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OUTLOOK

Running for My Life in El Salvador

An American caught in a government attack that chiefly killed civilians

By Philippe Bourgois

I **CROSSED** THE Lempa River from Honduras into El Salvador shortly before dawn. I wanted to see firsthand the land and kinds of villages Salvadoran refugees had come from.

Although the area I entered — Cabanas Province — was considered an FMLN [*Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional*] stronghold, no shot had been fired there in eight months, and Salvadoran government forces only enter known guerrilla strongholds on major military operations.

In November, the days were sunny, warm and clear. I brought an extra shirt and pair of underwear, planning only to stay 48 hours.

The peasants were a friendly group, curious about my work but always unobtrusive. I had been in Central America several times; in fact, I had written my honors thesis at Har-

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OUR POLICY IS TO SHOOT FIRST AND ASK QUESTIONS LATER... ARE YOU FOLKS COMMIES?'

Auth In The Philadelphia Inquirer

vard on how the Mayan Indians in Belize were reacting to economic development. I am fluent in Spanish. The children followed me everywhere.

Shortly before dawn on the day I was scheduled to leave I was sleeping in a peasant hut when a little boy came running up in

tears to say Honduran troops had lined up along the far bank of the river and were shooting into it to discourage anyone from crossing over. He was quickly followed by other peasants, who reported that Salvadoran soldiers were surrounding us.

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As soon as the sun rose, as soon as visibility was good, the Salvadoran troops attacked with U.S. Huey helicopter gunships. Everyone ran away from the huts. I was told they would be the first things strafed.

We all ran to a nearby cliffside and hid. I did as best we could in small cavities the peasants had dug there. Unfortunately, there weren't enough for everybody, so we often shielded the women and children in the cavities with our bodies.

I learned that some 1,200 to 1,500 soldiers, including members of the elite Atlacatl battalion which was trained by U.S. military advisers, had sealed off a 30-square-mile zone. For the next four days, under heavy aerial bombardment and land attack, 1,000 Salvadoran peasants — mostly women, children and elderly people — and I zig-zagged through the area, running for our lives. I did as I was told by the peasants, who had experienced a similar offensive in March.

The young males, mostly FMLN fighters, had lined themselves up along the perimeter of the zone to fight the government ground forces. They kept their distance to avoid drawing fire toward us.

We hid by day behind trees and boulders, in underbrush and in small caves. The rainy season had ended three weeks earlier, which meant the foliage was still thick enough to hide in and there were fewer mosquitoes. I wasn't prepared, however, for the cold when the sun went down, and I shivered all night.

When the bombardments and strafings began, we would take cover anywhere we could. I had never been in a combat situation before. I remember lying with my face in the dirt, while bullets whistled around me. The terrifying thing is that you can hear them coming. I never really believed before that you could actually hear bullets.

I was also told to crouch beside a tree trunk and, whatever I did, not to move. They'd shoot at anything that moved. I remember inching around a tree trunk to keep something solid between me and the machine-gun fire of the helicopters flown by the Salvadoran air force. We were also bombarded by

