brought there to serve as guides for the Atlacatl.

Major Cáceres gathered the captains together, gave them pseudonyms to be used over the radio during the operation—he himself would be known as Charlie—and issued a few orders. Then the five companies of the Atlacatl moved out, down the mountainside. Everywhere, above the roar of the helicopters, could be heard the thud of mortars and the booming of artillery. "It was a huge operation," the guide from Perquin told me. "There were helicopters and planes and heavy equipment and troops all through the mountains, and they even had animals to cart along some of the guns and ammunition."

As the Atlacatl men set out south from Perquin, hundreds of other soldiers were moving steadily north. Having been deployed as a blocking force along the Torola and Sapo Rivers, to the south and east, and along the black road, to the west, they were now tightening the circle. These units, the hammer of the operation, were meant to push all the guerrillas in the zone up toward the anvil of the Atlacatl and crush them against the best troops the Army had to offer. But, as a lieutenant involved in the operation remarked to me, "you take troops from all over the country and move them up to Morazán in about ninety truckloads, right along the Pan-American Highway—I mean, you think somebody might notice?"

As Monterrosa's men circled the hills below Perquin, the guerrillas of the People's Revolutionary Army, far to the south, at La Guacamaya, completed their preparations. Confronted with a heavy force blocking the river to the south, and the Atlacatl moving down from the north, the guerrillas would break straight west, punching their way through the military's lines at the black road. That night, some of their train started the trek: long columns of peasants, their belongings, food, and young children bundled on their backs, trudged single file through the mountains, flowing in a vast nocturnal exodus that would carry them over the mountains to the Honduran border.

On the morning of Wednesday, December 9th, while thick mist still carpeted the valleys, the men of the Third Company of the Atlacatl rose in their encampment on a hill called El Gigante, broke camp, and circled back toward the black road. In the hamlet of La Tejera that afternoon, they seized three civilians, two youths and an old man of eighty or more, hustled them along to a field not far from the sawmill, and began interrogating them "very strongly, very brutally," according to the guide from Perquin. The officers accused the men of being guerrillas, demanded to be given the names of their comrades, to be told where they had hidden their weapons. When the men denied the charges, Major Cáceres declared that they would be executed; the killing, he said, would begin here. But then a farmer from the area came forward. The two youths worked for him, he told the Major, and he protested vigorously that they had nothing to do with the guerrillas. One of the guides vouched for them as well, and after a prolonged dispute the men were spared.

This argument over identity, over who was a guerrilla and who wasn't and what constituted evidence one way or the other, would recur during the next two days. Already in La Tejera, officers disagreed about whether the men should have been spared; according to the guide, Captain Walter Oswaldo Salazar, the company commander, reacted angrily when he was told of a comment from another officer that the local people should be treated with respect unless there was evidence that they were guerrillas. "Salazar said, 'No, these are all guerrillas,'" the guide said. "He said the soldiers could go ahead and kill any of them, or all of them." Later that day, according to the guide, Captain Salazar let slip his suspicion that the other officer was in fact a guerrilla himself, and vowed to assassinate him.

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Lawrence Raab

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This wasn’t simply paranoia. “We had tremendous infiltration in the Army at that time,” the lieutenant involved in the operation told me. “We knew that certain sales of arms were going to these people, that information was being leaked—all our operations, all our movements, were being leaked.” The overwhelming suspicion that this engendered, together with the growing panic among the officers about the deterioration in the government position, gave the hardest-line officers a decisive upper hand.

“The hard-core guys there really did believe that it was a virus, an infection,” Todd Greentree said. “They’d always say a cancer—you know, Communism is a cancer. And so if you’re a guerrilla they don’t just kill you, they kill your cousin, you kill everybody in the family, to make sure the cancer is cut out.”

These officers, of course, had Salvadoran history on their side. “They had a ‘kill the seed’ mentality,” Professor Stanley told me. “After all, what happened in 1932? To this day, when someone wants to make a threat here, why do they invoke the name of Martinez?”—the author of the Matanza. “Because he is an icon, that’s why. The idea of going out to the zones and killing everyone is not a new idea. It’s a proved idea.”

