

RECON STRIKE

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A twelve year old boy zigzagged through lines of obstacles, a 9mm Beretta pistol in his hands. He wore a pistol belt, boots, and drab green fatigues. No insignia marked his uniform.

The obstacles simulated the doorways and windows of a street. A target-- the form of a soldier painted with the camouflage green uniform of the Army of El Salvador-- swung from a doorway and the boy snapped two quick shots into the chest of the target and a final shot into the target's face, the quick shots reverberating in the walled firing range.

Another target appeared in a window behind the boy. Pivoting, his thin arms locked and steady, the boy fired at a blond-haired norteamericano wearing a gray suit, sunglasses, and holding an Uzi submachinegun. The boy scored two hits to the chest and a third hit on the blond man's forehead before sprinting away to the next confrontation.

Two soldiers watched from the back of the range. Both men wore the same dark green fatigues as the boy. One man, the instructor, sat at a panel of switches. He activated targets as the boy ran through the course.

The instructor flipped a switch and bomb exploded only a step in front of the boy. The deafening blast staggered him but he did not stop. Coughing, wiping dirt from his eyes, the boy fired three quick shots at a target and ran, fired again at a pop-up target and

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reloaded.

At the last set of obstacles, five targets appeared simultaneously. The boy dove for cover and fired from the ground, hitting every target before firing his last cartridge.

The second man, Colonel Octavio Quezada, nodded his approval. Colonel Quezada commanded the training camp. A veteran of eight years of struggle before the victory over the Somoza regime, he had lost his left arm and his left eye in the war. His injuries had ended his service as a fighter but did not end his fight for international revolution. With a staff of aides and instructors, he trained young men and women to strike at the other regimes in the Americas.

"Two months?" Quezada asked the instructor.

"Two months ago, he lived with his people in Guazapa. The bombs of their air force killed his family and our comrades sent him to us. He did not need any indoctrination. He says he lives only to kill."

"How is his English?"

"He learns but it is difficult. He cannot even read or write Spanish."

"Yes, the English will take more time than the guns and explosives. Run boy! Run!" Quezada shouted out. "Other comrades want to play here. You did very well. I am proud of you. Next month we will make you a teacher."

The boy ran back. His body streaming with muddy sweat, his chest heaving, he holstered the empty Beretta and gave the pistol belt to his teacher. Without a word, he started to the gate.

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Quezada grabbed his shoulder. "What is this? Can you not say 'thank you' when your commandant praises you? Did that little firecracker kill your ears?"

Hard-eyed, the Salvadorian boy stared at Quezada, his mestizo face as impassive as a carved wooden mask-- a mask that concealed nothing from Quezada. He had studied the reports on this boy. Agents loyal to Quezada-- not to the Cubans, not to the Popular Liberation Front-- had confirmed the details:

Born to a family of seasonal workers in Guzapa, the boy followed the harvests with his parents and brothers and sisters. The family picked coffee and cotton, existing from one harvest to the next. An infant sister died when the mother's breasts went dry, a brother died of pesticide poisoning. His oldest brother joined the guerrillas. An informer identified the family as communist sympathizers and the family fled into the mountains where the guerrillas ruled. But during a random bombing of the guerrillas, an American-made phosphorous bomb fell through the branches concealing their shack. The boy had been a kilometer away, carrying water from a stream. Only ashes and bones remained of his family. He also found metal fragments of the bomb marked with manufacturing codes. A guerrilla who could read said the bomb came from the United States. The boy vowed to God to revenge his family.

Only years and national boundries had made this boy different than Quezada. Like the boy, Quezada had a childhood in the fields.

His family lived in fear of farm managers protected by soldiers and informers. His family never questioned why they lived in a rented shack and the landlord lived in a mansion, why they walked and the

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farm manager and his bodyguards rode in a Cadillac. Not even hoping for change, they only prayed for life to continue in unbroken cycles of rains and crops and work by the day.

But Quezada fought with the Sandinistas in the mountains and after years of war, he and his comrades took Nicaragua from Somoza and his National Guard. Now he trained this boy, this boy who could be his little brother, to kill Yankees and Salvadorians.

Quezada brushed dirt from the boy's shirt and his sheared hair.

"You did good. And that is no joke. You did very good."

The boy smiled, suddenly the child again. "But I missed. I missed targets two times. That is not good."

"You shot good. When I was a boy like you, I only dreamed of fighting. I did not have your courage--" And he punched the boy in the stomach, lightly, not hurting him, but doubling him and making him fall in the dirt. Startled by the blow, the boy stared at him.

"Ha! You still have much to learn. Flattery and smooth words are as dangerous as bullets-- even an old one-eyed, one-armed fighter like me has his tricks. Go! Why are you sitting down? Get out of here! You think you're a soldier already, go learn about rifles, go!"

The instructor followed his student out the exit gate. Quezada left by another gate in the high stone wall around the firing course. Stepping into the enclosed waiting area, he saw the next instructor and student, a lean young woman from San Salvador.

