

09

Rotor-thrown rain hammering his face, Captain Niles leaned from the sidedoor of the old Huey troopship. To the north, he saw pre-dawn violet sky and stars and the graying forms of churning thunderheads. But ahead, the absolute black of the storm obscured the western horizon. He could see nothing of the ridges and peaks of the mountains of Morazon.

The storm would conceal their insertion into El Salvador.

Above him, the amber navigation light flashed, illuminating the rain streaking past him, reflecting from the rotor blades in instants of stroboscopic stop-motion.

Gray forest and shadowy folds of mountains continued into the distance. He could not see the roads indicated on his topographical map. The clustered lights of a town-- La Estancia? San Antonio? Juniguara?-- shone out of the night for a moment, then disappeared.

A hundred meters to starboard, Niles saw the navigation and anti-collision lights of another troopship flashing against the darkness. The flashing lights gleamed on the plexiglass and enamel of the rain-polished fuselage.

Then the amber light above him quit. They had crossed into El Salvador-- or more correctly, territory appearing on maps as part of El Salvador but also claimed by Honduras.

As he turned back to his men, he felt the helicopter slow and

heard the turbine's whine change. The crew chief passed him the intercom headset. The Alabama voice of the co-pilot told him:

"Two minutes."

"Any problem with visibility?"

"We're locked in with terrain-following-radar."

"That radar see trees?"

"No, sir. That's why I'm wearing my night vision goggles."

"Well, you watch out. We can walk home. Don't know about you."

Switching off, Niles questioned the others with a shout, "Ready?"

He heard Sergeant Vatsek answer, then Sergeant Alvarez.

For the last time, the captain checked the Salvadorian Army load-carrying-equipment he wore. The obsolete U. S. Army-surplus pistol belt had an antique brass interlocking buckle. The old o.d. canvas rucksack had stamped-metal buckles on the straps. Hours before, as he had prepped for the mission in the hanger at Toncontin, he had wrapped every steel D-ring and belt-tip with black plastic tape. The same tape secured the rattling front handguard of the Colt Commando rifle he carried-- a short barrellled version of the standard M16A1 with a telescoping buttstock. With a slap, he confirmed the seating of the 30-round magazine.

A luminous circle appeared beside his wrist. Lieutenant Stark tapped the captain's watch. Stripping off the velcro cover, Captain Niles held his arm steady while the two radium points of the second hands swept in sync.

The lieutenant thanked the captain with a crisp, "To the second, sir."

Rotors flaring, the helicopter angled down. The four Marines leaned from the sidedoors and scanned the darkness around and below the troopship. The black shapes of trees emerged, then the pale splotch of a ridge. Captain Niles heard the voices of the pilots through the headphones as they corrected the drift and angle of their descent.

"Okay, Marines. This is-- "

Throwing his headset off, Niles unsnapped his safety harness. A swirling gray mist smelling of earth and rain enveloped the helicopter. When the skids touched the ridge, the Marines leapt out and rushed into the pre-dawn storm. They went flat in the mud, forming a security X, facing in four directions, their boots touching, each man watching the darkness and rain in front of him.

The troopship lifted away, the rotor-storm showering their backs with mud and leaves. Captain Niles waited as the rotors faded into the distance. Seconds later, another helicopter passed overhead, the noise beating through the graying sky.

Two other troopships had accompanied their Huey. American and Salvadorian helicopters often flew between the military bases in Honduras and El Salvador. Unless someone within a few hundred meters had heard the insertion, the passing of the three helicopters would be only one more early morning overflight of the mountains.

A minute later, they heard only the sound of the rain. Intermittent gusts of wind brought momentary downpours that hissed on

the mud and drummed on their equipment. Niles kept his head low and his Colt Commando above the mud and rain-matted grass. Behind him in the weeds, his men remained silent and motionless, their prone forms invisible. They waited, listening, watching the darkness under the wind-swayed trees.

