

Interview with Douglas Henderson

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR DOUGLAS HENDERSON

Interviewed by: Henry B. Ryan

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Q: Mr. Ambassador, as I mentioned, I'm interested in knowing a little bit about your early life, where you grew up. I believe you mentioned that it was right here in Weston, Massachusetts. Is that correct?

HENDERSON: I was born in this house in 1914. I was the fifth of seven children. My father was a carpenter, and he was also very much involved in military affairs. If there was a war on, he volunteered. He was in the Philippines for the Philippines insurrection; he was on the Mexican border; and he was overseas with the Yankee Division in charge of transport for the Yankee Division in France in the first World War.

Q: He was an officer?

HENDERSON: He came out of the service with a field rank of captain. He, of course, spoke a lot of his various encounters with other cultures. I'm afraid he had a rather red-neck attitude toward them, but he stirred my interest. My mother fostered my interest in reading, starting as far back as I can remember, by reading to the younger children, myself included, before bedtime. I had an uncle who was a mining engineer and he did many

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tours in Latin America, including places like the Dominican Republic, Chile and Bolivia, and from him I acquired an interest in Latin America.

That is in conflict with growing up in Weston which was a rural community, and a rural community which sent most of its high school graduates on to college, strangely enough, because it was also a place where wealthy people had, at that time, their summer homes.

I graduated from high school in 1932...

Q: Did you go to high school in Weston?

HENDERSON: ...in Weston.

Q: Weston Community High School?

HENDERSON: Yes, a public school. But because it was the depression there seemed to be no prospect for my going on to college. I turned my hand at any number of things in that period from 1932 to 1936, none of them particularly in line with any future interest in the Foreign Service certainly: things like nearly two years as an orderly in the operating room of the Waltham Hospital; a winter, bottling rum in East Boston; picking apples in the local orchard; that sort of thing.

In 1936, however, a high school teacher of mine took an interest in me, got me a scholarship to go to Boston University at a moment when I had a fairly stable job as a filling station attendant. So I went to Boston University, College of Liberal Arts, with no particular career in mind. However, since I was paying my own way, I decided I would take as many disciplines and studies as I was interested in and I ranged across the board from history, languages, literature, astronomy, biology—a true Liberal Arts education.

In the course of these four years I won a scholarship which paid tuition and expenses, and which turned into a Fellowship after I graduated. So that in 1940 I was looking around for

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my next step, and in talking with one of my professors in history, he asked me if I would be interested in diplomacy.

Q: Excuse me. Was this a scholarship to go on to do graduate work?

HENDERSON: Yes. And although I said that I had no background in Foreign Service diplomacy, he suggested that I look into a recently founded school across the river—as we say—at Fletcher on the Tufts campus. I went to Fletcher in that '40-'41 year and went back for a second year in September of '41. I had not prepared myself for the Foreign Service exams specifically but in the fall of '41 I took the exams thinking it would be wise to find out what they were about, and I was notified on December 6th, 1941 that I had passed the written exams.

My choices then, and they might not have been my choices, were between the Foreign Service and the armed services. The State Department intervened with my draft board and asked that I be released to go into the Foreign Service, and the draft board made the concession.

Q: Just one question comes to my mind. How did your father feel about that, having been a military...

HENDERSON: My father never really...he was interested, he was proud, he was happy. I don't think he understood. If he had been asked what he thought of a diplomat he probably would have used the stereotype "cookie pusher." It should be noted here that only two of my brothers served in the armed forces during the war.

Q: How many brothers and sisters do you have.

HENDERSON: I had five brothers and a sister, the sister being the oldest. My older brothers— two of them were mining engineers and consequently exempt from the draft. The third brother was in petroleum industry and similarly...and my next younger brother

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was with the ROTC, an MIT graduate, and served as procurement officer in the southwest Pacific. The youngest, went into the armed forces during the war, was a pilot with the Chinese-American wing in China.

Q: Where are you in age?

HENDERSON: I was the fifth of seven. I would have to say that nothing in my background, other than the exposure I had growing up, to my father and my uncle in their service in various foreign countries, nothing in my background necessarily pointed me in the direction of the Foreign Service.

Q: In the University what were the subjects you liked the most? Or were there any that stood out above the others?

HENDERSON: I have very catholic, wide-ranging interest in everything.

Q: What about religion? What is your religion?

HENDERSON: My father and mother were both baptized, my mother at the age of 80 in the Baptist Church, and my father at the age of about 50 in the Episcopalian Church. But I think these were just happenstance. You will not remember, but the age of puritanism was still very strong in New England when I was a boy growing up. All kinds of activity, card playing, and sports, were forbidden on the Sabbath. We did go to church but there was no strong religious thread running through my education.

