

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE ROAD TO SEGUNDO MONTES

On a flat area at the top of the hill, a large L-shaped open-air pavilion offered a commanding view of the surrounding countryside. Inside several men and women, some dressed in combat fatigues, sat at long picnic tables. It was a conference of rebel leaders.

The drive to the mountain village of Perquín in the northern sector of Morazán took us through the province of San Vicente and the northern part of Usulután.

Close to one o'clock, Sinclair called for a stop at a gas station overlooking the four-lane road divided by a median strip of grass. At the time, it felt like a handful of sand was grinding away at my stomach walls, so I elected to stay put in the van with Willison, Barker, and Sacco.

Across the road a convoy of six large, open-backed trucks packed with uniformed soldiers stacked together came to a halt and several jumped out to stretch their legs. Four car lengths behind was the required escort, a white United Nations van.

"It's the job of the U.N. peace-keeping forces to oversee the movement of any troops in the country," Sinclair explained.

Back on the road, we traveled another two hours, stopping for lunch at an open-air cafe under a stand of trees. Diners sat at tables under a tin roof, and inside was a large enclosed room, a kitchen area, and restrooms. Across the street an imposing

walled-in compound topped by sentry boxes, was the base for the army's 3rd Battalion. Sentries in camouflage fatigues, sleeves rolled up to the biceps, carrying automatic rifles guarded the entrance.

"This should be quite a hot spot," Willison observed, checking out the cafe. "Look inside. There's a dance floor in there. This must be quite the place on a Friday night when the guys from the barracks get off duty."

Over drinks and spaghetti, conversation turned to a notorious incident from the war. Gradie was talking about Lieutenant Colonel Domingo Monterrosa, a legend among government forces, and the charismatic leader of the Atlacatl Battalion. Known for tearing babies from their mothers and hurling them into burning ovens, he was the commander responsible for the El Mozote massacre that began on December 11, 1981, when close to 700 people were slaughtered. At the time, government officials in the U.S. and El Salvador denied reports of the massacre, and reporters for the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* were denounced by right-wing critics for what were construed as their biased accounts of the carnage.

But the reporters were vindicated when Rufino Arrayo, the sole surviving eyewitness who lost four children and her husband, recounted the story of the massacre. According to her account, after shooting and decapitating the men, the soldiers raped the young girls of the village, shot the mothers, then strangled and cut the throats of children who had taken sanctuary in the village church.

Later, it was said that the guerrillas exacted revenge for Monterrosa's atrocities when he climbed aboard a helicopter booby-trapped with a rebel bomb and the copter exploded in mid-air.

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Closer to Morazán, at one point Sinclair told Romeo to pull over. We climbed out of the vans and stood by the side of the road, entranced by a vista of lush, green farmlands divided into plots and

stretching off into the distance and up the side of a mountain. As far as the eye could see the land was under cultivation.

“This is good farmland, owned by wealthy families,” mused Sinclair. “Most *campesinos* know nothing else but farming. And with not enough land for everyone, part of the economic future of the country rests in training people to work in light industry or other occupations.”

But the maquiladoras, the huge factories where *campesinos* sought employment, were rife with poor working conditions, long hours, and low wages, he said. Stories abounded about the workers attempting to organize and about the abusive measures of wealthy owners hiring and firing at will.

After San Miguel, the last major city before entering the province of Morazán, we drove northeast following the Rio San Francisco past the town of San Carlos and finally stopped for gas at the town of San Francisco Gotera, the entrance to what during the war was known as “the red zone.”

“This place was the last stronghold of the government army,” Sinclair announced. “The population of this town swelled by some ten thousand people during the war because of the presence of the army and refugees. This is uncharted territory for me. On previous trips this area was too dangerous to travel to because of the ongoing conflict.”

Reminded again to exercise caution for safety’s sake, my imagination flipped into overdrive. Across the street from the gas station a group of men stood watching us milling around, and I imagined them getting angry at two vans of *Americanos*.