The eastern sky grayed, a gray on black panorama of clouds and the forested ridgelines of the Cordillera Nahuacaterique emerging from the night. Niles kicked the boot of Alvarez. The sergeant flicked the radio key-set to send a pre-determined code. A coded reply confirmed their communications link.

Wordlessly, Niles led the men from the ridge. He moved a step at a time, almost blind in the darkness and downpour. He eased down the slope, testing each step on the slick grasses before committing his weight. His boots sank into the soggy earth with every step. With his left hand, he gently pushed aside branches and slipped sideways through the brush and tangled pines, moving, pausing to listen for pursuit, then continuing. He held the Commando in his right hand, the muzzle pointed at chest level, his thumb on the safety/fire-selector.

The satellite-generated contour map showed a steep ridgeline sloping down to gentle hillsides that gradually descended to a small river. The captain maintained a southern bearing as he zigzagged down the slope. He accelerated the pace as the storm clouds glowed with dawn. The three men of his team followed silently, seeming to float through the lush foliage, their rifles ready, their eyes scanning the trees and brush around them.

A drop-off stopped the captain. Crouching at the edge of the sheer fall, the captain looked down at the gray, storm-swept valley. He glanced back. His men faced outward in three directions.

"Stark," he whispered.

As the lieutenant joined him, the sergeants shifted to watch the area, watching the random patterns of the tangled growth for the forms of men pursing them. In the rain and gusting wind, they could not listen for movement-- they depended on their eyes. "Cartography error," Stark commented, looking down the fifty-meter drop. Rain-water poured off the canvas of his floppy gray-and-green patterned bush hat, a downdraft spraying the stream of water into the void. The cliff continued a hundred meters to the north, where it intersected another ridge. To the south, the cliff gradually descended to the rolling hills of the valley.

"Good reason not to wander around in the dark-- there, the river will be there," the captain pointed at a crease in the valley as he whispered. "The bridge will be down around that bend. I want to cross there--"

As the Niles indicated their route, the lieutenant squeezed out a dab of olive-drab grease and streaked it down the glossy black of his face. He added dabs to the backs of his hands. He finally wiped his fingers clean on the Atlacatl Battalion insignia on his left shoulder.

"-- where that creek comes down, then follow that ridge around. We'll come around behind anyone watching the road. Make sense to you?"

"Yes, sir. They will expect long range patrols to come from Perquin, not Honduras."

"Not exactly a tourist road anymore ...."

The Soccer War of 1969 had closed the north-south Route Seven to traffic between Honduras and El Salvador. In the later years of the next decade, war again closed the highway as insurgency took most of Morazan Province out of government control. Salvadorian Army units in the town of Perquin blocked all travel into the area, halting vehicles and seizing guerrilla suspects. Guerrillas controlled the section of road continuing to the Honduran border. No one travelled safely.

North of the disputed international border, Honduran counter-insurgency battalions harassed Salvadorian guerrillas carrying supplies to the war and arrested Salvadorian refugees fleeing the fighting.

Satellite photos had shown a weed-overgrown track cut by wash-outs and downed bridges. Except for infrequent airborne and infantry operations mounted by the Salvadorian Army, the guerrillas of the People's Revolutionary Army held and governed the isolated region.

Moving again, Niles veered south. He paused and signaled Vatsek, the captain pointing north, then cocking his thumb back to point in the route of march.

The sergeant nodded and rushed away. Using his two hundred and twenty pounds of body weight and the forty pounds of equipment load, he stomped his boots into the soft red clay to create indelible

prints. He followed the cliff to the north. At the intersecting ridge, he came to a sheet of naked stone. The stone continued in a band across the mountain, appearing and disappearing at irregular intervals. Despite the weight of the equipment he carried-- M16/203 combination automatic rifle and grenade launcher, 5.56mm and 40mm ammunition, fifty meters of nylon rope, rations for three days-- the sergeant stopped and jogged backwards up the mountainside, leaving a second set of bootprints marking his return.

