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THE HONDURAN ARMY'S DEATH SQUAD: HOW MUCH DID THE U.S. KNOW?

(Editor's note: Between 1980 and 1984 the Honduran army, with American support, uncovered and then systematically wiped out much of the small Honduran guerrilla movement, writes James LeMoyné. His report is based on accounts given by a former interrogator in a Honduran army death squad who claims to have been trained in Texas by the CIA, and a Honduran woman who in 1983 was tortured for 80 days in a secret army jail near Tegucigalpa, during which time she says she was periodically visited by a U.S. official. In this excerpt from the June 5 New York Times Magazine LeMoyné tells how their stories offer "a unique window through which to view the most primitive and bitter level of the struggle between political change and maintenance of state power now under way in Central America." LeMoyné is the El Salvador bureau chief for The New York Times. He has been reporting from Central America for The Times since 1982.)

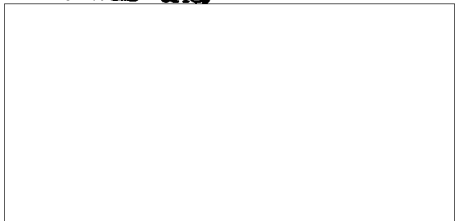
By JAMES LEMOYNE

He came into my office in San Salvador reeking of the vinegar-tinged sweat of simple human fear. His eyes rolled to show their whites as he insisted that "they" were trying to kill him. He said his name was Florencio Caballero and he wanted to tell me of his work as an interrogator in a Honduran army death squad, which he said had tortured and then murdered approximately 120 Hondurans and other Latin Americans. He had been trained in Texas by the CIA, he told me. As a sergeant in the Honduran army, he said, he had kidnapped and interrogated people, including an American priest, who were then murdered. "Horrible things" had been done to people in dark basements and hidden graveyards.

Intoning his words like a catechism, Caballero insisted again and again that "the Americans" had trained him not to murder and physically torture people. But once he began working in an army intelligence unit in Honduras, the admonitions of his instructors in Texas were forgotten. He told me he liked and respected his American mentors. But somehow it had all gone wrong, even though it had started well, even though "the Americans" had good ideas. Caballero wanted me to know that he didn't enjoy torture. He thought murdering prisoners was wrong. He wanted out. But "they," his former army colleagues, he claimed, were trying to kill him for deserting them.

When Caballero came to see me more than a year ago the sheer detail and conviction of his emotional account of secret jails, murder and CIA involvement made it seem convincing. But it was the

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word of only one man, and the Honduran government denied his charges. It took many more months to find other witnesses, but eventually several American and Honduran officials and a survivor of the army's secret jails confirmed much of Caballero's story.

They gave details of the "horrible things" Caballero had seen and done, things that neither Honduran nor American citizens would condone if done publicly. "What Caballero says is probably true," I was told by an American official in Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras. "It's pretty damaging."

Caballero told me that a young Honduran woman named Ines Murillo could confirm much of his account -- because, he said, she had been a prisoner in a secret army jail near Tegucigalpa where he himself had "interrogated" her and had watched his co-workers torture her. "It was sad to see what they did to her," he told me, shaking his head. "Ines Murillo suffered the most."

It took a long time to contact Murillo. After managing a remarkable release from a secret jail in 1984, she fled from Honduras to exile. She admits that at the time of her capture in Honduras she was a member of an underground Marxist guerrilla group that carried out bombings -- and robberies to raise funds for their revolutionary goals. In spite of her strong political beliefs she does not appear to be a propagandist. She has not sought out journalists and has refused to write a book about her experience.

As she spoke of her torture, in a five-hour interview in Mexico, Murillo seemed to serve as a kind of witness for the tens of thousands of people who have "disappeared" in Latin America and for the dozens of victims of official death squads I personally have seen in six years of reporting in Central America. Their slashed, bullet-pocked, sometimes raped and dismembered bodies showed -- but could not speak of -- the terror that had befallen them. But Murillo could speak.