Putting that proved idea into practice would become the mission of the Atlacatl Battalion. Hoping to insure that at least one unit of the Salvadoran Army was adequately prepared to fight, the Americans sent Special Forces instructors in early 1981 to train the first recruits of the new Immediate Reaction Infantry Battalion (BIRI). Yet, as the American advisers well knew, the epithet of “elite, American-trained” that was hung on the Atlacatl by the press was a bit of a joke. “They had no specialized training,” one of the original Special Forces trainers told me. “They had basic individualized training—you know, basic shooting, marksmanship, squad tactics. I mean, the difference was that the Salvadorans basically had no trained units in the country, so this was going to be a unit that would be trained.”

Some officials in the Embassy and the Pentagon had wanted the entire unit to be trained in the United States—and, indeed, later in the year recruits for the sec-

ond of the BIRIs, the Belloso, would be flown en masse to Fort Bragg, North Carolina. But the Atlacatl had something the Belloso didn’t: it had Monterroza. “That the battalion wasn’t sent to the United States but was trained by Monterroza here in large part a testament to his authority,” a contemporary of Monterroza’s told me. “The High Command had been preparing him, grooming him. He had taken all the courses the Americans offered, including those for the paratroopers and the commandos. His ambition became very concrete around the time the Americans decided to direct a major counter-insurgency effort here. When the Atlacatl came along, he jumped at it.”

From the beginning, Monterroza worked to give his new force a mystique—a mystique. “They shot animals and smeared the blood all over their faces, they slit open the animals’ bellies and drank the blood,” a lieutenant in another unit told me. “They were a hell of a raunchy unit. They had no discipline of fire, none at all. I mean, they saw something moving out there, they shot it—deer, pigs, whatever. You’d be out there in the field trying to sleep, and all night those bastards would keep shooting at things.” According to one reporter, the men of the Atlacatl celebrated their graduation by collecting all the dead animals they could find off the roads—dogs, vultures, anything—boiling them together into a bloody soup, and chugging it down. Then they stood at rigid attention and sang, full-throated, the unit’s theme song, “Somos Guerreros”:

We are warriors!
Warriors all!
We are going forth to kill
A mountain of terrorists!

By the fall of 1981, the Atlacatl was well on its way to building that mountain. The pattern of its operations had become well known: units of the regular Army and the security forces would move into place along the border of one of the red zones, walling it off, with the help, very often, of a natural barrier, like a river or a mountain range. Then a blocking force would invade the zone, pushing before it everyone and everything living. Finally, the helicopters would sweep in, and the men of the Atlacatl would storm out, bombard all whom the trap had snared with artillery and mortar fire, and then with small arms.

It was the strategy of “draining the sea,” or, as Monterroza was heard to describe it on occasion, of La Limpieza—the Cleanup. Those parts of El Salvador “infected” by Communism were being ruthlessly scrubbed; the cancer would be cut out, even if healthy flesh had to be lost, too. “El Mozote was in a place, in a zone, that was one hundred per cent controlled by the guerrillas,” one of the original American advisers with the Atlacatl told me. “You try to dry those areas up. You know you’re not going to be able to work with the civilian population up there, you’re never going to get a permanent base there. So you just decide to kill everybody. That’ll scare everybody else out of the zone. It’s done more out of frustration than anything else.”

Joaquin Villalobos, the E.R.P. comandante, freely conceded to me in an interview that in a number of the most notorious operations, both before and after El Mozote, many of the civilians killed were in fact sympathetic to the guerrillas. “In San Vicente in 1982, for example, the massacre at El Calabozo that involved more than two hundred people,” he said. “This was a situation where the Army was stronger, where our guerrilla force was too weak to protect our followers. We simply weren’t able to provide those people sufficient military protection. It was the same in 1980 at the Sumpul River in Chalatenango, where a group of our sympathizers were fleeing, trying to cross the river. The guerrillas, benefiting from very good intelligence and excellent mobility, generally managed to escape from the zone ahead of the Army; it was their supporters, and any other civilians who happened to be there, who took the punishment.”

In the case of many of the massacres during the early eighties, then, the Salvadoran Army was managing to do what it set out to do: killing Salvadorans who were sympathetic to the insurgents. However, bluntly this behavior violated the rules of war—however infamous it was to murder men, women, and children in masse, without trial or investigation, simply because of the political sympathies of some of their number—
the strategy did at least have some rationale. Even against this grim background, El Mozote stands out. "El Mozote was a town that was not militant," Villalobos said. "That's why what happened at El Mozote was special."