Niles continued. Now, with daylight, they could walk without leaving a trail, placing their feet carefully, skirting stretches of mud or delicate ferns. Walking last in line, Vatsek corrected any missteps, brushing away bootprints and rearranging crushed leaves. The rain completed his task, erasing all marks of their passing.

For an hour, they followed a weaving course down the hillsides, exploiting the concealment of the pines and scrub oak. Rain continued to fall. Winds parted the cloud cover from time to time, brilliant tropical light illuminating the hillsides in moments of vibrant, multi-toned green, the flowing reds and yellows of the soil abstract contrasts. In these moments, the squad went to ground, staying low and motionless until the light passed, until the gray shadows and rain returned.

The hills sloped into abandoned cornfields. The Marines could not avoid crossing the fields. Staying within the cover of tangled bamboo and bananas and flowering morning glory, the captain led his squad to within a few steps of a low wall. For generations,

farmers had piled rocks from their fields to create boundary walls. Now, after years of war, weeds and brush choked the fields. Corn and bean vines gone wild grew in clumps everywhere, the corn stalks dried and yellow. Niles noted that the ears of wild corn had been harvested.

Sections of walls and paths had disappeared under the growth. Leaving the bamboo, the captain crawled through the tall grass to an overgrown wall. He crouched there for minutes, watching the abandoned fields and listening. Misting rain continued, limiting his vision to a kilometer. Past that, the distance became gray and diffuse, the mountain tops lost in clouds.

When he signaled, his men followed. They crept cautiously from field to field, staying low behind the rock walls, never using the pathways-- both the Salvadorian Army and the guerrillas used mines to inhibit the movement of their enemies.

A few meters from the remains of a burned-out adobe shack, the captain paused. A crater filled with stagnant water and shattered trees indicated that the shack had been a bombing target. Now morning glory vines and broad-leafed chocon covered pressed-mud walls eroding back to the earth.

Niles studied the muddy earth, advancing a step at a time, then stopped at a stand of banana trees.

Peasants in Central America often grow banana trees in their gardens. Each tree eventually produces a single stalk of bananas.

As the fruit matures, bananas can be cut individually to feed the family or the stalk harvested to be sold in the village market.

Niles pointed out the freshly severed center-stem of a tree. Milky fluid still dripped from the cut.

Someone had harvested a stalk of bananas that morning. And only guerrillas occupied this area. Faint mismatched bootprints-- some with the sole pattern of Army boots, others with commercial tread-- led from the banana tree to the field. By the rain-erosion of the tracks, Niles guessed the guerrillas had passed at dawn.

For the next several hundred meters, the Marines moved more slowly, more cautiously, staying in the below the level of the piled-stone walls, using the wild corn for concealment. They heard the stream before they saw it. A cornfield dropped off into a streambed. Churning brown water tore through the narrow channel, the roots of trees exposed on both sides. Captain Niles motioned Vatsek forward and pointed at the rope he carried. Vatsek nodded.

Studying the banks of the streambed, the sergeant moved upstream a few meters. There, bamboo and overhanging trees offered concealment.

As Stark and Alvarez watched the fields and the Niles the opposite bank, Vatsek wound his rope into a cowboy coil. Then he knotted one end around a fist-sized rock.

His first throw sent the rock over an overhanging branch of a ceiba tree. Playing out enough rope to allow the rock to fall almost to the water, he jerked the rope taut. The rock swung like a pendulum and Sergeant Vatsek caught it on a backswing.

Niles looked up at the branch and hissed over the roar of the water, "What are you doing?"

Knotting the lines together, Sergeant Vatsek stepped on the knot and swung into space. He gave his chest two thumps with his fist as he flew over the rushing water, then dropped onto the opposite streambank. "Tarzan ...." Alvarez said, laughing quietly. He pushed through the bamboo and caught the returning rope. He crossed the stream, followed by the lieutenant. Captain Niles crossed last.

"California crazies ...."