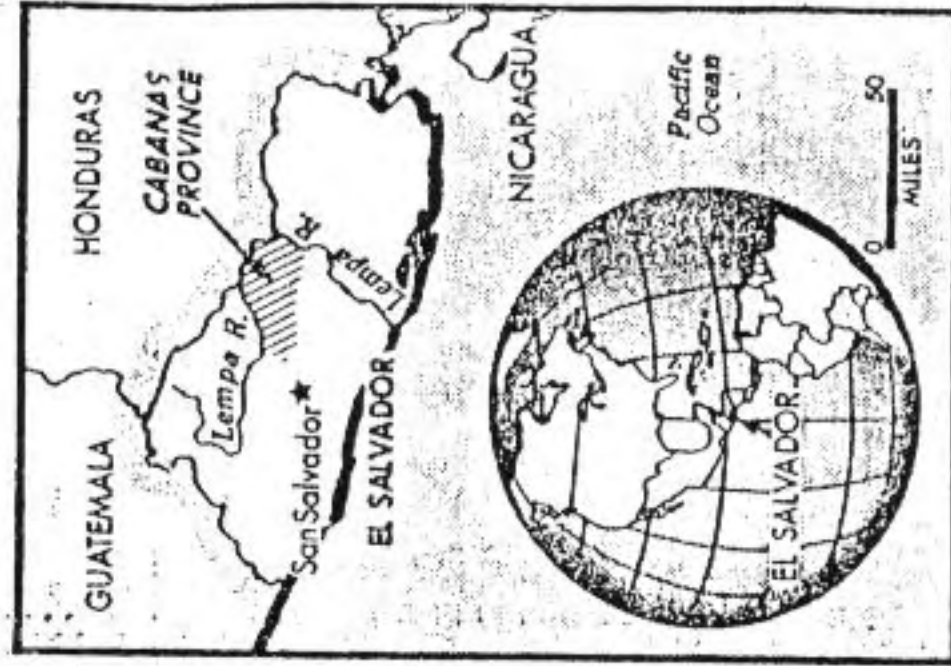
A mortar projectile makes a soft sound when it is fired. Then you have to wait 30 seconds before it reaches its target. So you wait — breathless — hoping this time you are not the target. Sometimes the mortar shots come 10 times in a row, and there's a tremendous sense of panic when you hear them getting closer and closer.

I was told that when I heard a mortar fired, I should grit my teeth and keep my mouth open to prevent my ear drums from rupturing.

I was more afraid of being wounded than dying. We had almost no medical supplies, and I had this fear of being roughly dragged around the country on somebody's back for days without medication.

Unfortunately, I was forced to see the suffering of the wounded in gory detail. On the first four days, I know of about 15 men, women and children who were wounded. Shrapnel was removed, and amputations were performed with absolutely no pain medicine.

The helicopters and jets would attack up to 10 to 12 times per day. They'd strafe us for



By Richard Fumo — The Washington Post.

five to 10 minutes, then we'd have maybe two hours of calm. During those break periods, we would cook and try to eat as much as possible. We knew if we survived we would have to flee from this place, and we didn't know when we'd be able to eat again. We would need our strength, but I just couldn't choke down the food. I lost 25 pounds during the ordeal.

At night, because the airplanes couldn't circulate, we'd be bombarded even more heavily by the mortars. You'd never have a long enough period of time to sleep. Most of the people were wounded at night because they were tired of crouching behind a bunker. They'd stretch out on the ground to sleep and get hit by shrapnel.

The guerrillas I saw did not have aircraft or the sophisticated U.S. weapons that the government forces had. The weapons I saw them with were primarily World War II vintage, taken from the government paramilitary forces, the loyalist peasant troops, because they are the easiest to ambush. The FMLN fighters had a handful of newer guns stripped from government regular army soldiers.

The rebels barely had enough ammunition, so it was only a matter of time before they were overrun. They would occasionally pass us in groups of two or three and calm us. "Don't panic," they'd say. "Everything's OK."

After four days, we knew we had to get out of the region, but the Honduran troops still barred our escape across the river. We were forced to head deeper into Salvadoran territory.

An FMLN scout told us, "Tonight's the night," so all the noncombatants gathered in a field in the middle of the night. We marched single-file along a path toward the line of fire. We hoped to run through the line undetected.

We were on a rocky path, with a Salvadoran gunpost off to the left. FMLN guerrillas, also on our left and to the rear, drew their fire while we made a break for it. The babies the women were carrying were shrieking at the noise and, as soon as we got within earshot, the Salvadoran forces turned their fire on us.

At that point, it was pandemonium. Grenades were landing around us; machine guns

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United Press International

An FMLN guerrilla sleeps in a house in a village some 30 miles from San Salvador.

were firing; we were running. I saw two people die that night. A little boy about 20 yards ahead of me was blown in half when a grenade landed on him. His body lay in the middle of the path, so I had to run over it to escape. An older woman was shot next to me.