Sometimes during the incident at La Tejera that Wednesday afternoon, word came over the radio that the First Company of the Atlacatl had engaged the guerrillas. "There was an exchange of fire, an armed confrontation," the guide says. But, like so much else in this story, the battle—its intensity, even its precise location—has become a matter of fierce dispute. From the start, the Salvadoran military claimed that the fighting took place at El Mozote itself.

On December 17th, a C.I.A. officer cabled from San Salvador that "the heaviest fighting had occurred at El Mozote . . . where 30 to 35 insurgents and four Salvadoran soldiers were killed."

It is impossible to know for sure, but from the context of the cable it seems very probable that the C.I.A. man's information came, one way or another, from the Salvadoran Army. The guide, on the other hand, who was a few miles away and heard the report on the fighting as it came over the Atlacatl radio, places it "around Arambala. It was a little skirmish," he told me, "and it happened at El Portillón, near Arambala—a little over a mile from El Mozote."

Villalobos, who appears to remember the operation in great detail, also insists that the fighting took place at Arambala, which "was in effect our rear guard," he said. "Although most of the serious fighting took place south of us, along the Torola, there was a minor level of fighting, including maybe a little mortar fire, near Arambala." He went on to say, "It's normal when you displace a large force to leave small units to protect the retreat and keep up resistance." Guerrilla squads around Arambala, north of La Guacamaya, were in a perfect position to protect the flank of the main guerrilla force as it retreated west.

Santiago, who was still in La Guacamaya, readying his Radio Venceremos crew for that night's retreat, describes how "the pressure of the enemy was growing in his north-south advance."

On that day, he writes in his memoirs, "the comrades of the Fourth Section took by assault a position of the Atlacatl Battalion and captured two rifles"—a plausible number in view of the four dead that the Salvadoran Army apparently acknowledged. But Santiago makes no mention of the "30 to 35 insurgents" killed that are claimed in the C.I.A. cable, and neither, so far as I know, does any other guerrilla memoir. This would have been a very large number of dead; the fact that no one mentions them, and the fact that, in the wake of this fighting, the guerrillas did indeed manage, as Santiago recounts, to "maintain the lines of fire and organize the movement to break the circle and make a joke of Monterrosa's hammer blow"—these two facts lead one to wonder whether the officers, in providing their reports to their own superiors (and possibly to the C.I.A.), had created a victory at El Mozote from what was in fact a defeat at Arambala.

The officers would have been especially reluctant to admit a defeat at the hands of the Fourth Section. An elite guerrilla unit, it had been trained, in large part, by Captain Francisco Emilio Mena Sandoval, an Army officer who had deserted to the guerrillas the previous January. Salvadoran officers had developed a deep hatred for Mena Sandoval, regarding him and others like him as much more despicable forms of life than, say, Villalobos: in their eyes, the latter was merely a delinquent terrorist, whereas officers like Mena Sandoval were traitors. And, as it happened, the officers and men of the Atlacatl had a special reason not only to hate Mena Sandoval but to remember with the greatest distaste the town of Arambala and also the hamlet of El Mozote, just down the road.
It was near Arambala, eight months earlier, that the first unit of the brash new Atlacatl had ventured forth to show the guerrillas, and the rest of the Army, what it was made of; and it was there that, to the embarrassment of its officers and men, the highly touted new unit suffered a humiliating defeat—in large part because Captain Mena Sandoval had had the foresight to steal an Army radio when he came over to the guerrillas. Thanks to the radio and Mena Sandoval's knowledge of the enemy's codes, the rebels were able to keep one crucial step ahead of their opponents. "We defended one line on the outskirts of El Mozote, which the enemy was unable to take for many days," Mena Sandoval writes in his memoirs. "Their cost in casualties kept growing, as did our morale. It had been twelve days of combat and we had almost no casualties."

