Cuban team of specialists began a survey of the geographical and geological characteristics of the Vallegrande valley, using information gathered through the historical investigation to guide their efforts. The surveying team focused in particular on a 20-hectare area of the old landing strip that the historical information suggested was the most likely burial site. Techniques

used in this survey included photogrammetry and teledetection, optical-analogue interpretation of photographs, studies of temporal change, digital analysis of images.

Within this chosen area, the analysis identified 34 disturbances in the soil where the burial site might be located. One 60m by 300m site within the zone, where a number of disturbances were concentrated, seemed particularly promising.

On June 19th the excavations resumed under the direction of the Cuban Dr. Jorge González, according to a plan based on the survey results. On Saturday, June 28th, the excavation team discovered human remains. The Bolivian Special Governmental Commission and the Cuban team immediately contacted EAAF, and EAAF members Patricia Bernardi, Carlos Somigliana, and Alejandro Inchaurregui traveled to Bolivia, where they participated in the investigation for two weeks.

The exhumation was undertaken using standard archaeological techniques. Seven human skeletons were recovered. For security reasons, the scientists slept beside the remains in the grave, at a depth of 1.9 meters, throughout the investigation.

On Saturday, July 5th, a week after the site was discovered, the seven skeletons were exhumed from the site and transported to the Japanese Hospital of Santa Cruz de la Sierra for analysis. Personal effects, including socks, clothes, and belts, were found with the remains. In the inner pocket of a jacket that turned out to have belonged to Che, a small tobacco box was discovered, still containing tobacco.

The remains were analyzed between July 6th and 11th. Once again, the scientists slept with the remains, this time in the hospital morgue.

As a result of this laboratory work, the seven skeletons were identified as belonging to Aniceto Reynaga Gordillo (Bolivian), Ernesto Che Guevara Lynch (Argentine-Cuban), René Martínez Tamayo (Cuban), Simenón Cuba Sarabia (Bolivian), Orlando Pantoja Tamayo (Cuban), Alberto Fernández Montes de Oca (Cuban), and Juan Pablo Chang Navarro (Peruvian).

The identifications were made through comparisons of "pre-mortem" information with information gained through analysis of the remains.

In the case of Che Guevara, the pre-mortem data

used in the process of comparison, in addition to general features, included orthodontic records, plaster dental molds, radiographs of his teeth, enlarged photographs of details of his teeth, photo-cranial superimposition, records of old lesions, and information from the autopsy of October 10th, 1967. The overwhelming abundance of pre-mortem information made the application of other identification techniques, such as genetic testing, unnecessary.

All the skeletons studied showed gunfire wounds. The craniums of six of the skeletons — all but Guevara's — had been shattered by gunshots.

The results of the investigation were described in a report to the representative of the Public Ministry of the Department of Santa Cruz de la Sierra. The report was written by Cesó Cuéllar (Bolivian); Patricia Bernardi, Alejandro Inchaurregui and Carlos Somigliana (EAAF); and Roberto Rodríguez Suárez, Héctor Soto Izquierdo, and Jorge González Pérez (Cuban).

On the morning of July 12th, 1997, a press conference was held at the doors of the Japanese Hospital of Santa Cruz de la Sierra, attended by the Ministers of the Interior and Human Development of the Republic of Bolivia. During the ceremony, the remains of the guerrilla fighters were deposited in wooden urns. The urns that contained the remains of

THE CUBAN REBURIAL CEREMONIES

In October 1997, 30 years after the guerrillas had been killed, the urns containing the remains of Guevara, the three other Cubans, and the Peruvian Juan Pablo Chang Navarro were displayed in the Plaza de la Revolución in Havana. They were later transported to the José Martí library in the city of Santa Clara. More than four million Cubans waited in line for hours to observe the guerrillas' remains and pay tribute to them.

On October 17th, in Plaza Che Guevara in the city of Santa Clara, the remains of the guerrillas were entombed in a memorial during a public ceremony.

At the request of his family, the remains of Simenón Cuba Sarabia were returned to Cuba after the ceremonies.

At the invitation of the Cuban government three EAAF members - Patricia Bernardi, Anahi Ginarte, and Alejandro Inchaurregui - traveled to Cuba in October to witness to the reburial ceremony of remains of Che Guevara and his companions. EAAF members were invited also by the local Institute of Legal Medicine to participate in the Annual International Meeting of Forensic Sciences in Havana. EAAF members gave a presentation about the team's work with special emphasis on the forensic work done in Bolivia.