Q: What church then would you have gone to?

HENDERSON: Episcopalian. I was confirmed in the Episcopalian Church.

Q: And your mother was housewife...

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HENDERSON: Housewife, and bringing up a family of seven children during the depression had her pretty...

HENDERSON: A busy woman.

Q: And your father after the war then went back to carpentry.

HENDERSON: That's correct, and made his living in carpentry.

Q: Working on construction jobs?

HENDERSON: He built several of the houses—the house down here, and two houses over there. Many of the houses were built by him, but during the depression, of course, there was no house building, just repair work so he eked out a living and we all had to contribute.

Q: What I would like to do now, unless anything occurs to you that is really salient in your early years, I'd like to jump to Bolivia, and particularly to the Che Guevara episode there. How long had you been in Bolivia when one heard that Che Guevara was in the country?

HENDERSON: Well, in the first place, I should say this was my second tour of duty in Bolivia. I had been a consul in Cochabamba from 1944 to 1947, so, 20 years later, when I was posted as ambassador in 1963, I had some background knowledge of Bolivia. The Bolivian scene, of course, is not a restful one and we went from one crisis to the next. It was never dull.

I ask indulgence on the question of dates, I think I'm right but you better check them. In the second place, I knew, from my experience in the Service, that an ambassador is not self-levitating. His staff holds him up. In my years in Bolivia as ambassador, I had three complete changes in senior staff and the third group served me during the Guevara

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episode. What I will recount will be my view of what happened, but keep in mind that I was being supported by professionals.

Q: Yes, I will.

HENDERSON: The first word that we had of anything like the Guevara episode, must have been in the summer of 1966. In Bolivia the problem is not one of gathering information, but of sorting it out. You have a lot of rumors fed into the embassy all the time, and they may point like magnets under a scattering influence, they point in all directions. But, if suddenly all the arrows point in one direction, you start to take them seriously. At first we didn't get very much out of this. There was a story that there was a guerrilla uprising being developed in some part of Bolivia, it was kind of vague. In the southeast, they said, a man by the name of Guevara—well, there are lots of Guevaras in Bolivia and a number of them are known revolutionaries of one kind or another.

Q: How were you hearing about this?

HENDERSON: It came through the station, the intelligence station. But they were not particularly alarmed by it, they didn't pick up on it, they just noted it.

Perhaps it would be just as well if I took a moment now to jump ahead, or rather to come to a final analysis of one aspect of this. I think it's important to notice that this Guevara episode was one that was carefully planned. It was not a hit or miss operation even though it might, on the surface, appear to be. In the first place the selection of Bolivia, and the selection of the site in Bolivia, must raise questions. If Guevara had chosen the Amazon rain forest river system, no one would have been particularly surprised. That river system had been a communication channel for communist couriers going between Cuba, Brazil, Peru and other countries for a number of years. When I was stationed in Peru we knew that some of the Peruvian guerrilla operations were being sustained this way. But he didn't choose that. We also found out later that, for example, the French man Regis Debray had surveyed the Bolivian scene earlier, possibly as early as 1965. And so you have to stop

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and think, why? Now it's also obvious that there had been a number of other interested parties in this operation. The girl, Tanya, appears to have been an East German attached (for whatever purpose I have never investigated), to the Guevara operation. There was an Argentine who was also attached to the operation from Argentina.

Q: Man or woman?

HENDERSON: Man. So that outside interests had channels into the operation. Now why did he choose the area that he did?

Q: Do you know anything about those areas before we go on?

HENDERSON: No. They were isolated, and I never followed up on them. I had my hands full with the operation and only afterwards did it become apparent that these were not just happenstance kinds of things. There were other parties to the operation.

To make it short I would have to say that I think Guevara's ultimate objective was to establish a revolutionary base in Bolivia from which he could move out into northern Argentina, he being himself an Argentinian.

Q: So hence the area. You were starting to talk about that, and that's the significance of that.

HENDERSON: Yes. This is the significance because otherwise the area itself would not be a convenient base to start a revolution in Bolivia. The way to do that would have been to go into the mines. It wouldn't have been hard to start up all kinds of difficulties in the mines. If you had wanted to just facilitate communist operations in surrounding countries, an Amazon River base would have been a dandy place to be; very easy place to move around, in and out.

Q: He was in Bolivian lowlands?