Finally, after twenty-two days of intense fighting, the guerrillas slipped away across the black road under cover of night. As for the Atlacatl, news of its poor performance spread quickly through the Army. Soon officers and soldiers began passing on a little joke. The Atlacatl's designation as a BIRI, they said, stood not for Immediate Reaction Infantry Battalion, as everyone had thought, but for Immediate Retreat Infantry Battalion. This kind of needling would likely have assured that, eight months later, many officers and soldiers in the Atlacatl would have retained vivid memories of Arambala and El Mozote.

Now, after the initial engagement on Wednesday, according to the guide, "we heard by radio that the other company killed people there." Under the gaze of Major Cáceres, who was then with the First Company, the troops entered the town of Arambala, brought out the people who had remained there, and assembled them in the plaza. They led the women and children to the church and locked them inside. Then the troops ordered the men to lie face down on the ground, whereupon they bound them, blindfolded them, and began to beat them, demanding information about the guerrillas. A number of men—the guide believes as many as twenty (and his estimate agrees with the figure given in a detailed analysis of the operation in and around El Mozote by Tutela Legal, the San Salvador Archbishopric's human-rights office, in November, 1991), though other estimates range as low as three—were taken from the assembly, led away, and executed.

In Arambala, the officers still relied on their lists to select who would die. However, by the following afternoon, Thursday, the lists had run out, and at some point—perhaps that day, perhaps late the day before—the officers made a decision about the direction the operation was to take. For, despite Rufina Amaya's bitter conviction that there had been a "betrayal," that the officer who had spoken to Marcos Díaz as he left Gotera had taken part in a nefarious plot to make sure that the people of El Mozote stayed in their homes to await the fate that had been planned for them, an equally likely explanation—and, in a way, a more horrible one—is that the officer was in fact trying to do his friend Díaz and the people of the hamlet a favor, for at that point nothing whatever may have been planned for them.

Whenever the officers made the decision, it is clear that by the time they reached El Mozote they had ordered a change in tactics. "They had lists from Porquin south to Arambala," the guide told me. "But farther down, there were no lists. Farther down, they killed everything down to the ground. Farther down, scorched earth."

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**THE KILLING**

*When the strafing finally stopped, and the troops marched into El Mozote, the villagers still believed that the Army would protect them.*

Just after midnight on Wednesday, as the men of the Atlacatl settled down to sleep, a long column wound its way out of La Guacamaya and snaked slowly through the ravines and gullies, heading west toward the black road. The guerrillas and their entourage travelled quietly: the only sound in the tense darkness was that of hundreds of moving feet. The fighters came first, lugging their rifles and ammunition and whatever other supplies they could manage. Then came the civilian followers, loaded down with their bundles of clothing and sacks of tortillas and coffee, and nervously hushing their children. And at the rear came the men and women of Radio Venceremos, bent under the weight of the transmitter and the generator and the other equipment that formed the station's heart.

In the end, it was these burdens which betrayed them: the weight slowed them, so that, as they finally came within sight of the black road, struggling along in increasing panic, the darkness thinned and faded, dawn broke behind them, and they could see, as they gazed upward from their hiding place—a ravine full of prickly maguey—the men of the Atlacatl rising and stretching there on the highway. One soldier was swirling his poncho around him to free it of moisture, and the first rays of sunlight glinted off the droplets. The guerrillas had been caught, but turning back was out of the question; there was nothing for it but to run.

"Advance!" Jonás ordered. No one moved. "Advance, I say!"

A handful of guerrillas broke from their cover, zigzagging in a wild, desper-
ate sprint toward the road, staggering under the weight of their equipment. A moment passed before they heard the shouts of the soldiers, and a moment more before the bullets started to come. They took cover and returned fire, then again ran, took cover, and fired: but they were badly exposed, and by the time they had managed to cross a hundred and fifty yards of open country three men had been hit. One of them, Toni, had been carrying the transmitter, and as he collapsed his precious burden slipped from his back and tumbled down, end over end, into another ravine. His comrades gathered around him. Toni was dying; the bullets kept coming; there could be no question of retrieving the transmitter. Monterroso would have his war prize.

Late that Thursday afternoon, the men of the Atacatl trudged into El Mozote. They found the streets deserted. For the last two days, the thud of the mortars, the firecracker staccato of the small arms, and the roar of the aircraft had been coming steadily closer, and that morning helicopters and planes of the Salvadoran Air Force had strafed and bombed the area around the hamlet, terrifying the inhabitants. “Everything was closer every day, louder every day,” Rufina Amaya told me, “and finally, by that day, the people were hiding in their houses.”