About 1,000 of us were running at once as fast as we could, and roughly three-quarters made it before the Salvadoran troops sealed off the path. Two to three hundred of the peasants were forced to go back into the battle zone.

For the next six days, I found myself in a no-man's land, hiding during the day, running and looking for food and better shelter at night. I don't know how far I traveled or where I was.

I shivered awake each morning to another 12 hours of anguish. One night I dreamed I was safely out of El Salvador; I was in New York, telling my friends the story. Then I realized I was still here, worried a helicopter would spot us or that military patrols would hear the hubbub of the camp.

It's amazing that these people didn't have more discipline. As soon as they thought they were safe, they would laugh and joke, even play their radios, when any one of these noises could have gotten all 700 of us killed in a jiffy.

One of the major hazards we always faced was the noise of crying babies and the moans of the wounded, making the whole group vulnerable to detection. Rags were stuffed in the

mouths of the wounded so their cries would not be heard. The babies cried a lot because they were hungry; their mothers' milk had dried up. We played with the babies to distract them; we put leaves in their mouths so they wouldn't cry.

I held the legs of a little boy while shrapnel was removed from him. We stuffed a rag in his mouth so his screams of pain wouldn't alert the government troops. He died later, but we couldn't even bury him properly. We buried him under a bush.

We had some cotton to clean wounds, but it quickly became bloody and mud-stained. We kept using it anyway. Some of the young people from the villages had some very basic medical training, and they helped care for

Some of the sights were just horrible. I helped a woman whose chin had been blown completely away stay alive for 10 days by squeezing orange juice down her throat.

One woman who was killed was the mother of two children, one two months old, the other two years old. The baby the mother had been nursing was severely malnourished by the time I left.

A young woman gave birth on the second night of our flight. She was up and running for her life the next day, along with the rest of us. Those of us who were young and healthy were lucky.

It was the law of survival at its cruelest. The slow runners and the elderly were killed.

We finally decided to return to the area we had fled from, assuming by now that the government offensive was over. The battle zone stood between us and the safety of the Honduran refugee camps, so we had to reenter it to get out.

As we returned, we were hit with the overpowering stench of decaying bodies. There were donkeys, pigs, horses, chickens — all dead. The soldiers had burned down as many of the houses as they could, ripped apart the granaries. It even looked as if they had tried to trample the fields.

I heard many stories about what the soldiers had done to the people, but only saw one victim personally — a naked middle-aged woman whose skin was bubbling off, apparently some kind of acid had been poured on her — placed by the path we returned on. I imagine it was to instill terror in us. I was told by the peasants that it was standard procedure to display mutilated bodies.

Then the Salvadoran troops relocated us. We were bombarded again by the helicopters, the jets and the mortars. It lasted for three more days.

Finally a scout came to tell us that the Honduran troops had left the bank of the river. As soon as it was dark, we sprinted for the river. I was faster than most because I wasn't carrying a baby, wasn't pregnant, wasn't in bare feet, wasn't elderly. I was wearing a new pair of running shoes. Ironically, I had thought when I was trapped, and no one knew I was in El Salvador. That's how my body would be identified — by my shiny new Adidas.

I ran all night through the broken terrain and made it to the river. There were six other people with me. They paused to take their clothes off first; I didn't even stop. I dove right in, shoes and all. It was surprisingly warm. I swam the 60 yards to the Honduran side and crawled up onto the shore, safe at last.

I was told in the Honduran refugee camp at La Virtud that those who were slower, caught by daylight running toward the river, were strafed by the Salvadoran helicopters. I heard the gunfire in the distance.

Subsequently, Salvadoran Defense Minister Gen. Jose Guillermo Garcia claimed a great victory for his troops in the Nov. 11-24 Cabanas offensive, saying 250 guerrillas had been killed. I was there and I saw who was killed. I estimate conservatively that at most 12 FMLN soldiers died in the fighting.

But 50 civilians were dead, another 50 wounded and 100 more missing. If that's one of the most successful military operations the Salvadoran forces have engaged in, then there's something fundamentally flawed with the strategy behind this war.

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