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HENDERSON: No, he was in a part of Bolivia called the Dry Jungle. The Andean mountain chain there faces out to the Chaco, and it is very precipitous, very broken up, and lots of ravines and channels and gullies, and very difficult both for movement, and also because of the living conditions. All the diseases known to mankind are endemic in that particular area.

Q: Then it was mountainous, or at least foothills.

HENDERSON: It breaks off very sharply there so it's really mountain and then it drops right down to the Chaco plain. The only significant industrial resource in the area is the oil fields at Camiri, and yet there was never any evidence that that was an objective.

The other part of it that seems to indicate that this was a well thought out, well established operation, was that when Guevara failed there were a group of Cubans who were with him, about six I believe, who had been surrounded in the same area. They escaped from the Bolivian army and disappeared, and resurfaced about four months later crossing the high Bolivian plateau in a very remote, desolate area fronting on Chile, a place called Uyuni. They escaped across the Chilean frontier, and the Chileans shipped them back to Cuba. But my point is rather that they were able to sustain themselves in Bolivia as hideaways for months. They could only have done that with some sort of a support group.

Q: From outside or within Bolivia?

HENDERSON: It had to be from within Bolivia. Those are the reasons that I think that this was a concerted attempt, better thought out than it appears on the surface, with a very deliberate site selected for a deliberate purpose.

Q: Could I ask you one question in that regard? I always wondered about it. I'm thinking of Mao's dictum that the guerrilla should swim in the sea of the people, and it did seem that

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this was very foreign territory for Guevara. They're Quechue speaking population, are they not? Did he have support in the area? Or did he stand out like a ...

HENDERSON: The first tip-off to his actual presence was that two Bolivians, completely fed up with the discipline of his camp, left the camp, fled to Camiri with some arms—I don't know just what they were—and tried to sell their arms there in Camiri, and were promptly picked up by the local military commander and interrogated.

The problem apparently in that camp was that the Bolivian recruits were treated with contempt by the Cuban hardcore, and were more or less the gofers.

Q: He was recruiting on the spot, trying to recruit?

HENDERSON: The communist party in Bolivia, the communist parties in Bolivia tried to make contact and they sent some of their people in. They weren't really recruits. They were people trying to take a free ride on this Cuban intervention. This is speculation on my part, I have no firm data to support it, but the fact is that two of the Bolivians escaped from the camp and more or less inadvertently gave the whole show away.

Q: Did he get any significant support from the population?

HENDERSON: There is no significant population in the area. This is, as I say, dry jungle, very little in the way of local population there at all; very scattered subsistence farms, nothing in the way of population concentrations. Camiri, obviously he did not locate in Camiri where there was a population which he might have recruited, but he didn't.

Q: He was near Camiri. That would be the closest.

HENDERSON: That was the closest center.

Q: About how far was it from...just so I can...

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HENDERSON: At the very outside, he might have been 15 miles away, but because of the terrain he could have been on the moon as far as that goes. There are other population centers: Tarija, Yacuiba, but they are small and really pretty remote from other Bolivian territory. But Bolivia is very sparsely populated, except on the Altiplano, the mines, and the cities, and now, of course, the population is shifting towards Santa Cruz which is the...well, it is Amazon, but it is at the very headwaters of the Amazon. It is the demarcation line between the Chaco, which is mesquite shrub desert, and the more or less grassy plains which stretch out towards the Amazon rain forest.

Q: You're speaking now of Santa Cruz.

HENDERSON: Santa Cruz is the point at which there's a break over, high mountain, Altiplano population, and rain forest population.

Q: How many of them were there? Do we have a figure on that?

HENDERSON: Well, we know there were about ten Cubans. We know that there was Tanya, and this other Argentinian, and we know Regis Debray was there, and there may have been maybe another...the figure was always fluctuating, people were moving in and out of the camp, but I would say 20 to 30. It was not a large group.

Q: Twenty to thirty total, or 20 to 30 in addition to the ten Cubans?

HENDERSON: In addition to the core group.

Q: Did that number grow...I mean, was that the final number?

HENDERSON: At the very most that was what they had.

Q: So we're talking really 35 people.

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HENDERSON: Forty, outside. It was a core group, and Guevara intended to harden his core group through training before he made any move. He was off on a training march when the two Bolivians broke away and went down to Camiri, and the whole thing was blown. Before Guevara got back the local Bolivian commander decided that he was going to be a hero, and he sent I guess maybe a squad, maybe a little bit more, of his soldiers into the area where the Bolivians had told him the camp was located. But they were very clumsy, fell into an ambush...I guess a couple of them were killed, the rest of them were captured, brought into camp, interrogated, and I guess their shoes were taken because shoes were a very valuable commodity in this terrain, and then they were sent back. When Guevara came back, in this time sequence, he realized that his cover was blown, and decided he had to break camp and move out.