It was McAllister who later objected to characterizing any situation as threatening. “I was never, never, never made to feel uncomfortable as an American,” he said in the drive from the airport back to the university.

Meanwhile, the other driver was pushing against the side of his van, rocking it back and forth.

“What’s he doing?”

“Trying to get as much gas into the tank as possible.”

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A light afternoon rain fell as we drove north toward the Torola River past the village of Chilanga and up to Yoleciquin where the Rio San Francisco veered off to the left. Bertsch, writing later in the *Sacred Heart University Review*, captured the beauty of the landscape:

I was awed by the presence and power of the hills and the mountains, the volcanoes and the rocks – the arena in which the people of El Salvador had fought, to which many were forced to flee and from which many “disappeared” – the mountains that so often were hidden by the clouds, enveloped in the early morning mist, or covered during intense tropical storms as if by a sheet of smoked glass. They were startling in their powerful and merciless beauty. ¹⁴

Beyond the village of Delicias de Concepción, in a matter of minutes we came upon the Torola, a brown ribbon of water that edged the southern border of Honduras and the northern part of the province of San Miguel, then flowed east through the guerrilla-held mountains of central Morazán. During the war, anywhere north of the Torola the civilian population was believed by the army either to be active in the rebel ranks at least supportive of their cause.

We drove up to a lengthy dilapidated bridge spanning a gorge with the river far below. Considered a strategic link to the North, the bridge was blown up several times during the fighting and, in spite of the cease-fire in effect, rightist sympathizers recently planted a grenade, blasting out a mid-section to impede traffic and the flow of supplies to the rebel stronghold of Perquín. Logs were thrown over the damaged section so vehicles could attempt to pass, but the rain made the wood slippery and the churning wheels of vehicles left gaping holes.

Romeo stopped the van and got out to check the makeshift repairs. Deciding to give it a try, he got back in, shifted into first gear, and plowed forward, sending the van bouncing and lurching as the tires spun over loose planking and logs. Halfway across the

right front wheel slipped through logs, dropped about a foot, and the van came to a sudden stop, leaving it tilted on an angle.

Inside we held our breaths while Romeo opened the driver's door, found some secure footing, and stepped out to survey the damage. Meanwhile a dozen children, excited by the spectacle, ran up to watch the unfolding drama. At that point, Sinclair and the folks on the passengers' side of our van managed to open the doors and pick their way to the solid planking of the bridge.

I slid back the door on my side, and looked down. Between the logs, wet and spun out of place, I could see the brown water of the river far below. The logs, up to a foot in diameter, had been placed side by side on top of 2 x 6 inch steel girders running a foot apart under the planking of the bridge.

I managed to wedge myself out the door, stepped carefully on the logs, slid the door shut, and made my way over to the front of the van. The front wheel on the passenger's side was wedged up to the axle between the steel girders about eight feet from where secure planking started again. After assessing the situation, we grabbed the front end, lifted the wheel free, pushed the vehicle back to the solid planking, then rearranged logs to cover the damaged spot. At that point Romeo climbed into the van, backed up, stepped on the gas, and tore across the repaired section with the logs clattering beneath the wheels and flying in all directions. With the van safely on a secure section of the bridge, we jumped back inside and sped across the rest of the way without incident.

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We drove past a large government encampment in a field under trees, and into Segundo Montes City, a community under the protection of the FMLN named after Fr. Segundo Montes, one of the assassinated Jesuits who founded the Human Rights Institute at UCA [IDHUCA] and was noted for his work with Salvadoran refugees.

By now the afternoon rain had stopped and in a yard behind a row of shacks a gathering of about thirty people sat and stood in a large semi-circle watching a TV perched shoulder-high on a

platform above the ground. Some people stood as far as twenty feet away, craning their necks to get a better view of the screen. I had no idea what the program was about, but they stood in the dusk watching and listening, captivated.

Past an open market, the vans climbed a dirt road up a hill winding through heavy vegetation and one-story concrete block buildings to a flat area at the top where a large L-shaped open-air pavilion offered a commanding view of the surrounding countryside. Inside several men and women, some dressed in combat fatigues, sat talking at long picnic tables. It was a conference of rebel leaders.

