

Guerrilla War in El Salvador

edited by Max G. Manwaring and Court Prisk



OVERVIEW

The three-way civil war in El Salvador—involving Communist rebels, government troops, and right-wing terrorists—was bloody and at times incredibly brutal. United States public opinion was sharply divided along party lines: Republicans backed President Ronald Reagan in his support of the democratically elected, pro-United States government of El Salvador, while Democrats scorned U.S. aid as just another case of the United States propping up a brutal South American regime. The following interviews, reprinted in *El Salvador at War: An Oral History*, provide an inside look at two sides of the guerrilla warfare in the early 1980s.

GUIDED READING As you read, consider the following questions:

- What indications do these interviews give that the El Salvadoran armed forces are unorganized?
 - How do the interviewees differ in the reasons they give for the El Salvadoran army's disintegration?
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The October Campaign

THE EDITORS—As time progressed from the "Final Offensive" through the end of 1984, it became more and more evident that the insurgent organizations were not interested in reforming the Salvadoran society. Indeed, reform appears to be no more than a pretext to rally support both internally and externally. After reforms were, in fact, initiated by the government, the real objective of the "revolutionaries" became obvious—take power. In October 1982, the FMLN [Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front—a coalition of leftist guerrilla groups] began a prolonged, nearly constant offensive.

Joaquín Villalobos Commander-in-Chief of the People's Revolutionary Army (ERP), one of the organizations which forms the [leftist] FMLN.—In the previous campaign we wanted to prove that we could win the war. Now we wanted to push the Army to the point where its morale would collapse. To beat an army it is not necessary to annihilate all its men, nor to capture all its arms, only to cause the collapse of its morale. How can we achieve our aim? On the basis of deepening the three lines of the previous campaign: First, actions of strategic annihilation wherever possible. Second, destabilizing the country through sabotage, fundamentally against transportation, power lines, telephone lines, and fuel. Third, harassment ambushes and annihilation of minor positions. By deepening these lines of action, making better use of all our forces and taking advantage of our high combative morale and the large

efforts of all our fronts to further their development, we are making progress in our aim to provoke a collapse of the enemy's morale.

The Army has been dealt three severe blows already: the one in El Jícaro-Las Vueltas, in Chalatenango, and the ones in Perquín and Corinto and Morazán, with the loss of three Army companies. Our plan, in concrete, was to confront the Army with these alternatives: either they would give up terrain because they decided not to mobilize and we would continue occupying positions and extending our zone of control, or they would mobilize, in which case our plan was to achieve the annihilation of major units.

What did the Army choose? At first, they opted to give up terrain, abandoning territory that for us offered greater areas of maneuverability to solve the supply problem. Now, in the process of occupying six towns and in the ambush on the Corinto-Sociedad highway, on November 8 in Morazán, we have annihilated and captured the weapons of two companies and have disarticulated and put out of combat the other two. We practically put an entire battalion out of commission in a month. Prior to this, they could maintain a broad encirclement around our zones of control to impede the arrival of supplies in order to weaken our social support base. Now that option was eliminated, as our theater of operations and zones of control have extended.

The October campaign in Morazán began with the encirclement of more than 100 soldiers in an important location and the occupation of three towns practically at the same time. The towns of Torola and San Fernando were taken in the first hours of combat, and the Army's positions at Perquín were surrounded, ending with the occupation of the town and surrender of the majority of the forces there, including the captain in charge of the company.

This presented the Army with a situation which theoretically obliged them to make a strategic move. However, the Army did not, so we searched for other targets: the occupation of the town of Carolina, in the northern part of San Miguel. This added to the quantity of terrain at our disposal, and now practically the northern part of the Department which borders Honduras was in our hands. On November 18, on Corinto-Sociedad highway, our forces annihilated another enemy company which was heading towards Corinto as reinforcements. Nearly 100 arms and some military vehicles were captured, and 62 prisoners, including two officers, were taken. Later, our forces occupied Corinto.

The eastern part of the country was practically paralyzed economically since the start of the campaign, without transport or electrical power. Fuel was scarce since we had destroyed over a dozen fuel trucks. Water was rationed. The railroad was paralyzed due to our sabotage of the bridges and engines. All these facts will have an effect on the cotton and coffee harvests.

In the central zone there were four Departments affected to a greater degree by our sabotage of power lines: San Vicente, Cabañas, Cuscatlán, and

Chalatenango. The Troncal del Norte highway was also closed down because of our constant sabotage.

In the western part of the country we managed to partially close down the transportation system, by destroying railroad cars, buses and trucks loaded with coffee. Electrical power was also starting to be affected in the west. Commercial transportation from Guatemala was paralyzed by our sabotage actions. By prolonging and sustaining this situation, and by continuing with our military operations, we put the Army in a difficult position. During the course of the campaign we carried out actions that reinforce the enemy's awareness that they must concentrate on defending strategic positions. One such example was our attack against the oil refinery located in what was presumed to be their safest territory, the western area, their deep rearguard, where the revolutionary movement, because of the terror campaign, had been forced to scale down its activity. We attacked the refinery with several Chinese RPG-2 rockets, producing "considerable damage," as was recognized by the government itself, forcing a reduction in their output and in the distribution of fuel to the rest of the country.