The strafing ceased not long before the men of the Atacatl entered the hamlet, dragging with them civilians they had found hiding along the way. Tired and impatient, the soldiers swarmed about the houses of El Mozote and pounded on the doors with the butts of their M16s. “Salgan!” they shouted angrily. “Get out here! Get out here now!”

Hesitantly, the people came out into the twilight, frightened, bewildered, unsure of what was happening. The soldiers, cursing and yelling, pulled them forward, hustled them along with the butts of their rifles, herded everyone into the center of the street. Rufina and her husband, Domingo Claros, emerged with their four children: he was carrying three-year-old Marta Lilián and leading Cristina, nine years old, while Rufina had five-year-old María Dolores by the hand and carried at her breast María Isabel, eight months old. “They told us all to lie down in the street,” boca abajo—literally, “mouth down”—and they began pushing some of us down,” Rufina says. “As my husband was setting the little girl down, a soldier pushed him to the ground. The girl started to cry. By then, all the children were crying.”

The entire town lay like that, perhaps four hundred people face down in the dirt, as darkness fell. Between the waiting of at least a hundred children and the shouting of the soldiers—hundreds had entered the hamlet by now—the din must have been unbearable. The soldiers marched up and down the lines of people, kicking one here and there, striking another with a rifle butt, and all the while keeping up a steady rain of shouted insults and demands. As Rufina tells it, a soldier would stop next to a man or a woman, kick the prone body, and bark out a question: Who were the guerrillas? Where were they? Where did they hide their guns? The men and women of El Mozote insisted that there were no guerrillas there, that they knew nothing of guerrillas or weapons. “If you want to find guerrillas,” one woman shouted tearfully, raising her head from the ground, “go out there”—she waved toward the hills—“outside town. But here, here we’re not guerrillas.”

This only made the soldiers angrier. “All you sons of bitches are collaborators,” an officer said. “You’re going to have to pay for those bastards.”

At one point, as Rufina tells it, the wealthy and influential Marcos Díaz, lying in the street beside his wife and their sons and daughters, raised his head. “Wait!” he pleaded. “They promised me nothing would happen to the people here. The officer told me so.”

At that, the Atacatl officer laughed and said, “No, motherfucker, you all have to pay. Now, get your face back in the ground.” And he raised his black boot and pushed Marcos Díaz’s head down into the dirt.

“They were very abusive,” Rufina says. “We couldn’t do anything. They had all these guns. We had to obey.” Some of the soldiers took down names as others went along the lines demanding to see people’s hands and pulling from their fingers any rings they saw, then ordering them to turn over their jewelry and crucifixes and anything else that might have some value.

The people of El Mozote lay there in the street, their faces in the dust, the children sobbing, for a long time. The soldiers yelled, strode back and forth, aimed their weapons at them. “We thought that they were going to kill us all—that we were sentenced to die right there,” Rufina says.

But finally the soldiers ordered them to get up. As the people of El Mozote climbed unsteadily to their feet, the soldiers barked out an order: they were to go back into their houses, the soldiers said, and not let “even so much as their noses” poke out the door.

The people, terrified, grateful to be alive, hurried into their houses—crowded into them, for virtually every room in the hamlet held extra people. Now the wailing of children made the houses seem smaller still. No one slept. Outside, the men of the Atacatl shouted and laughed and sang songs, punctuating the hilarity with celebratory bursts of gunfire. Rufina and her husband, packed into a house with two other families, struggled to calm their children. “They were hungry, and we had no food to give them,” she says. “We were going to kill a chicken to feed them, but as soon as we lit a candle the soldiers yelled at us from the street to put out the light. Our children were scared, and hungry, and the littlest ones were messing all over themselves, and we couldn’t even take them outside to clean them.”

So they huddled inside in the darkness, listening anxiously to the laughter, starting up each time it was cut by a burst of automatic fire, and all the while trying to soothe the children. “The saddest thing was that the children were crying and we could do nothing for them,” Rufina says. Soon everything would be all right, their parents assured them—soon they would be safe.