Sinclair went to find the welcoming committee, and we walked over to the edge of the parking area to a sharp drop-off. Far below dwellings lay scattered among the trees with several foundations under construction, and beyond the houses a rugged, hilly countryside gave way in the distance to mist-covered mountains.

Back at the pavilion we gathered around a table where a woman explained we had to officially sign in, drop off our gear at the dormitories, then return to the pavilion for supper.

Following instructions, we walked down the dirt road to a small white building where we signed the Segundo Montes guest book.

"There's a rule when travelling," Wickwire advised, spying bathrooms behind the building. "Never pass up a *baño*." With that, he picked his way around the side with his two canes.

Outside I heard shouting. Across the road two cinderblock shacks nested among the trees below, and a man was standing by the nearest shack, about twenty-five yards away, yelling and throwing stones at a skin and bones dog cowering in a small garden. A young boy, probably the man's son, stood nearby, watching, while a pig and half a dozen scrawny chickens rummaged in the dirt close to the shack. Soon a stone found its mark and the dog yelped and ran off, tail between its legs.

Sinclair had warned us about the treatment of dogs. How in poorer communities, rather than "man's best friend," they were viewed as pests competing for the little food available. Accustomed to dogs as pampered pets back home, it was difficult to watch

Salvadoran dogs, ribs visible under mangy hides, slinking around. We didn't see many, but those we did were not welcome.

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Once plans for the evening and the next day were arranged, we drove back down the hill, climbed another plateau, and stopped in front of two one-story, dormitory-style, rectangular wooden buildings. Behind the buildings, the land remained flat for a couple of hundred feet, then dropped off to the valley. On the other side of the road on higher ground under trees was what looked like a small village of blue, red, and green painted shacks.

The women, Ventura, and Wickwire carried their bags into the dorm to the left, while the rest of us piled into the other one. Roughly thirty-five feet long and twenty feet wide with dirt floors, the buildings came with metal cots, folding chairs, a card table, and thin mattresses. After we decided who would sleep where, I set my pack under a cot by the door and walked outside and around back to check the showers Sinclair had mentioned earlier.

Three small open stalls with tin roofs attached to the back of the dorm had floors of flat circular stones and each stall held a fifty gallon drum filled with water. The idea was to strip, ladle water out of the drum, pour it over yourself, scrub yourself down, douse yourself again, then towel off. Beyond the showers, a path led to another building and I poked my head inside. The community *baño* was equipped with three primitive concrete toilets, plus an overpowering stench.

Retracing my steps, I met a young German couple in front of the dorm, tanned and athletic-looking in hiking boots, khaki shirts, and shorts. They spoke English and said they were touring the country "on vacation." I was dumbfounded. With its scars from the war and current unrest, El Salvador hardly seemed an optimum spot for a vacation.

That evening we drove back to the pavilion for supper, stood single-file in front of the counter to pick up our chicken, rice, beans,

and drinks, then moved to the long picnic tables where members of the rebel army sat eating. Wickwire, not passing up the chance to learn the latest about the unfolding peace process, sat at the end of the table, talking to a bearded fellow dressed in army fatigues. I wished I knew what they were saying.

Talking to Wickwire later, I forgot his chat with the rebel, and instead asked him what he thought about the military's role in the UCA massacre.

"It doesn't make sense to me," I said. "I understand the part about how they hated the Jesuits, but why would they get involved in a massacre? I know they left leaflets trying to point the finger elsewhere, but they must have suspected that the operation could backfire and the truth would come out."

"I think the FMLN offensive had them in a panic," he said. "The people were saying they were 100,000 strong, at least with their sympathizers included."

After we finished supper, while a heavy early evening rain enclosed the pavilion in cascades of water, Sinclair filled us in on the program for the next day: a tour of ongoing projects at Segundo Montes, then the drive into the mountains to the rebel stronghold of Perquín.