Q: This is about '66, or late '66?

HENDERSON: No, by this time it must have been March of '67. Now, there were two things going on in parallel so I'm going to follow one and then I'll follow the other.

Q: Good.

HENDERSON: The first thing I want to follow is Guevara. Guevara broke camp, decided that neither Regis Debray, nor the Argentinian could handle forced marches in that terrain. He moved his group south for about a half a day's march to where he could shake those two out, drop them off, and then turned and went back north. So that Regis Debray and the Argentinian were captured almost that same afternoon and tried to give a story that they were just newspaper reporters; the Argentine was a journalist, but also a member of the Argentine Communist Party. Debray said he was a French journalist, and he was. But the Bolivians didn't necessarily believe them, and held them and started interrogating them. Regis Debray, of course, being French and his mother being a person very close to De Gaulle, and being an intellectual, managed to get a lot of international publicity, and it became a very sore point for the Bolivians.

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Barrientos called me the night that Debray had been captured. He didn't know who Debray was, but said that they grabbed this guy, part of this guerrilla uprising. And I said, "Your excellency, what are you going to do?" He said, "Execute him." I said, "Really, I think that's not quite on. I'm not here to tell you what to do, but I can tell you what the consequences are of an action like that." And for several days my military personnel were telling me that the man was dead.

Q: The Defense Attach#.

HENDERSON: The Defense Attach# and others. And I kept putting the pressure on Barrientos and his military staff. Of course, my station chief was interested in any intelligence he could get out of it so he wanted to know about it too.

Q: Do you remember the name of the military attach#?

HENDERSON: No, I can conjure up his face but I can't remember his name. I had some lulus.

Q: Was Tilton the...

HENDERSON: He was the station chief. Well, in any case, the Bolivians kept Debray alive, and they kept the Argentine alive. But they got all kinds of bad publicity out of imprisoning this French intellectual. Mrs. Debray came to Bolivia and almost became a public relations problem for the French embassy, as much as anything. But, in any case, Debray is alive. That's one channel.

The other channel...

Q: Is Debray still around?

HENDERSON: Yes, as a matter of fact he is one of Mitterand's advisers.

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Q: He's a real survivor, isn't he?

HENDERSON: He's a survivor. Now, the first that we knew of specific actions (we'd been getting these rumors), the president, Rene Barrientos, called me one evening and said he had to talk to me urgently. And I said, "Well, I should have one of my advisers with me. Is this an economic matter? Is this a military matter? Is this a political matter? What are we talking about?" He said, "Well, bring down your counselor." So I brought my counselor down, John Fisher, a very stable chap, who by the way had a lot of military background himself

Q: Oh, did he?

HENDERSON: So he made a nice combination. Barrientos told us that...this was after the first ambush...

Q: Then you met personally with Barrientos at the palace?

HENDERSON: No, at his house. He said, "This is a guerrilla uprising. It's small, its been badly handled. I think we can probably handle it all right, there isn't any problem, but I think we ought to let you know." And I said, "Fine." And we went up to John Fisher's house which was a little way up, and we sat there and were talking about it, and thinking, "Well, he hasn't asked for military supplies, so apparently he's satisfied that we can go on as we have been." We were sitting there, and my wife called me and said, 'The President has just called and said he needs to see you again urgently, and to bring your military attach#.' We called the military attach#...and this fellow was pretty good, he wasn't very imaginative but he was a very solid person...

Q: This is the same night just after you'd...

HENDERSON: The same night. We'd met Barrientos at 8:00, by 9:30 we were back again at his house. The house by then was surrounded by bodyguards. When we'd gone

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down the first time there was no problem. Barrientos said he'd been talking to his military personnel and they felt they needed all kinds of arms and ammunition and all the rest of it, and they had a shopping list that wouldn't quit. And I said, "Excellency, we'd better define our terms. I think we've had a military training program here for years. The last element of our training program was to be a ranger battalion for the lowlands of Bolivia. We haven't started it yet. I think this would be a good time to start it. I'm not going to authorize any materiel for any armed force that isn't trained. The end result of arming an untrained group of people is to transfer ammunition and arms to the enemy. So we will start there. We will set up a training program for a ranger battalion, and since this is obviously not highland operations we're dealing with, we'll set it up in Santa Cruz. This has been programmed for years and we had been concentrating on other elements. We'll set up that training program."