Perhaps the parents began to believe it themselves. After the terror of that evening, after feeling the earth against their faces and the gun muzzles at their necks, Rufina and her husband prayed that they had seen the worst, that the soldiers would leave the next day. “We were thinking that because they hadn’t killed us yet, maybe they wouldn’t,” Rufina says. After all, no one had really been harmed, and, even if the promises of Marcos Díaz’s officer friend had been worthless—well, the people here had never had trouble with the Army. The people knew that they weren’t guerrillas,
and the soldiers, despite their angry shouting, must know it, too.

As the people of El Mozote huddled in their dark houses, down at Oiscala, the base camp of the operation, south of the Torola River, the officers were taking stock. The first stage of the operation—the convergence of the Atlacatl companies on El Mozote, the capture of the hamlet and its people—had gone well.

"The first phase was over," an officer involved in the operation told me. "All the unit commanders came to Oiscala to talk it over. I was heading for the mess hall, and I bumped into"—he named a major who at that time was a key figure in military intelligence—and he said to me, "Look, we might need you tomorrow. Be ready." Then the major gave the younger officer a rundown of the situation. "He said, 'You know, the first phase is over, the units have gone through and done what they've had to do, and now it's just a question of going in there and interrogating those people'—you know, like P.O.W.s. I asked him if there had been any guerrillas there, and he said, 'No, they're gone. But we might need you. We have people to interrogate. We have maybe six hundred people altogether.'"

That was a lot of people to interrogate. "If I had gone in there," the officer told me, "I would have expected to spend two or three days, considering all the people they had."

The two men stood there for four or five minutes while the major briefed the younger man on the sort of information they wanted to get out of the prisoners. "Basically, we were looking for the guerrillas' means of support—how they were getting their food, and so on. We'd stopped a lot of their communications, but we wanted to know their logistics, how they were getting their supplies, what their routes were, and so on. Especially, we wanted to know who it was they'd infiltrated"—into the Army itself—and who was selling them arms. We had evidence that there was considerable selling of arms from the Army at that time—I mean, you could ask three and four times what a weapon was worth, and these people would pay it, and many of the soldiers couldn't resist that. There was selling of information as well. All our operations were being leaked. Everyone wanted to make a buck—that was the game."

Other officers passed by as the two men talked. That the first phase had been completed, that the Atlacatl had seized El Mozote and now held its population prisoner—that much was widely known among the officers at Oiscala that night. "My impression was that the plan was to spend the next day interrogating these people," the officer told me. "And apparently that was the major's impression as well. But the next day he never called me. And by that night everyone knew that something had happened."

While it was still dark, the soldiers came to Rufina's door and began pounding on it with the butts of their rifles. "Salgan!" they shouted once again. "Get out here!" The families were hustled outside. "We wanted to give our children food," Rufina says, "but they said, 'No, get out to the plaza.'"

All around, the people were emerging from the houses; the soldiers pushed them along roughly, and in the darkness they stumbled over the ground and bumped against one another. "Form lines!" the soldiers shouted. "Men and older boys over here! Women and children over there!"

Soon all the people of El Mozote were lined up in the plaza. The soldiers ordered them not to move. They stood for hours. The children, having had no food and no rest, sobbed and fussed; the mothers tried to quiet them. The soldiers, unlike the evening before, said little. They just marched up and down the lines looking real mean and ugly, not saying anything," Rufina says. And so the sun rose on the people of El Mozote that Friday.

Around seven, they heard the sound of a helicopter approaching. As it hovered overhead, the soldiers began herding the people from the plaza. The men were ordered into the church, a small whitewashed building adjacent to the even smaller sacristy; the women and children were crowded into the house of Alfredo Márquez, a small building on the main street a few feet from the larger house of Marcus Díaz and directly opposite the church and the sacristy.

Looking out a window of the tightly crowded house—well over a hundred women and children had been forced into a space meant for perhaps a dozen—Rufina saw the helicopter touch down in the plaza and half a dozen officers climb out. She saw several of them, accompanied by soldiers of the Atlacatl, stride to the church, where the men were being held. The others came marching to the house where she was, and pushed through the door into the packed, noisy room.

"They had bayonets on their guns, and they used them to push the women back," Rufina says. "They said we were collaborators. They were angry. They kept asking us where our pistols were, where the men had hidden our guns, and when we kept saying, again and again, that we didn't have any, they'd push at us with the bayonets. Then they'd say, 'Shut up, old woman, what are you crying about?' They said they'd kill us if we didn't tell them."