Cuban geophysicists Beatriz Rodríguez and Jose Prol with EAAF members Anahi Ginarte and Patricia Bernardi in Vallegrande, Bolivia

the Cuban guerrillas were then immediately transported to the Viru-Viru airport at Santa Cruz de la Sierra. From there they were taken on a special flight to Cuba.

THE SEARCH CONTINUES

In 1998 the Cuban researchers discovered the body of Tamara "Tania" Haydee Bunke Bider, an Argentine-German who had been working in Bolivia for the Cuban government and assisting Guevara's

revolutionary movement.

As of this writing, the work of finding and identifying the remains of the approximately 23 other guerrillas is still underway in Vallegrande. These persons include: Jesus Suarez Gayol, Cuban; Eliseo Rodriguez Reyes, Cuban; Antonio Sanchez Diaz, Cuban; Jorge Vazquez Viana, Bolivian; Jose Maria Martinez Tamayo, Cuban; Raul Quispaya Choque, Bolivian; Antonio Jimenez Tardio, Bolivian; Juan Vitalio Acuna Nunez, Cuban; Israel Reyes Zayas, Cuban; Apolinar Aquino Quispe, Bolivian; Gustavo Machid Hoed Beche, Cuban; Walter Arancibia Rodriguez, Bolivian; Moises Guevara Rodriguez, Bolivian; Fredy Maimura Hurtado, Bolivian; Jose Restituto Cabrera Flores, Peruvian; Julio Velazco Montano, Bolivian; Roberto Peredo Leigue, Bolivian; Manuel Hernandez Osoerio, Cuban; Mario Guttierrez Ardaya, Bolivian; Octavio Concepcion de la Pedraja, Cuban; Francisco Huanca Flores, Bolivian; Lucio Galvan Hidalgo, Peruvian; and Julio Luis Mendez Korne, Bolivian.



The trench in which Che's remains were discovered

Where Is Che Guevara Buried? A Bolivian Tells

The writer of this article, an American journalist, is working on a biography of Che Guevara for Atlantic Monthly Press.

By JON LEE ANDERSON

LA PAZ, Bolivia, Nov. 21 — When Ernesto "Che" Guevara was captured by the last major remnant of leftist guerrillas through the military operations in 1967, the army that had hunted him down initially received it with a wary eye. The evidence of his Cuban-sponsored campaign to spread revolution across Latin America.

Guevara, 38, had already enjoyed any rights of the radical left, and other prisoners were screaming against Argentine agents cut off his hands to check his fingerprints against the files in his native Argentina, then Bolivian agents took his body to a secret burial place.

His disappearance has led to endless speculation, especially in Latin America, where Guevara remains a towering presence. His death is the most of social transformation.

Now, after 29 years of silence, a retired Bolivian Army general who was part in the counterinsurgency effort and once he witnessed the secret burial has decided to disclose where the body lies.

"Enough time has passed, and it is time the world knows," the officer, Gen. Mario Vargas Luján, said in an interview in the large garden of his well-kept home near the city of Santa Cruz in Bolivia's southern lowlands.

"Che's body is buried in a mass grave in Vallegrande," he said, referring to a provincial capital in the mountains about 150 miles northwest of Santa Cruz. "It is buried under the windmill at Vallegrande."

The Cuban Government has long sought to recover the body, Guevara remains the prime symbol of revolution in a time when economic difficulties have produced social storms in Cuba, and even newly Cubans who differ with the Communist system.

But the 1967 is a decisive one in Cuban history. Cuba's victory in the revolution has opened a cold war campaign for the return to Communist control that have run with little success from the Bolivian Government, which insists that it does not know where they are.

For the Government here, 1967 is the year that began a dramatic domino theory. Bolivian forces fought groups often called as 1967 as 1967 suspected leftist activities remain scattered as "insurgents," most of them being the right wing military unit of that stage, Euzébio Salas in the 1970s.

General Vargas, who in 1967 was a Bolivian officer listed in Vallegrande with Bolivia's last Army Division, said he was one of only three witnesses to Guevara's burial, and he provided the most detailed account to date of the episode.

General Vargas said he believed that one other witness was present, a Bolivian government official whom he knew only by his surname, Torres.

Sometime after midnight, in the early hours of Oct. 11, 1967, General Vargas said, he and a fellow officer, Maj. Galdo Pérez, received orders to accompany Torres. They were to dump trash at 10:15 p.m. in the area of the guerrillas, including Guevara, in Vallegrande's suburbs.