Only an occasional shudder or tear, usually when she recalled watching someone else being hurt, betrayed what Murillo felt five years after being beaten, electrically shocked, burned, starved, exposed, threatened, stripped naked and sexually molested for 80 days. She said Caballero was one of her torturers, a word he never used to describe the "interrogation" he carried out on a bound and naked woman.

Like Caballero, Murillo impressed me as a direct, credible witness. Each lent strong support to the other's account. Piece by piece, it gradually became clear that their story offered a unique window through which to view the most primitive and bitter level of the struggle between political change and maintenance of state power now under way in Central America. Other Latin American governments, particularly those of Guatemala, El Salvador and Argentina, have killed many more people than has the Honduran government. But the accounts of Murillo and Caballero provide a remarkably complete and disturbingly human picture of how the cycle of failed reform, guerrilla pressure and answering official repression begins, not just in Honduras, but in much of Latin America.

The weight of evidence indicates that between 1980 and 1984 the Honduran army, with American support, uncovered and then

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systematically wiped out much of the small Honduran guerrilla movement, as well as other rebel networks within Honduras supporting Salvadoran leftist guerrillas and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. During those years in Honduras there were no trials or lawyers to defend the accused. It was a period of rationally directed state terror against an identified enemy who was also willing to kill to change the system of government.

The victims were not all Hondurans. Around the time Murillo was seized, Caballero said, he interrogated an American priest, Father James Carney, who supported guerrilla warfare and was captured along with a group of 96 rebels who had infiltrated into Honduras from Nicaragua after training in Cuba. Caballero said Carney and nearly 70 of the captured guerrillas were executed. His account was seconded by a Honduran officer. American officials have long contended that Carney and other rebels died of "exposure" or in combat.

The CIA knew what was going on and the (American) ambassador (John D. Negroponte, now deputy assistant to the president for national security affairs) complained sometimes. But most of the time they'd look the other way," said one American official who, like almost all officials quoted in this article, spoke on the condition that he not be named. The CIA refused to comment on the events described here, saying through a spokesman that the agency would not comment "on intelligence matters."

Caballero, who had already received U.S. training, says he was among the first of those recruited to serve in a new unit known as Battalion 316, which was organized by a Honduran army colonel, Gustavo Alvarez Martinez, with CIA support.

"I was taken to Texas with 24 others for six months between 1979 and 1980," Caballero told me. It was there, he said, the Americans "taught me interrogation in order to end physical torture in Honduras. They taught us psychological methods -- to study the fears and weaknesses of a prisoner. Make him stand up, don't let him sleep, keep him naked and isolated, put rats and cockroaches in his cell, give him bad food, serve him dead animals, throw cold water on him, change the temperature."

Occasionally, an American CIA agent visited the hidden jail where he worked, Caballero says, and was given edited interrogation reports on prisoners. It is unclear how much he knew of the torture. "The Americans didn't accept physical torture, they didn't accept kidnapping -- they said to arrest people using a judicial order," Caballero said. "But guerrillas don't wait there with a pen to sign a judicial order. Our commander ordered us to kill them. We hid people from the Americans, interrogated them, then gave them to a death squad to kill."

Murillo entered Honduras' secret jails on March 13, 1983, when a Honduran army death squad seized her and a friend in the northern town of Choloma. She was 24 years old. Murillo admits she used a false name and carried false documents, because she was, in fact, an underground organizer and spy for a Honduran Marxist guerrilla group known as the Lorenzo Zelaya Popular Revolutionary Command.

She says her disappearance began when assailants forced her into a truck, blindfolded her, then raced through the night to a secret army jail in the basement of a residential house in the town of San Pedro Sula. The torture began immediately. Her kidnapers threw her

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into a small basement cell, she says, stripped her naked and demanded that she tell them about her work as "a subversive."