Q: And you'd been talking about setting this up before?

HENDERSON: Oh, yes, this was part of an ongoing military assistance program that we had started in 1958. That is a separate story. So when we left Barrientos said, "Well, I am going to have to deal with my military, and you had better have some escort service." And he sent out three or four jeeps to follow us back up the hill. It was this kind of atmosphere we were working in. No one really knew what was going on; was it big? was it small? where was it headed? what was it intended to do? We had no way of knowing.

Q: You mentioned here that he was at first quite cool, and then I gather under the influence of his military advisers became quite concerned.

HENDERSON: And demanding. You will have to understand, of course, that Barrientos was an air force general. He was a very able, astute, politician, but he also had a military background and his armed forces just put the pressure on him to get all kinds of supplies out of this.

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Q: I'd like to go back to this visit you have just been talking about, but while we're at this point with Barrientos, could you just give me an idea of what your impression of him was as an individual, politician, president, whatever? Your personal impressions of Barrientos.

HENDERSON: Barrientos was, in the first place, a thoroughly Bolivian person. He knew his own people. He also had a pretty good idea of how to deal with the Americans. He had trained in the United States. He knew the Americans pretty well. He had good American friends. He had become president, elected president, by overcoming some very real obstacles so that it was obvious that he was astute, a survivor, a daring man, a very bold person with a good grasp of how to maneuver both politically, and militarily. But he was also terribly Bolivian, had a...what do I want to say, not so much a spiritual side to him, but a sort of...he believed in his own insight into events, he believed that he had a sort of "second sight".

Q: You said a strong belief into his own insights.

HENDERSON: A strong belief in his own insights into events, and if he once conceived as to how this thing was going to go, I couldn't tell him anything. And that was why I chose this ranger battalion. I made a concession to him. I gave him what he needed, and I showed him that I was going to support him. But I wasn't going to...

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...he and I had had a long conversation, and I thought that this man would understand better than most military men.

Q: Was he connected with CINCSOUTH?

HENDERSON: I've forgotten his exact relationship, but he was attached to CINCSOUTH, an air force general, William Tope, so when CINCSOUTH said they wanted to send someone down, I said, "Fine. You may send someone down but I would prefer that

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you send down General Tope. I know he doesn't speak Spanish but he is an Air Force General. He can get on first name terms with the president very quickly because of this, rather than send along someone who is Spanish speaking." Which they did.

Q: You had known Tope before?

HENDERSON: Yes. It was just one of those things; I had met him in Panama and I'd asked him a very awkward question in a presentation, and he said, 'What's a good question. I'd better talk to you later.'" So we talked.

My point had been all along that this was, by this time, an isolated operation. He had been driven out of his camp. He had ambushed another military group which had been following him, but he had had to move on. He couldn't sit still, so he no longer had a real base. It was a guerrilla operation. We couldn't depend upon regular troops, if there were any, to handle this. We had to have a trained ranger group.

Q: Do you remember who the CINCSOUTH was?

HENDERSON: No, but I can find out. I asked for General Tope, and when he came down there I said, "Bill, we can't have a big military presence here. That is not in anyone's interest. This is a Bolivian operation, the Bolivians have to do it. But it is the kind of operation which doesn't require either a lot of materiel, or a lot of personnel. What it requires is a highly trained group which will concentrate on the one operation and not fan out and look for guerrillas behind every mountain peak. And this is the way I want to keep it." I said, "I've got a mission here, and I've told all the rest of my mission that they're to carry on their own work. That this is an incident, this is not a takeover operation, this is an incident. It is well on its way to being solved to my way of thinking, and let's keep it small, and keep our profile in it low."

As I say, there was another ambush and later on, probably about the middle of August, a Bolivian military group which were not part of the rangers, but which were operating in

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the general area, stumbled on Guevara's bivouac at night, caught them by surprise. There was a kind of Chinese fire drill, everybody scrambling, nobody knowing what was going on. The Cuban group melted into the jungle. The Bolivians grabbed everything in sight, and it turned out that they'd picked up Guevara's diary, Guevara's code books, Guevara's passport, his forged passport, the whole bit. So that the Bolivian army had this material. The station chief was off on leave, and there was a chap who had come in just to replace him, and they got a look at this materiel, and told me about it. But they didn't have the stuff itself, the documents.

The chief of the MIL group was also new, he had just been assigned and just come in.

Q: You had a MIL group in addition to a Defense Attach#?

HENDERSON: Yes. Theoretically they were supposed to monitor the use of military supplies.