After only a few minutes, the officers strode out, leaving soldiers to guard the door. Around this time, the helicopter lifted off, taking at least some of the officers along.

Now the women began to hear shouting from the church. "We could hear them yelling—the men," Rufina says. "They were screaming, 'No! No! Don't do this to us! Don't kill us!"

When she heard the screams, Rufina, who together with her children had been sitting on a bench with her back to the front wall of the house—the wall facing the church—climbed up on the bench so that she could look out a small window high up in that wall. Through the window she saw soldiers leading groups of men from the little whitewashed church—blinded men whose hands were bound behind them. Each pair of soldiers led five or six men past the house of Alfredo Márquez and took them out of the hamlet in various directions. After a time, she saw her husband in one group, and as she watched, along with young Cristino, who had climbed up next to her, eager to see what was happening, they both saw him—Domingo Claros, twenty-nine-year-old woodcutter, husband of Rufina and father of Cristino, Maria Dolores, Marta Lilián, and Maria Isabel—bolt forward, together with another man, in a desperate effort to escape the soldiers. But there was nowhere to run. The men of the Atlacatl levelled their M16s and brought both men down with short bursts of fire.
Then the soldiers strode forward to where the men lay gasping on the ground, and, unsheathing their machetes, they bent over them, grasped their hair, jerked their heads back sharply, and beheaded them with strong blows to the backs of their necks.

"I got down from the bench and I hugged my children to me," Rufina says. "My son was crying and saying over and over, 'They killed my father.' I was crying. I knew then that they were all being taken away to be killed. I just hugged my children to me and cried."

While the officers had been questioning the women, other officers and soldiers were interrogating the men in the church. "Many of the men were bound, blindfolded, and forced to lie face down on the ground while they were interrogated," according to the Tutela Legal report (which was evidently compiled with the cooperation of at least one soldier who had been present). "The soldiers would step on their backs and pull their heads back by their hair until they screamed in pain." For all their brutality, however, the interrogations of the men appear to have been almost as perfunctory as those of the women. The officers devoted scarcely an hour to questioning the hundreds of supposed collaborators, which makes it difficult to believe that they really expected to acquire useful intelligence from the people of El Mozote.

At about eight o'clock, "various of the men who had been gathered in the church were lifted off the ground and decapitated with machetes by soldiers," according to the Tutela report. "The soldiers dragged the bodies and the heads of the decapitated victims to the convent of the church, where they were piled together." It must have been at this point that the women in the house across the street began to hear the men screaming.

Decapitation is tiring work, and slow, and more than a hundred men were crammed into that small building. After the initial beheadings—it is unclear how many died inside the church—the soldiers began bringing the men out in groups, and it was from one of the first of the groups that Domingo Claros had attempted to escape.

While Rufina huddled with her children in the crowded house, mourning her husband, other women climbed up on the bench beside her and peered out the small window. From here, they, too, saw the soldiers taking groups of men from the church and marching them off in different directions.

Outside the hamlet, on a hill known as El Pinalito, the guides from Perquin waited in the company of several corporals—the officers had ordered them to stay there, lest they become confused with the townspeople during the operation—and throughout the morning the guides watched the soldiers pass. "I saw them marching along groups of maybe ten each," one guide told me. "They were all blindfolded, and they had their hands tied behind their backs. Then we would hear the shots, the bursts from the rifles." Out in the forest, the soldiers forced the men to the ground and ordered them to lie flat, with their faces against the earth, as they had lain, with their families, the evening before. Then the soldiers lowered their M16s and fired bursts into each man's brain.

"All morning, you could hear the shots, the crying and the screaming," Rufina says. In the house of Alfredo Marquez, some of the children had become hysterical, and no one knew how to calm them. Cristina begged his mother tearfully to take them out of the house, lest they be killed, as she had seen his father killed. Rufina could do nothing but point helplessly to the guards and try to calm him. None of the women had any idea what would happen next. "We just cried and hugged one another."

Around midday, a group of soldiers came into the house. "Now it's your turn, women," one of the soldiers said. They were going to take the women out now in groups, the soldier explained, and then, he said, the women would be free.
to go to their homes, or down to Gotera, or wherever they liked.