The bull-necked sergeant thumped his chest again as he re-coiled his rope. Niles crept up the bank and peered through the trees. He saw only a slope shaded by the ceiba. Matted leaves covered ground littered with plastic bags and rags.

The trash heap of a town? He checked his compass bearing and glanced at his plastic-coated contour map. An ink circle marked a bombed-out and deserted village hundreds of meters upstream. A line traced a winding dirt road. Past the road, they would begin the climb of the next mountain. The captain continued, his boots sinking deep into the matted leaves.

A hand clawed at his leg. He startled back, pointing his rifle, not firing, not believing what had touched him, staring at the skeletal hand reaching up from the leaves and trash.

"Mother of God!" Alvarez whispered, unconsciously crossing himself.

Niles took a step toward the arm and his boot crushed through the trash-- an old smell hit him, the wave of stink so foul and nauseating that he staggered, kicking through the matting,

scattering debris as he tripping to one knee.

An rotting face stared up at him, the eyelids half-closed over empty eye sockets. Framed by swirling black hair, the lips and face of the girl had drawn back to reveal teeth and the hole of her gaping mouth. Skin had also puckered back from a second hole in her face, a tiny perfect bullet hole in her forehead. A flap of skull and hair hinged away from the side of her head where the high-velocity bullet had exited.

He clenched his jaw and stood, looking around what he had thought to be trash: knees and elbows still clothed in rags, the pale and withered skin of hands and faces, the fragments of bullet-shattered skulls.

Watching from the streambank, Stark held his bush hat over his mouth and nose. Motioning the others to follow, Niles forced himself to walk among the corpses, his boots causing arms and legs to move, leathery skin to crack and release putrefication.

At the road, he went prone. He crabbed to the side to avoid the bones of a child-- apparently killed by a machete, one side of the small skull sliced away-- and looked out at the gullied and overgrown track. No vehicle had used the road in months. Rain-beaded grass showed no tires tracks or foot prints. He waited until the others joined him, then dashed across.

They charged straight up the mountain, leaving the horror and stink of the murdered families far behind, gaining five hundred meters of altitude in a half hour. Short of the crest, the four Marines paused.

As the others faced outward, their rifles leveled, Alvarez keyed his handset again, tapping out a coded message to check in with their communications interlink. When the response came, he reported their approximate position. Before he clicked off, he he leaned closed to the captain and whispered a question:

"Do I report the massacre?"

Captain Niles shook his head, no.

"Little children ...." Alvarez whispered as he switched off the transmitter and secured his keyset. "Sir, who do you think did it?"

Glancing to Alvarez, Niles saw the Chicano sergeant watching him, waiting to see how he reacted to the question. Niles looked away, focusing on the ferns and pines surrounding them, his eyes scanning the mountainside for movement. Clouds swept over the ridgeline, wind shaking heavy drops of rainwater from trees overarching the Marines.

"Not us," he finally answered, his voice only a hiss in his throat.

Parallelling the ridgeline, they avoided crossing the crest of the mountain. Overflight photos had shown networks of trails there, where the wide, flat terrain of the crest allowed the guerrillas to move quickly. The forested mountaintop also provided some concealment from gunships and bombers for the lines of guerrilla supporters transporting weapons and supplies.

Good trails merited security details to warn fighters and support personel of counter-insurgency ambushes. Or the placement of booby-traps to maim outsiders and alarm the guerrillas.

An alert sentry-- or a mine-- could end their mission. And perhaps their lives.

They stayed a hundred meters below the ridge, moving slowly, silently around the mountain. Bombs had shattered trees and cratered the mountainside. But the Marines saw no evidence of guerrilla casualties: no bones, no shredded clothing, no discarded bandages.

Above them, near the crest, they saw much more damage from the bombing. Fallen trees lay at all angles, branches thrown by blast hung in other trees, and where the Salvadorian Air Force had employed napalm, skeletal trees stood black against the storm clouds.