"Next he brought in another," the general said of Torres. "He dug the trash grass, brought the dump truck with the guerrillas, dumped the guerrillas, then brought the tractor and



A retired Bolivian Army general has lifted the veil of mystery surrounding the burial place of Che Guevara. The leftist guerrilla leader's body was displayed after he was killed in October 1967.



Che Guevara, the revolutionary, is said to be buried in Vallegrande.

granted it over."

Guevara, who was called as a doctor to Argentina, joined Fidel Castro's small band of revolutionaries in Mexico in 1959. He was the first to be killed against the Cuban leader, Fulgencio Batista. Guevara became the chief Army commander of the Cuban revolution.

After the victory of Mr. Castro's rebel government in January 1959, Guevara was considered the most second most powerful man in Cuba. A communist Marxist, he is considered to have been one of the most loyal and the most Cuban Government's subsequent confrontation with the United States.

Guevara was most passionate about what he considered as the "new" Cuban concept for guerrilla movements in Latin America and Africa. He returned to the battlefield, he organized a guerrilla movement in Argentina in the 1960s of operations leading to the 1967. He was killed in early 1964 but his remains were discovered and most of his guerrillas were killed or captured.

Guevara disappeared from public view in 1967 when he left Cuba to lead one of the rebel forces in Latin

ing in the former Belgian Congo, now Zaire. But his army was crushed. Later Guevara, he was returned to Cuba to prepare for a new guerrilla campaign in Africa.

After a long customary period and having been diagnosed as an acute tropical disease, Guevara returned to Cuba in November 1967 and was killed by 36 of the Cuban, Bolivian, Argentine and Peruvian guerrillas in a battle in Vallegrande, a remote tropical desert. There, he managed to train guerrillas from the eye witness to "shoot off a 'card' from his chest."

The guerrilla's chief was troubled from the capture. Bolivia's pro-Communist Party, on which he depended for backing, withdrew its support. This was followed by another betrayal to the army by communist presents and the capture and death of key members of his band. And amidst illness, sickness, fatigue and dehydration, he was a heavy toll.

After the Guevara's presence in Bolivia, Washington was reported to have advised the Bolivian government to "shoot off a 'card' from his chest" to "shoot off a 'card' from his chest."

On Oct. 11, General Vargas, then an army captain, led an ambush that wiped out many of the guerrillas. He was promoted to major for his efforts.

Guevara was captured on Oct. 8, 1967. He was held overnight in a mud-floor schoolhouse in the town of La Higuera, about 30 miles from Vallegrande, and then moved to the camp of Bolivian's President, General Barrientos, he was executed.

General Vargas, who has Guevara's photograph afterward, said his first words were: "Good, good! You are going to kill a man."

Guevara's bullet-riddled body was taken to Vallegrande and it roughed there afterward and the next day, Oct. 15, it was put on display in a hospital

laundry house. Hundreds of thousands of people came just for a glimpse, and photographers took pictures.

Local workers used Guevara's body as a "memory" for the day. He was and stepped back of his circumscribed base as he passed, said General Vargas, a major with 1967-1970 and was the body.

On the night of Oct. 18, the military held the public display by adding all the reports. The Bolivian Government had decided to "shoot off a 'card' from his chest" to "shoot off a 'card' from his chest." The first, a detail of the shooting is quoted in Cuba. And attention to the reports of his death, were were taken to preserve evidence of his identity.

General Vargas said he witnessed the group's execution. He followed the shooting with his own death of Guevara, the execution of his body by Argentine agents and his neighbors' burial.

The tracks and death track were 1967 revealed to Cuba by a Bolivian journalist on behalf of Bolivia's former Minister, Américo Argenteo, Mr. Argenteo, whose wife has been in Bolivia, 1967, defected to Cuba and eventually returned to Bolivia.

Finally, the death track was revealed. It was one of an unbroken line in Cuba, with Guevara's capture. Guevara's capture in the north of Bolivia's Central Bank.

But Guevara, continuing rumors have suggested that Guevara's body was dumped into the Atlantic Ocean (not a helicopter, buried in a mountain). But until now, no other also was involved in the campaign against him has offered a credible account.

Speaking of his mission for bringing his body back, General Vargas said he felt it was time that Bolivia and Cuba should take responsibility. "The Bolivian and Paraguayan are the only ones," the general said, "they were not."