That attack, our actions along the highways, and our sabotage in the capital city, forced the Army to dilute its concentration of forces. The elite units were used to control roads and highways, while the Army continues to lose its remaining positions in our rearguard zones. By now we had taken over six population centers in Morazán and three in Chalatenango, aside from the 19 towns that the Army abandoned already, but that we had not occupied. We were now in control of vast new areas, which is also a great improvement.

Another element, aside from the conquest of new terrain, was the decline in the Army's morale. It is reflected in two facts: First, there are more prisoners taken than killed or wounded soldiers. Their troops now have a marked tendency to surrender. They prefer not to fight in order to save their lives. Another proof of their demoralization was that they refused to move. This was not the result of a military option in favor of defensive tactics; it reflects lack of morale, fear that the troops may be disarticulated or annihilated. Another element of the same phenomenon was that increasingly they were talking about operations that simply do not exist, or operations that militarily did not make any sense.

*U.S. View of the
1983-84 Guerrilla Situation*

Thomas Pickering U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador, 1983 to 1985—I arrived on the first of September, 1983, and three days after that, the last major guerrilla-sustained offensive was launched with an attack that did fairly heavy damage in San Miguel, in the east. That was followed up in a three-month period with roughly 85 separate guerrilla attacks of varying magnitudes but all significant enough to be worth reporting. A large share of them were partially or fully successful even from the Embassy's viewpoint. They may have

had a 60, 70, or 80 percent success rate in that they did significant damage to army units caught off guard, perhaps managed to kill or wound a large number of government individuals, and were able to take over towns for a period of time.

It was, in a military sense, a low point in military activities and operations. We had just begun to train people in Honduras. We had just begun to pull together for the umpteenth time an effort to coordinate political-military and economic development activity. It's something that we still probably need to do more work on to achieve real success. It's something which the government resisted.

The main lesson coming out of that attack sequence is that its success was really heavily on the military side and heavily on the intelligence side. There were days at the end of 1983 when we wondered whether we would make it through the next two or three months because of that offensive and where things were taking us, and we were beginning to stare an election process in the eye. One can well characterize my two years, more or less, as the nadir of political-military activities, and all the consequences—political and economic negative effects—were being widely felt in the country.

Colonel James J. Steele Commander, U.S. Military Group in El Salvador, 1984 to 1986—The guerrillas launched a "final offensive" in early 1981, and they almost pulled it off. Really, the guerrillas maintained the initiative even after that. You can argue at what point the government forces gained the initiative, and so on. But certainly, even into 1983 and early 1984 the guerrillas were operating with a considerable amount of strength. They were operating in large units almost in a conventional mode at times. They were operating in 100-man columns or more and confronting the Army consistently.

By late 1983 we saw some fairly significant reorganizational changes within the military establishment. We saw a considerably increased level of U.S. assistance and reorganization of the general staff. There were, however, some major guerrilla successes which extended right up into 1984. They destroyed the bridges across the Lempa, the 15 September bridge in particular. They captured the 4th Brigade headquarters in El Paraíso on New Years of 1984, and so on. What we saw after that was a situation where the government forces were obviously getting better; the Air Force was particularly effective, and the guerrillas saw their prospects for a quick victory beginning to fade. They saw the political situation in the country changing.

After the presidential elections in early 1984, principally to survive, the guerrillas initiated and implemented a major change in strategy in mid-1984. President Duarte took office in June 1984. Even though there were some major attacks after he took office—a major dam complex in late June of 1984, and attacks in areas like Suchitoto—the guerrillas had essentially taken a step back in terms of classic insurgency stages and had gone to smaller units, dispersed, with less confrontation with government forces, and so on. At the

same time, the insurgency began to lose its people. There were a lot of defectors after Duarte was elected. June of 1984 was a fairly large month for deserters. The guerrilla movement was obviously having some problems trying to hold itself together politically, but it would be wrong to say that it was defeated. It still numbered between perhaps 9,000 and 11,000 armed insurgents at that time.

*The Military Situation from the Fall
of 1983 to the Turning Point*

Colonel Joseph S. Stringham III Commander, U.S. Military Group in El Salvador, 1983 to 1984—Frankly, you could just see things start to slow down after Agostinas [vacation period] was over. Everybody said we operated like hell during Agostinas and said, "Okay Americans, we did it for you. Now we have to take a break," and in fact they did. Then, in September [1984] they [the insurgents] hit San Miguel. I had a 50-yard line seat and watched the whole thing. They also hit all the way around the base of Cocawatiki, and it was rather an interesting day for me. Really, the first time I got a chance to see what was going on.

