

PEOPLE

The ghost of Che Guevara

THE TRANSFORMATION OF CHE GUEVARA FROM LATIN AMERICAN REVOLUTIONARY TO GLOBAL POPULAR CULTURE ICON AND NOW THE SUBJECT OF AN ACCLAIMED MOVIE HAS REVIVED A GHOST FOR THOSE WHO WERE AMONG THE LAST TO SEE EL CHE, DEAD AND ALIVE. ANNE HYLAND REPORTS.

Gary Prado Salmon, paralysed from the waist down, straightens his athletic torso in his wheelchair, which belies his 65 years, and grimaces at the mention of the name Ernesto "Che" Guevara. "Che's been a burden I've carried on my back for 37 years but I'm proud of what I did," says Prado Salmon.

Prado Salmon was the aspiring young captain whose US-trained platoon trapped and captured Che, deep in a ravine in the obscure, harsh and miserable eastern terrain of Bolivia, in 1967. At that time, Prado Salmon was 11 years junior to Che, the poster boy hero of the Cuban revolution. Che who would die soon after his capture, aged 39, had already become a legend around Latin America, for his idealistic cause of defending the exploited and oppressed of that continent, often by brutal guerrilla force. His legend failed to die in his elimination and in the 37 years that has passed since his death the folklore of Che has grown into a global multi-million dollar commercial enterprise as his famous beret wearing image is used by rock bands, worn on t-shirts by uber-chic celebrities and rebellious youth universally and sold by companies on merchandise such as key-rings, coffee mugs and posters.

Prado Salmon despises the myth which has swallowed the real Che and lays the blame largely on the shoulders of the Bolivian army and government. "He was just a regular guy," says Prado Salmon, from his home in Santa Cruz, Bolivia's second largest city and a day's drive from where Che was executed. "At no time at all did I have an impression that he was this charismatic or mythical character. The legend is more than the reality." For this reason, Prado Salmon will boycott *The Motorcycle Diaries*, the film which revved up the critics at the prestigious Cannes Film Festival in May. "So many films have been made about Che and not one of them is near the truth," says Prado Salmon.

The Motorcycle Diaries, produced by American actor Robert Redford, which is yet to have an Australian release date, depicts the adventures of Che, then a fresh young Argentinean doctor, as he travelled around South America with his friend Alberto Granado on a clapped out Norton 500 motorcycle learning of the continent's poverty. This journey of self-discovery would inspire Che's desire to bring a revolution to the continent, which began alongside Fidel Castro in Cuba in 1959. However, not all Bolivians share Prado Salmon's assessment that Che was just an ordinary foreigner who came to invade their country and who had to be stopped.

In Vallegrande, a small, dusty, forgotten town five hours from Santa Cruz, Che is celebrated as a secular saint. There, masses are still held in honour of the dead revolutionary, while his graffiti decorated and decrepit

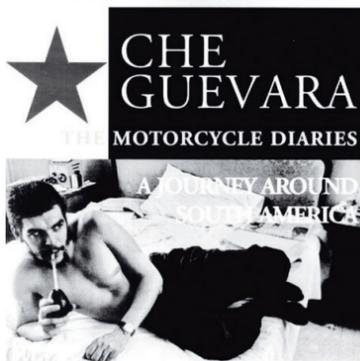


"mausoleum" resembles a large public toilet near the town cemetery. "Some people in Vallegrande think Che was a saint and by praying to him he might be able to resolve their problems," explains Erich Blossl, 74, a German immigrant and resident for almost 40 years. "It's common in Latin America for big personalities to be made into saints."

An enormous white statue of Jesus Christ stands at one entrance to Vallegrande, which some locals also refer to as Che. Che was executed by the Bolivian army on October 9, 1967, in the hamlet of La Higuera near Vallegrande, and his corpse was later transported to a military base in Vallegrande and put on display to locals and the world's press. He was buried in an unmarked grave near Vallegrande airport where it remained hidden for 30 years until Che's remains were exhumed and transported to Cuba.

German Lacio-Lino, 66, a lawyer who now lives in Santa Cruz, was working in Vallegrande when Che's corpse arrived. "I'm not at all a superstitious man but that day when his body was laid out like Jesus Christ, he did look how the Lord is depicted." He said he watched the CIA agent Felix Rodriguez snip locks of hair from Che's head, only deepening the belief that this dead revolutionary was some kind of deity.

Blossl has photos on the walls of his restaurant and home in Vallegrande that feature himself with the dead Che. "When my friend was taking the photo of me with Che I was thinking: 'You were a doctor and with that profession you could have done thousands of things for the good of the people here in Bolivia. But instead you came with a gun and you died. I



Left: The book that inspired the film on Guevara's early days. Above, top, stills from the film *The Motorcycle Diaries*.

also came as a stranger to Bolivia to work and to tend people and use my knowledge to help them. I still have my life." Blossl arrived in Bolivia as a volunteer working for German funded agricultural projects.

A fresh bout of Che fever has broken out in Vallegrande as the town has become a movie set for another Che film, as yet untitled, that focuses on the revolutionary's last stand in Bolivia. Locals peer wide-eyed and proud at the flash movie types who strut around Vallegrande oblivious to the excitement they cause. Young Vallegrande residents are eager extras on the film set and march the town's warren of streets carrying wooden cut-outs of Browning machine guns and M1 rifles as they pretend to be Captain Prado Salmon and his battalion.

Prado Salmon, who interrogated

Che after he was captured, believes the enduring popularity of Che is largely a result of how he died, which made him a martyr.

"He shouldn't have been executed - that's what I've always thought and said," says Prado Salmon. "We made that myth given the way he died. When I turned him over to my superiors I thought he would go before a military court."

Che was executed by a junior officer of the Bolivian army on the orders of the country's then President Rene Barrientos. Initial statements released by the Bolivian army, however, lied about Che's injuries and claimed the revolutionary died in battle, which pointed the finger at Prado Salmon and his men. But this was soon disputed by locals who had seen Che brought in alive to the hamlet of La Higuera. In a fashion of two lies make a truth, the Bolivian

government and army would later confirm that Che was executed but the whereabouts of his grave remained a secret until 1997.

Prado Salmon retired from the army a Major General 22 years after Che's capture. He reached that rank despite being paralysed by an accidental gun shot wound in 1981 while trying to quell a local band of guerrillas. He wrote a book about Che and went on to serve his country as ambassador in the United Kingdom and Mexico.

History can only speculate what Che would have become if he had been jailed instead of killed or whether he would have even become an anti-hero.

For now, it's clear that his mythical stature grows with help from movie production houses and marketing companies, whose slogan *El Che Vive*, the Che lives, ensures that the legend won't die.