FROM THE NEW YORK TIMES, NOVEMBER 21 1995

Bones Now Seem to Prove That Che Is Dead

By JON LEE ANDERSON

VALLEGRANDE, Bolivia, July 4 — In a six-foot-deep pit, the body of Che Guevara lies exposed to the Bolivian skies. Experts who have unearthed a mass grave in this small Bolivian mountain town said today that the grave contains the remains of Guevara and six of his guerrilla comrades.

The skull that is thought to be Guevara's lies partly exposed at the bottom of the pit, covered by an olive-green military jacket. The skeleton has no hands, an important clue.

Although the remains have not yet been exhumed and definitely identified, two of the experts say they are "100 percent sure" they have at long last found the remains of the legendary Argentine-Cuban revolutionary.

After Guevara was wounded and captured on Oct. 8, 1967, he was held overnight and executed on the orders of the Bolivian President, and in the presence of a Cuban-American agent for the Central Intelligence Agency. The revolutionary had come to Bolivia in 1966 to begin what he hoped would be a continental revolution by Marxists against "Yankee imperialism." The deaths came after an abortive 11-month campaign led by Guevara, the former confidant of the Cuban leader Fidel Castro.

The missing hands are the strongest piece of evidence. After Guevara's execution, his body and those of several of his comrades were flown by helicopter to this town. His body lay in public view in a hospital laundry for 24 hours, after which it and those of his comrades vanished.

The Bolivian high command decided to "disappear" their bodies to deny the guerrilla a place where his disciples could pay him homage after death. But to preserve evidence that they had killed Guevara, they amputated his hands.

His body has remained one of Latin America's most enduring mysteries and a state secret in Bolivia. Guevara's hands, preserved in formaldehyde, eventually surfaced in Cuba.

The long silence was finally broken in Nov. 1985 when a retired Bolivian general, Mario Vargas Salinas, disclosed that he had taken part in the secret burial in the early hours

of Oct. 11, 1967, and that the guerrilla leader and his comrades had been buried in a pit dug by a bulldozer on the edge of Vallegrande's dirt airstrip.

After General Vargas Salinas's revelations, President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada formed a commission to find the bodies and return them to the families.

After several weeks of excavations by an Argentine forensic team and Bolivian soldiers, the bodies of several guerrillas were found, but not Guevara's. Under pressure from local military colleagues, General Vargas Salinas went underground after saying he did not remember the exact location of Guevara's grave.

Over the last year and a half, Cuban Government forensic experts and historians intensified the effort to discover the graves in Vallegrande. They scoured the earth with mapping equipment to detect "anomalies," then returned in May, prepared to dig in places where they had determined that earth had been disturbed by a bulldozer.

But their work was halted for six weeks when the town passed an ordinance forbidding further excavation. Local authorities have long expressed a wish that the remains of Guevara and his comrades remain here, and planned a mausoleum.

But given the wishes of the families that the remains be returned to them, the Bolivian Interior Ministry overturned the local ordinance and authorized the work to continue.

The digging resumed on June 18, and on June 28 Bolivians working with the Cubans bulldozed open a trough in which they found human remains. As they dug, they realized that this was a site that had once been dug up by a bulldozer. Over the last few days the skeletal remains of

seven men have come into view.

The Cubans were joined on July 1 by three Argentine forensic anthropologists who were involved in the earlier digging, and what they have found "coincides absolutely with General Vargas Salinas's account," said one of the Argentine experts, Alejandro Inchaurregui.



Roberto Inchaurregui, left, a Cuban anthropologist, and Carlos Inchaurregui, of Argentina, identify a grave in northern Bolivia, showing human skeletal remains of the guerrilla Che Guevara.

Mr. Inchaurregui said today, "We have found common mass graves in which all the bodies were dumped in the same moments." He said three of the bodies were lying on top of one another, indicating that they had been thrown into the pit. Several of the skeletons are wearing crude sandals and others have military boots.

"The theory for the hypothesis that these are the bodies of Che and his comrades is strong, but we still have to undertake the work of identification," Mr. Inchaurregui said.

On Sunday the forensic team expects to remove the bodies to a laboratory for formal identification and Mr. Inchaurregui says he expects the identification of Guevara to be complete on Monday.

In addition to the missing hands, one further detail has strengthened the belief that the remains are Guevara's: In a pocket of the jacket covering the skeleton with no hands are traces of plaster of Paris.

On the same evening that Guevara's hands were amputated, death masks were made of his face at the Vallegrande Hospital. The plaster traces could be residue from that process.