Right down at the bottom of the hill about 20 clicks [kilometers] you could see this thing going on at San Miguel, and that was extraordinary. They dropped those three bridges with charges; that wasn't José Sievo with his little handy-dandy rucksack on those charges—they were big. I could feel the impact. That was the overmanifestation of what was going to be a dramatic and total defeat for the Salvadoran military. The insurgents were going to make it dramatic and did that in San Miguel. The attack had a devastating psychological impact. They had to do it and they did it.

The third factor in this thing was us, generic term "gringos." The Salvadorans were scared silly. They weren't going to get money to buy more bullets, and they were rat-holing everything they possibly could, from radio batteries to ammunition to everything else, and of course the scale of operations was dropping off. Equipment was starting to wear out—the old equipment they were using. We didn't have a lot of field equipment and stuff in stock for them anyway, and we went to zero in money at the end of July. Although we were expecting 25 million dollars and I had a plan to spend it, it wasn't there. Of course when you shut the pipeline off, you know it takes some time to get the pipeline going again. In effect, they had to operate with what they had already received, and nothing else was going in.

During the month of October, the military situation continued to reverse rapidly. We lost a Cazador battalion trained at RTC [Regional Training Center], and we lost a Salvadoran battalion at Cocawatiki, which had been trained by Salvadorans in-country, although at least one company made a good account of themselves there. This took place over a period of three weeks, and I am talking about "wipe out!" Government losses were extraordinarily high in the October and November time frame. They had

quite a psychological impact on the government and the military. As an example, on the Monday morning before Thanksgiving, Manny Granado came to me and said that he thought the Salvadoran Army was in the process of disintegrating. The day before, Sunday afternoon, just south of a little place called Corinto, which is on the Torola River, right up on the Honduran border, there was a company outpost where the subversives drove up in buses like they were going to play soccer, and the lieutenants surrendered the garrison.... This was not a local force militia. No, they were a company from a Cazador battalion.

I went over to the Estado Mayor [General Staff Headquarters]. There was a major sitting there, on a beautiful sunshiny Sunday afternoon, myself, and three other gringos. I went to him, and I said, "Hey look, this is not my country, but you guys better get serious about this thing or you are not going to have to worry about me complaining to you much anymore." I said, "I'm going home." I went at that time to see the Ambassador, and early Monday morning I said, "I just want to tell you, Mr. Ambassador, that there are some people, very knowledgeable guys on my staff, that think they are witnessing a general disintegration in process in the armed forces, and I'm not ready to buy off on that yet, but things aren't looking very good." He's an unflappable guy, and he chuckled, and he said, "Well, that's not a real nice way to start Monday morning out. Give me some facts. I've got to know what's going on." I went on what I call my famous barnstorm tour. I started at Ahuachapán and went all the way to Miagin, an island in the Gulf of Fonseca. I went to every brigade area. I went to every department. I covered them all, and I got very close to what was going on. The day before I ended "Le Grand Tour," significantly, I went again to Watikitu, and this time I was at base. A Cazador battalion was hung-up up there, but this time the insurgents hit them with about 600 people. This was a significant change, subversives going to mass operations—600 folks is a significant number of people. It's always about that number when you get your ass kicked, and they were supported with indirect fire systems. They were willing to eat the significant casualties which they received from the Air Force. In the afternoon it was all over. The Cazador battalion was gone, it disintegrated. One lieutenant hung on up there. This kid hung on up there. Well into the afternoon he ran out of ammunition, and Cruz [the battalion commander] called him up and said, "Don't lose your balls," and the kid came back on the radio—and, I'll never forget it, he said "My balls are fine and intact. I want to keep them that way." He said, "They are not throwing candy at me up here." He got out and I later got a chance to pat him on the back.

In December the Army got two more bad, bloody noses. One was at El Paraíso, which happened right after Christmas. It was a disaster; it was awful. We found out, with the attack on Cocawatiki (near San Miguel) and others, that Villalobos and the other insurgent field commanders were willing to mass large amounts of troops.

Tactical mobility was grossly lacking on the government's side to fight this kind of a war, where you must have some kind of a force multiplier, not just bodies against bodies. The Cazador battalions didn't have staying power. They didn't have any punch, and we didn't have the tactical mobility to respond to the emerging guerrilla tactics. Monterosa, being the field commander, put together the double Cazador battalion, which became the light infantry battalion later on down the road. This new unit, significantly enough, was about the size of one of his company groupings in the Atlacatl battalion, which had punch and could stay and could wait a while for help to come if they got in deep water.

They had been used to dealing with disparate guerrilla formations of maybe 15 or 20 people or maybe not even that many. All of a sudden, they're running up against a main force, heavily armed with punch. They had to adapt to the tactics of the 600. As a result, the Salvadorans changed their modus operandi. If they hadn't, they would have continued losing major forces.