A man began to torture her methodically with electric shocks. The device he used, he informed her, was a light cord that he had cut to expose the two bare wires at the end. He would plug the cord into the wall and stick the two live wires on her body until she talked, he said.

For the first time in an hour of talking, a tear escapes from Murillo's eyes as she remembers. "I smelled smoke and realized I was burning from the singes of the shocks. They said they would torture me until I went mad. I didn't believe them. But then they spread my legs and stuck the wires on my genitals."

In 1983, during the months that Murillo was imprisoned and tortured, she says an American official periodically visited her secret jail, confirming an account first given to me by Caballero almost a year earlier. Because she was blindfolded, she never saw him. The American was never there when she was tortured, Murillo says, supporting Caballero's explanation that the rule was to conceal gross torture and murder from the CIA. But Murillo says she does not believe the CIA could fail to have known what was going on.

After 35 days in her first jail in San Pedro Sula Murillo was moved to a second hidden prison near Tegucigalpa, where Caballero says he repeatedly "interrogated" her. There her torture became more refined. Both she and Caballero say American-style "psychological" methods were then the preferred form. Murillo says Caballero and other interrogators gave her raw dead birds and rats for dinner, threw freezing water on her naked body every half hour for extended periods and made her stand for hours without sleep and without being allowed to urinate.

Not only strength, but the perseverance of her family seem to have saved Murillo's life. Her father, Cesar Augusto Murillo, once served in a branch of the Honduran military where he met many officers. Murillo says that when she finally broke under torture she told her captors her real name. One of them immediately said: "My God, I know your father." But the torture continued.

Mr. Murillo guessed that his daughter was in a secret jail and, according to Ms. Murillo, let it be known he would pay for information on her whereabouts. A soldier contacted him and, for a bribe, told him where his daughter was held. The soldier, Ms. Murillo says, also revealed the name and phone number of a man the informant said was the CIA agent who visited the secret jail.

According to Murillo, her father told senior Honduran and American officials that he would publish the information if his daughter was not released. His threat seemed to have worked. Eighty days after she was seized Murillo's captors suddenly took her to a Honduran court. The judge quickly reincarcerated her as a common detainee in a regular jail. She knew that being placed in a public prison meant she had been allowed to live. She was never convicted of any crime, she says, and about 13 months later was allowed to go into exile.

Through several sources I learned the name of the American suspected of being the CIA officer. When asked, the CIA would not comment on whether the man worked for the agency or on whether any

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of its agents ever visited secret jails in Honduras. Several Honduran and American officials, however, say that the American was a CIA officer and that he was sent out of Honduras shortly after his identity and, perhaps, his work were revealed.

In 1974, after several Latin American police forces trained by the United States had been accused of torture and killing, Congress cut off all American financial assistance for training foreign policemen, although it allowed the CIA to maintain contacts with police forces. In 1985 Honduras, along with El Salvador, was given

a special waiver, which permitted American military aid to its police and intelligence units.

Caballero, now a refugee living in Canada, says he no longer thinks the official killing "worked." He says he watched his fellow soldiers slowly lose all sense of morality and discipline as they tortured people and ordered their deaths.

Murillo says her experience has convinced her not to return to Honduras as a guerrilla. But she, too, doubts the repression there "worked." After hours of talking her voice became hard:

"The enemy has taught me that you have to be very cold, very rational, very ordered. Between 100 and 150 of us have been killed. They killed very beautiful, decent people who cared for our country. But there will always be people as crazy as me, willing to fight. War will come. We will learn, as you keep hitting us, and we will become hardened and very, very tough. We will see a damned gringo American and we will blast him."

It may be that Murillo is wrong, that her judgment is swayed by her ideology and by the anger, mourning and hate she feels after being tortured and having friends killed. And it may also be that having experimented with state terror, Honduras will now rethink and change its ways.

Or it may be that Murillo and Caballero are right. It may be not only that state terror did not "work" in Honduras, but that it marked the beginning there of the cycle of failed reform and repression that already afflicts much of the rest of Latin America.

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