An hour passed before they saw the red dirt gash of Route Seven emerging from the south. A flooding river ran west. But they could not see where the road crossed the downed bridge that marked their objective. They continued around the curve of the mountain very slowly, expecting to encounter guerrilla positions overlooking the road and bridge. Crawling from cover to cover, they staying below the level of the ferns and grasses and brush, pausing to listen, moving, then pausing again, taking every meter of mountainside slowly.

The clink of a bottle betrayed the lookouts on the crest. The captain heard snatches of Spanish. Concealed from the ridgeline by a line of granite, he shifted slightly, angling up between the moss-covered rocks. He listened for minutes before he heard the laughter. He eased higher.

Low, shrapnel-chopped trees blocked his view of the ridge. But

the tangle also screened the Marines from the sentries.

A hundred meters farther on, ten meters past a faint path, he found a position viewing the road and shattered bridge. Pines screened the position from the guerrilla lookouts above them and the twisted branches of a fallen-- but still living-- tree would provide a place to wait and to sleep.

Vatsek provided security while Stark and Alvaret silently deployed their equipment. Words unnecessary, the soggy matting of leaves on the mountainside producing no sounds, the two Marine technical specialists unpacked monopods, camera mounts, lenses, and microphones.

Lining up with the downed bridge, Stark drove two monopods into the soaked clay of the mountainside. Each monopod-- an aluminum shaft fitted with a pan/tilt head-- created a stable camera mount only a hand's width above the mud. The night before in Tegucigulpa, Lieutenant Stark had first wrapped his Nikon cameras and telephoto lenses in water-proofed soft plastic, then packed the delicate equipment in foam and soft vinyl protective cases, finally sealing the cases with tape. Now, under the protection of a green plastic sheet, the cases opened without a sound, the lenses locking into the camera bodies with almost inaudible clicks. He assembled the cameras, then secured the cameras to the monopods by touch.

Alvarez pushed another monopod into the mountainside, then mounted the long foam-shrouded tube of an ultra-directional condenser microphone. Utilizing internal amplifiers and electronic filter circuits, the microphone could monitor a whispered

conversation from a hundred meters. A cable linked the microphone's amplifier output to a multi-track cassette recorder. He wrapped all the electronics and cables with plastic as protection from the rain.

Slipping on headphones, he tested the assembly by listening to the sounds of rain splattering on the concrete of the dynamite-shattered bridge.

Niles prepared for another duty. He removed the magazine from his Colt rifle, then slowly pulled back the charging handle to clear the chamber. He reloaded the short rifle with a magazine of twenty reduced-charge 5.56mm Interdynamic cartridges. The Interdynamic silencer locked over the muzzle to make the Colt Commando a silent rifle, capable of killing at a distance of up to two hundred meters.

Finally he clipped a plastic device over the ejection port to hold the spent Interdynamics casings. Nothing would remain in El Salvador to betray their action.

With his converted rifle, he left the others and inched his way up the mountainside to the lookout position. He heard two sentries-- one a low, guttural voice and the other a higher voice, the voice of a teenager. As the raspy voice talked, the teenage laughed.

Nile crept to within a few meters of the crest-- gently pushing through the bottle and can litter below the position-- but could not get a view of the lookouts. A plastic tarp flapped and snapped in the wind. He listened as the older man talked of 'taxing' foreign reporters:

"I tell them, they want my picture, they pay to the struggle.

They tried to give me money. Money! What can I do with money in the mountains? They had no food. So I take their batteries and a cassette of music ...."

The conversation shifted to other techniques for maintaining the flow of necessary supplies into the war zone, the veteran guerrilla instructing the teenager with an endless string of stories and boasts.

Waiting for a mention of the urban unit of the PRT, Niles listened throughout the last hours of the afternoon and into the night. Rain fell, other guerrillas replaced the first two, empty cans clanked down the mountainside-- but the guerrillas said nothing of the assassins from San Salvador.

A very patient man, Niles waited all night.