Q: Do you remember who that was—the chief of the MIL group?

HENDERSON: No, I've blanked his name out because I didn't want him. I thought he was trouble, and it turned out he was trouble and I made a big mistake. The next morning at staff meeting I reported that we had some indication of documents in Bolivian possession relating to this Guevara episode, and nobody said anything. But then the two attach#s—I had an air attach#, and an army attach#—the two attach#s came to me after the meeting and said, “We went with the commander of the MIL group yesterday to pay our courtesy call on the chief of staff, and he told us about this.” And I said, “You are my attach#s and the MIL group commander, although he is theoretically assigned to the Bolivians—is still an U.S. Army officer, and you did not report this to me?”

Q: The attach#s went to...

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HENDERSON: With the MIL group command who was new, to pay a courtesy call on the Bolivian chief of staff, and he told them about this.

Q: About the...

HENDERSON: About the documents, and they did not report back to me. And I made a mistake. I said, "This is a field operation..."

Q: In other words, they had known about this before you knew about it, but by this time you knew about it.

HENDERSON: I had known about it from other sources.

Q: You knew about it from the station?

HENDERSON: Yes, from the station. So they were pretty shaken by this and tried to make amends, and they went back and got the documents from the chief of staff. Well then, of course, there was a grand brouhaha between intelligence agencies, who had the right to the documents...so that I had made a big mistake.

And then the second part of it was, that we sent the documents back to Washington, but Washington said, "Oh, we don't want to touch that stuff. Turn it over to the Bolivian government, and let the Bolivian embassy bring it in and they can present it to the OAS and not as U.S. documentation at all." Which was done.

Q: Was this deliberate on the part of the attach#s, the military, or was it just sloppy.

HENDERSON: Just sloppy.

Q: Okay.

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HENDERSON: Sloppy in the sense that the MIL group commander had divided loyalties, and the attach#s...I don't know.

Q: Divided loyalties between...

HENDERSON: Between the assignment to the Bolivians, and assignment as a U.S. officer. Well, it was a mistake. I made a mistake. I should have relied on my station chief. I didn't, and so we got a fight going between the intelligence operations. Nonetheless, it did establish that this was Guevara. Now it's interesting to go back just a second. In May of that year I was in Washington on consultation and I went over to talk with Fitzgerald in CIA, who was fairly high up, and he said, "Look, this can't be Che Guevara. We think that Che Guevara was killed in the Dominican problem and is buried in an unmarked grave. But we could think of nothing better than if Che Guevara were to be in command of this operation because he is the worst guerrilla operative that we could be up against."

Q: The worst in the sense of the most capable, or the most incapable?

HENDERSON: Incapable. So that there was a real doubt in our intelligence community's mind as to whether this was Guevara, and now we had the proof that it was indeed Guevara. So now we've had episode one, the Bolivians discovering, telling, about the operation, disclosing that there was a camp, two, an encounter between the Guevara group and the Bolivian army, some losses. Guevara pulls out and starts on the long march, and the Bolivian military follow and they run into another ambush and this time they take significant losses, but Guevara by this time realizes he is being pursued. On the way, he splits his forces and leaves Tanya with a group to be following up. Tanya gets ambushed some time in August, and is killed. The Bolivian army runs across Guevara's bivouac, discovers the documents. We now know that it is Guevara.

There's one small episode which doesn't really mean anything. Guevara in late July surfaced in a small town between Cochabamba and Santa Cruz because he needed some

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medications—having asthma he needed medication. He went into this town, got whatever he needed, and left, but we now had him pretty well located, and the Bolivians now had their ranger battalion trained, and we had furnished them materiel.

But, because of my intervention to keep Debray alive, and the subsequent bad publicity which the Bolivians had gotten out of the whole operation, the Bolivian military were not very forthcoming in giving us any information. So on a Sunday morning in September—I've forgotten the exact date—the Bolivian ranger battalion surrounded Guevara and his group. The Bolivians had the high ground. They were firing down into this ravine. They wounded Guevara and his bodyguard, and isolated them from the rest of the Guevara operation, and seized them, took them prisoner, and took them into a place called La Higuera, meaning The Fig Tree, where the ranger battalion had their field headquarters. They radioed to the chief of staff through their headquarters in Santa Cruz back up to La Paz to the chief of staff, “We have Guevara, and what should we do?”

And now I do not have the texts of these things, but I know what happened. The Bolivian high command sent an order to the general in Santa Cruz who relayed the order to the commander in La Higuera, “You are to execute your prisoners.”