She glanced up as she thumbed cartridges into a pistol magazine. Scars from fists and boots marred her face. The bones of her fingers had mended in odd angles. Though Nicaraguan doctors had

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surgically corrected her smashed nose and the worst deformities of her hands, the night of interrogation-- and torture and rape-- in a basement somewhere in San Salvador had left her marked for life. She had survived because a drunken National Police sergeant had fired only one bullet at her head when they dumped her at the side of a road. Her hair covered the scar along the side of her skull.

"How goes it?" Quezada asked her.

"Good, I think." She smiled despite her broken teeth. "I always hit the targets. But I am not fast, not like the one who was in there--" She glanced toward the firing range. "I am slow, but I will try, I will keep trying. If you will keep giving me ammunition."

"Ammunition is nothing. You will shoot thousands and thousands of times before you return to your country. You must kill with every shot. Or you will die without advancing the--"

"Colonel!" An aide shouted out. "The newspapers are here."

"Go. The range is yours now. Make every shot true. Speed will come with time. Does the recoil pain your hands?"

Looking down at her smashed and twisted hands, she nodded but said nothing.

"Don't let the pain stop you. In combat, you will use a rifle. But if your assignment requires a pistol, or if you must use a pistol in a fight, you will not feel the recoil and pain. Believe me, you will be very, very busy and you will have no thought of a little pain."

As the colonel approached, the aide opened a sheet steel gate. The gate secured the training area and prevented the students from

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seeing the road leading to the administration complex-- and whoever came to offices.

"Any messages from San Salvador?"

"Check-in codes. There is no problem."

As the aide locked the gate, Quezada hurried along the road to the top of the hill. Before the Revolution, one of the old, wealthy families of Nicaragua had owned the hill and the surrounding mountains, growing coffee and grazing cattle. They ruled their domain from the spacious hacienda on the hilltop, entertaining visitors from Managua and Leon in their private movie theater, their children enjoying gardens, shaded lawns, and a swimming pool. Whitewashed walls three meters high and topped with broken bottles isolated the aristocrats from the campesinos who picked the coffee and herded the cattle. In 1979, when the Sandinistas took power, a chartered DC-3 landed at the airstrip and carried the family away to Miami.

When Quezada took the property for his school, his soldiers converted the barns to dormitories and classrooms. With high stone walls the corrals and stockyards became firing ranges. The walls also separated the buildings and training areas from the main house.

Quezada did not allow his students to see his offices. Every student went through the courses of weapons, munitions, and communications alone, never meeting the other students or leaving the camp. They arrived at the airstrip in darkness, studied for months, then departed at night-- without knowing the location of the camp or even the country that had provided the training.

Across the lawns and flowers, Quezada saw a van had parked at

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the entry to the hacienda. The stencilled white letters-- T V-- identified the van as a news vehicle. The colonel smiled at the cowardice of Emilio Pazos. The Cuban had the courage to torture and execute captured counter-revolutionaries, but he feared the roads north from Managua. He had painted T V on the sides and the roof of the van to guard against ambush. With the press credentials of Mexican journalist, he braved roads untouched by fighting since 1979.

Quezada pushed through flowering vines of the archway. In the courtyard, a fountain in the center shot a jet of water into the air. The splashing of the falling water almost covered the noise of typewriters and voices in the staff offices.

"Colonel!" A young man in jeans and a t-shirt left a doorway. Raul Condori served as an aide to Emilio Pazos, the Director of the Import Development Ministry in Managua. "Here are the newspapers from Managua. And Miami. I waited at the airport until they delivered the first copies."

"How dedicated you are."

"And here is a videotape of the scenes from the satellite news. I'm sorry it's in English--"

"Where is our distinguished comrade Pazos? Did they have a party to celebrate the killings?"

"No, colonel. The victory came unexpectedly. But I am sure he will learn of the victory in San Salvador wherever he is. It is worldwide news."

"Yes, worldwide. We succeeded in shooting down four unarmed Marines, two unarmed businessmen, and six Salvadorians. A great

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victor for you Cubans."

"And Nicaragua! And Salvador! The Americans call it terrorism in their broadcasts, but the victory remains a triumph for the armed forces of the people. Now the Americans cannot deny they are in combat. In the mountains, in the fields, in the streets, we will find the Americans and shoot them down."

Quezada laughed. "Brave slogan, boy. Do you want to join an urban unit? I can fly you into Salvador tonight. You can murder Americans tomorrow."

The aide backed away. "I'm sorry, colonel. But Commander Pazos left me in charge of the communications. And I must return. Immediately."

"When you tire of offices and typewriters and embassy parties, come to me. I'll make you front line fighter"

But Quezada talked to the empty archway. The engine of the van revved and the tires squeeled as the Cuban lieutenant raced away.

"Brave slogan, you Cuban shit."