

A HEN Hector Gonzalez Cueto w Pernas was asked in early 1986 if he was prepared to go to Angola. he found himself caught up in a whirlwind of conflicting feelings. And as he calmly explains how he felt in the days before he left, I look at the row of medals gleaming on his chest. He could easily be my own son. And so I am moved. but not surprised, by the simple way he tells me his story:

"My first thought that day was that at last I was getting a chance to do something really worthwhile. I was born in 1958. and so of course I couldn't take part in any of the events which led to the revolution. On the other hand. in 1986 I'd only just graduated as a fisheries engineer and I was a bit put off at having to interrupt my recently started professional career. But when it came to making a decision. what really counted was my desire to make my mark in the world. I'd grown up listening to the tales of my uncle, Captain Pernas Numilla. who fought with the underground forces against the Batista regime, I remember how I used to envy him, I really admired him...

#### MIXED FEELINGS

"I'm just saying all this so you can see how things were. not forgetting some rather ambiguous feelings I had, which you could interpret as egotism or individualism on my part.

"In May 1986 I reached Luanda. My father, a doctor. was already there on combat duty. He greeted me at the airport.. I'd left behind my mother, who also must have had mixed feelings; both tear and pride for her son, though we never spoke about it. She took the news calmly and only showed how proud she was of me.

"In Luanda I was at Cuba's military mission to Angola, doing political work with which I continued throughout my tour of duty. By February 1988 I was in Menongue..."

"...Cuito Cuanavale stands 200 kilometres south-east of the city of Menongue, situated on the extreme left of the lines defended by Cuban troops in southern Angola. I was sent to Cuito Cuavanale which has an airport that a group of Angola-brigades fell back to last November in the face of the large-scale enemy advance. which had begun the previous month in order to prevent the defeat of Unita in theavinga region, approximately 150 kilometres to the south-east.

"We had to reinforce that sector. In Meuongue I was instructed to proceed to Cuito, where I arrived on March 7. By then I knew the actual frontline was there. I thought to myself that in Cuito I was more likely to be wounded than killed. This was partly thanks to the effectiveness of our defences. but also because the objective of (the enemy's) long-range artillery is above all to wound as many as possible in order to sow panic, keep the medics occupied and create an atmosphere of hysterical confusion...

"We were getting a constant pounding from the enemy. who fighting in Angola: a lesson in love, says Cuban soldier At a little-known town in the heart of Africa the People's Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola (FAPLA) fought side by side with the Cubans to halt the advance of the invading South Africans..The NEW NATION reprints an account of the experiences of a Cuban soldier, who fought in the battle for Cuito Cuanavale. The story first appeared. in the 'Cuban International'.

'The bulk of our troops had withdrawn west of Cuito in search of better positions, not merely to resist the South African elite forces' attacks, but also with the aim of defeating them. The enemy had chosen the battlefield. We took up the challenge' had already launched a number of all-out attacks. The enemy would start up about four in the morning and go on until late at night. Their shells were causing a lot of damage. They explode, a metre before impact, into a thousand fragments. That's why I say they're aimed particularly at causing wounds. although obviously the enemy's prime objective was simply to wipe out the Angolan and Cuban forces. This was putting us in a very tight spot, and so they had to be stopped in Cuito."

#### TANK WARFARE

"...At the request of the Angolan government, Cuban advisers were sent by air to Cuito Cuanavale in December to assist the FAPLA infantry brigades, artillery and tanks. accompanied also by a number of personnel specialising in artillery and tank warfare. Almost simultaneously the Cuban Air Force in Angola was reinforced with a group of our most experienced pilots.

"The bulk of our troops had withdrawn to the west of Cuito in search of more advantageous positions, not merely to resist the enemy's attacks, but also with the aim of defeating them. The enemy had chosen the battlefield. We took up the chal-

lenge.

"It was a very difficult time We were living under a non-stop hail of lead, day and night. There were shells exploding all round us. I kept telling myself: be careful. but the problem was, if you were too careful you couldn't carry out the task assigned to you. while it you tried to carry it out regardless of the cost and didn't take care. the result was the same. You just had to sort yourself out and work out a compromise...

"The most tragic moment for me was when one of my comrades was killed while lighting from under a tank. A shell exploded nearby and blew him to bits...

"You ask me what I think a hero is. It's hard to explain. I was able to witness incredible acts a heroism by both Angolans and Cubans. They were just ordinary lads. It's then that you understand. that everyone is potentially a hero. It just means being in the right place at the right time and doing what has to be done. I don't think of myself as a hero. I did have the enormous luck to be there, and that was a privilege.

"Angola enriched me as a human being. You learn to appreciate life more. I met some fantastic people. I got to know a country being scourged by a dirty war, a country trying heroically to drag itself out of the squalor it inherited from colonialism. I became familiar with abject poverty, something I'd never seen before.

#### CHANGING STATE AFFAIRS

"It's hard, hot line as well. to realise that you can, even if only modestly, contribute towards changing state affairs. I thought often about Cuba, about Che Guevara now that I knew the jungle. I tried to imagine him, it was the same for all of us.

"I don't think you can come through an experience like that unchanged... It's traumatic, yes, but also a lesson in love of life and of humanity."

He pauses, I look at him, and once again I think he could be my son. In a way, he is. And I feel so proud of this young lad like all the rest.