Guevara was executed about 1:00 in the afternoon. His bodyguard had been executed before him. Then for some reason the Bolivians decided to put on a media show. They transported Guevara's body to another small town the following day and brought in all kinds of media. The New York Times was represented. There was a lot of international reportage going on. The station chief went in to John Fisher and told him the whole story.

Q: The story of...

HENDERSON: Guevara's capture and execution.

Q: One thing that I gathered from the telegrams that I was reading in Rio was that there was a lot of impatience in Washington, that you were counseling a course of keeping this

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small and keeping our involvement very much contained. What was the State Department reaction to that? Who was getting the cables in the State Department?

HENDERSON: Bob Sayre was acting, and Covey Oliver...I think Covey was there by that time. He was the Assistant Secretary and I think, I'm not really sure of that, but Bob Sayre was certainly there.

Q: You don't remember who the Desk Officer was for Bolivia.

HENDERSON: But the real point was that the State Department was very antsy lest we have too much of a military presence. I got instructions to keep all personnel, including the Peace Corps, but particularly armed forces personnel, out of the possible zone of combat. They did not want another Vietnam type operation. So they may have been impatient with my insistence of a low profile operation, but at the same time they were very insistent that I keep a low profile operation.

Q: So you and the State Department were operating pretty much on the same wave length? Am I interpreting that correctly? They were supportive?

HENDERSON: I'm not really sure, I'm not really sure for two reasons: one, I think that they were not completely forthcoming to me as to what extent I was authorized, to conduct some form of involvement. And certainly I was very surprised when we got the documents and then I was told that these were to be a Bolivian presentation, and that we were not to show any hand in it at all. I was surprised, but those were my orders so I just had to find my way through the thicket.

Q: And the Bolivians would present them to whom?

HENDERSON: To the OAS, and that was done.

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Q: What about CINCSOUTH and the Pentagon. What was their reaction? How did they feel this should be handled?

HENDERSON: Well, Bill Tope had been down there, and looked over the area. I took him down into a comparable jungle zone and showed him what kind of operations we might be involved in. He was completely in sympathy, and so I did have an advocate in CINCSOUTH to carry on the way I had hoped to do it.

Q: So you didn't have pressure in Washington to increase the military activity?

HENDERSON: No, on that point they were very cooperative. They supplied the training for the ranger battalion through CINCSOUTH, and then they supplied the materiel that the ranger battalion needed. But I had no pressure to go beyond that once I had Tope acting as my advocate in CINCSOUTH.

Q: How did CIA respond?

HENDERSON: As I say my major mistake was getting two intelligent agencies involved. CIA wanted it to be their baby, and then DIA got into it, and they were both unhappy with me.

Q: Did that express in itself any lack of cooperation in the field. In other words, they just grumbled.

HENDERSON: Most of the grumbling was being done in Washington, way over my head.

Q: Oh, really.

HENDERSON: DIA and CIA were fighting back and forth about it, but it didn't impact on my mission at all.

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Q: What was the feeling about Guevara? I have the sense that the Bolivian government felt that he was rather invincible. I was interested for you to say that CIA regarded him as a rather bumbling guerrilla leader..am I right that the Bolivians thought he was...

HENDERSON: Well, the Bolivians saw it as an opportunity to have some luster added to the Bolivian reputation. They felt that they had struck a blow against communism, and communist infiltration, and that we should be grateful. But after Guevara lost his base camp, even though the Bolivian army did get a bloody nose in the second ambush; after that they felt pretty confident that they were going to be able to handle it. They were particularly confident because of the training that the ranger battalion got.

Q: Did they ever want American military personnel?

HENDERSON: No, only for training, and for whatever materiel they could extract through this.

Q: You mentioned Vietnam, and one time I believe Che Guevara mentioned having one, two, a hundred Vietnams. Did you ever see this as a possibility of our getting involved, and tangled in this thing?

HENDERSON: I certainly did everything I could to prevent that happening. Keep it small, keep it isolated as much as I could, and keep it from spreading.

Q: And your idea of that was to keep us from getting involved.

HENDERSON: ...involved and as low key as possible.

Q: Do you have any sense that there was an effort on the other side, on Guevara's side, or Castro's side, to get us involved. Would that have been an objective?

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HENDERSON: There was no evidence of that. There was no real evidence of that. If Guevara had been able to carry out his entire program, it might have happened. I can see the possibility, but it never got that far.

Q: Do you think its much more likely that what he wanted was to begin an insurrection in Argentina?

HENDERSON: In northern Argentina.

