

Fidel in Vietnam: An unforgettable flight to the front line of battle



by Moises Perez Mok

Among the many memorable trips of his life, Colonel Ho Van A was especially impressed by the one that took the historic leader of the Cuban Revolution, Fidel Castro, to the line of fire in South Vietnam.

Van A had the privilege of being part of the crew that, commanded by Captain Nguyen Oanh, was assigned to accomplish the delicate mission, carried out on September 15, 1973.

It is worth noting that since its establishment on May 1, 1959, the 919th Flight Squadron, formerly the 919th Airlift Regiment, carried out many safe and effective civilian and military missions, ranging from direct participation in combat to the transfer of Party and State leaders.

During the years of fierce war, service conditions were extremely difficult, but safe, albeit complicated, flights were carried out even in conditions of extreme urgency, recalled the then air information officer in an interview granted some time ago to the digital newspaper of the People's Police.

One of those operations was the transfer to the line of fire in the south of the country of Commander in Chief Fidel Castro, who became the first and only president who, in the middle of the war, had the courage to visit the liberated zone of South Vietnam, where Cuba had an embassy accredited to the National Liberation Front since March 1969.

In 1973, Van A recalled, 'the outstanding leader of the Cuban people, brother and great friend from the other side of the hemisphere, traveled to Vietnam and expressed his desire to enter the line of fire to visit the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam and the recently liberated Quang Tri'.

In response to the request, then Prime Minister Pham Van Dong asked Brigade 919 to arrange a special flight, under conditions of absolute confidentiality and security requirements.

On September 13, we received the order to bring home the AN24 aircraft with the number VN-1094, the information officer recounted and recalled that, despite the signing of the Paris Agreement earlier that year, most of the Vietnamese transport aircraft were still at the evacuation site in Tuong Van (China).

In the early afternoon, he said, we took off to fly to Nanning, China, to refuel, check the technique and wait for the evening to arrive to return to Gia Lam. The next day, after the mechanical team thoroughly checked everything and the fuel chemical test was done, we made a test flight.

The plane was then handed over to the security guard, without the crew knowing where they would be traveling to or who they would be serving; but from the preparatory checks, everyone guessed that it would be a very special flight, one of those classified as category 'A'.

Finally, the crew that would carry out the operation was assigned and when they found out what the mission would be, they were all thrilled to have the honor of taking Fidel Castro to visit the recently liberated land.

A complex task, according to Van A, knowing the many times the enemy had tried to eliminate the leader of the Cuban Revolution and the conditions in which it would be carried out, since they had to land in Dong Hoi, 'an improvised airport, with almost no navigation equipment, all at a glance' and relying only on experience.

As if that were not enough, there was news that a storm was about to hit the Central region. Even so, AN24 took off at 09:40 (local time) to arrive at its destination at 11:15, according to the itinerary.

Fortunately, the privileged witness noted, the weather was beautiful that day and the meteorological conditions were ideal for us to make a soft landing at a field airport with a short and narrow runway.

In any case, and as described by the then ambassador of the island here, Raúl Valdés Vivó, in his book 'The great secret: Cubans on the Ho Chi Minh trail', the moment the plane took off -already on the runway and without turning off the engines- it had to stop suddenly.

On the radio they asked for the Prime Minister. I saw a very tense Pham Van Dong get off for a few moments, although he returned smiling: it was Le Duan and Troung Chinh -he told Fidel- who came to wish us a good trip... They could not arrive earlier because of the terrible traffic... Hanoi is flooded with

people... see them'.

And below, through the windows of the AN24, the campaign hats of Le Duan and Troung Chinh could be seen waving, 'while the aircraft took off with its characteristic noise of elephant snoring'.

Valdés Vivó himself points out that there was no lack of jokes during the crossing and some wondered if the pilot could land on top of so many craters or dodge the stones behind which the artillerymen were stationed, in a military airport where there was no control tower, only ruins.

In his notes on the trip to the line of fire, Dr. José Miyar Barruecos, 'Chomy', noted that after flying over the heroic bridge of Ham-Rong, where 99 Yankee planes were shot down, 'as we approached the South, the bomb holes appeared frequently'.

Further on he describes the passage over Nge-An province, where Ho Chi Minh was born, and where, along with Ha-Thin province, two million Vietnamese starved to death in 1945.

'We are going to land in Quang Binh province. You see a huge amount of 500-pound bomb craters. We land in the town of Donh Hoi at 10:50. We are warmly greeted by a group of officers. They offer us tea. 'Here in this province they dropped a million bombs and 60 villages were razed to the ground,' he wrote.

FIDEL'S WISHES

Returning to Colonel Ho Van A's recollections, he noted that the air operation took place in the middle of autumn, but even so 'the weather here is still terribly hot and water is very scarce. However, we brothers are very happy to have made the flight safely'.

Initially the crew was informed that they would stay until the delegation finished the visit and held talks with the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam. But suddenly, the next day, he received orders to take the group back to Hanoi.

'We later learned that, due to the tense situation in Chile (where a coup had overthrown Salvador Allende's Popular Unity government), President Fidel Castro had to return home early,' he recounted.

According to Van A, landing at Gia Lam airport they had another surprise, as the legendary General Vo Nguyen Giap personally went to the steps of the plane to receive the delegation and congratulate the crew for successfully completing the task.

Fidel shook hands with each of the crew members and thanked them for overcoming all the difficulties to make it safe for him and the Cuban people's delegation to enter the line of fire from Quang Tri, directly to the newly liberated land of Vietnam, he said.

He also wished us to complete our tasks, win many victories and for Vietnam to achieve its reunification soon, the information officer stressed in his remarks.

At the request of the crew, Pham Van Dong, Nguyen Giap and Fidel Castro took a souvenir photo at the foot of the aircraft's stairway, in which was recorded the radiant expression that illuminated the faces of all those who, even though they made many special crossings, assure that 'entering the line of fire that year was an unforgettable flight'. (Taken from PL)



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