Q: He was missing for a year before he showed up in Bolivia.

HENDERSON: He was in Africa, he was in various places, but I don't know what all his travels were. He had been off on insurrection activities in other places. I guess he had been in Angola, but I really don't know.

Q: Do you have any feelings—a final question—about his relations with Castro at that point. I mean its been suggested that Castro sent him really on a mission impossible. In a sense, he got rid of him.

HENDERSON: No, I think that there it was; that Guevara felt that his role in life was to be a guerrilla in the field. He had a mystique, that was the word I was searching for with Barrientos, Barrientos's mystique and Guevara had a mystique about the guerrilla. The Guerrilla was invincible if he just trained himself and became hardened as a guerrilla, then he was invincible. And that was where he felt his role was, as the guerrilla. Regis Debray, of course, introduced a discordant note into communist theory by saying that the Cuban revolution had proved that the business of revolutionaries was revolution. That you did not need to have the objective circumstances for a revolution, as the communist theorists had it. You could create a revolution just by having revolutionary leaders, and this became a very difficult sticking point for the communist theorists.

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Q: In other words you don't need the difficult social and economic situations, you just need the person with the mystique which certainly Che Guevara had at that point, hadn't he?

HENDERSON: Yes, he did, and of course, Fidel Castro has it too.

Q: Yes.

HENDERSON: But then you see he's fallen out of favor with the communists.

Q: By now, you mean.

HENDERSON: Well, even before, even earlier. You know he really had to swallow his pride in the Czechoslovakian episode...

Q: ...of '68.

HENDERSON: Of '68.

Q: Because of the...

HENDERSON: Of the military takeover in Czechoslovakia, of the military intervention.

Q: Sort of proving how unpopular that regime was in that country.

HENDERSON: And that the communist revolution needed military presence in order to survive, which was certainly contrary to anything that...

Q: Yes, external military presence.

HENDERSON: That's right.

Q: Well look, if that covers it...

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HENDERSON: There is one other thing that I've never really understood...there are two things. One, Guevara's diary. That, the Bolivians tried to put up for auction, couldn't get the money for it that they thought they ought to get, and finally it suddenly went underground, and reappeared in Fidel Castro's hands. It's just an interesting little episode but who in Bolivia was negotiating with Fidel Castro for the diary, and so on. That is one of those peculiar threads, just like how those six Cubans managed to escape from Bolivia.

And the other thing is, that a number of prominent Bolivian army officers, have been assassinated. One of them was the general in command of the area who transmitted the order to execute Guevara and he was gunned down in Paris.

Q: The general who gave the order...

HENDERSON: The chief of staff, and probably Barrientos—with Barrientos' approval—gave the order, but it had to be transmitted through the area commander in Santa Cruz, and that man's name was Zenteno—General Zenteno. He was assassinated in Paris and nobody has really explained to me what happened. There was another general who was assassinated in Argentina in about this same time sequence.

Q: This was a long time after? A short time after?

HENDERSON: This was several years after.

Q: And another general who was involved was killed in Argentina.

HENDERSON: I don't know that he had the same direct involvement, but I think that he was the army commander in the chief of staff's headquarters.

Q: Had we been asked, which I gathered we weren't before this happened, would we have counseled keeping him alive? I presume it would be a better thing to do for questioning, etc.

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HENDERSON: Strangely enough, apparently, according to whatever sources, however reliable they are, when Guevara was taken prisoner (he was wounded, he had a wound in his leg), he apparently said, "Don't shoot me, I'm Che Guevara. I'm worth more to you alive than dead." Now this may be apocryphal, I don't know, but that is what is reported to have been said. The fact is he would have been worth more alive than dead, but I think there the Debray syndrome kicked in and the Bolivians were just not having any more of that.

Q: Do you feel that they wanted to execute Debray?

HENDERSON: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. No question at all. All my military advisers were telling me, "He's dead."

Q: So really it was you who saved him in effect.

HENDERSON: Well, I put the pressure on. The Bolivians made the decision, of course, and they must have taken other things into consideration besides my pressure but nonetheless our relationships after that episode were not quite as close as they might have been.

Q: Just for the record, you left Bolivia...

HENDERSON: In August of 1968.

Q: And you became ambassador to the OAS?

HENDERSON: The reason I left Bolivia was that President Johnson wanted to place Raul Castro. Raul Castro had wanted another assignment. He had been in Salvador and he wanted another one. He had tried to get Peru, and Argentina and had been turned down there and so Johnson finally sent him as a replacement to Bolivia. It was done all very spur of the moment.

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End of interview