With that, the soldiers began picking out, one by one, the younger women and the girls, and pulling them toward the door. "The girls would hang on to their mothers, and the soldiers would come in and just grab them from their mothers," Rufina says. "There was a lot of screaming and shouting. Everyone was screaming, No! No! Don't do this! But the soldiers would hit the mothers with the butts of their rifles, and they would reach behind and grab the girls and pull them along with them."

From the house of Alfredo Márquez, the soldiers marched the group of young women and girls—some of them as young as ten years old—out of the hamlet and up onto the hills known as El Chingo and La Cruz. Before long, the women in the house could hear screams coming from the hills.

The guides, on El Pinalito, nearby, also heard the screaming. "We could hear the women being raped on the hills," the Perquin man told me. "And then, you know, the soldiers would pass by, coming from there, and they'd talk about it. You know, they were talking and joking, saying how much they liked the twelve-year-olds."

In the midst of this, one or perhaps two helicopters—accounts differ, as they do about many details of the story—touched down in the plaza in front of the church, and a number of officers climbed out. From his vantage point on the hill, the guide says, he recognized the distinctive figure of an officer he had seen several times before: Colonel Jaime Ernesto Flores Grijalba, the commander of the Third Brigade, in San Miguel, who was widely known as El Gordo (the Fat Man). Among the officers accompanying Colonel Flores was one famous figure, a small but charismatic man whom the soldiers of the Atlacatl proudly pointed out to the guide: Lieutenant Colonel Domingo Monterrosa, their beloved commander.

The officers, having been received at their helicopter by Major Cáceres and the company captains, were escorted to a house not far from the church, and disappeared inside. After some time, during which the killings went on around El Mozote—and also in the adjacent hamlet of Tierra Colorada, where patrolling Atlacatl troops had begun shooting people they found hiding in the houses—the officers strolled out onto the common, climbed back into their helicopter, and lifted off from El Mozote.

Around this time, the soldiers returned to the house of Alfredo Márquez. "I was still sitting on the bench with my kids," Rufina says. "When they came back, they began separating the women from their kids. They pulled the mothers away, leaving the children there crying. They took one group of women and then in a while they came back and took another. That was the saddest thing—little by little, the mothers disappeared, and the house became filled mostly with crying children."

Rufina found herself in one of the last groups. "It must have been five o'clock. There were maybe twenty of us. I was crying and struggling with the soldiers, because I had my baby on my chest. It took two soldiers to pull the baby from me. So when I came outside into the street, I was the last in the group. I was crying and miserable, and begging God to help me."

The soldiers marched the women down the main street. They passed the house of Marcos Díaz on the right and, on the left, that of Ambrosiano Claros, where Rufina and her family had spent the previous night. Ambrosiano Claros' house was in flames. "I saw other houses burning, and I saw blood on the ground. We turned the corner and walked toward the house of Israel Márquez. Then the woman at the head of the line—we were in single file—began to scream. She had looked through the door and seen the people in the house."

What the woman had seen was thick pools of blood covering the floor and, farther inside, piles of bloody corpses—the bodies of the women who only minutes before had been sitting in the house with them, waiting.

"The first woman screamed, 'There are dead people! They're killing people!' and everyone began screaming. All down the line, the women began resisting, hugging one another, begging the soldiers not to kill them. The soldiers were struggling with them, trying to push the first women into the house. One soldier said, 'Don't cry, women. Here comes the Devil to take you.'"

Rufina, still at the end of the line, fell to her knees. "I was crying and begging God to forgive my sins," she says.

Though I was almost at the feet of the soldiers, I wasn't begging them—I was begging God. Where I was kneeling, I was between a crab-apple and a pine tree. Maybe that was what saved me. In all the yelling and commotion, they didn't see me there. The soldier behind me had gone up front to help with the first women. They didn't see me when I crawled between the trees."

The crab-apple tree—which still stands, next to the ruin of Israel Márquez's house, as gnarled and twisted an old crab apple as one can imagine—was within about fifteen feet of the house. "I couldn't move, couldn't even cry," Rufina says. "I had to remain absolutely still and silent. The whole group was still outside the house—the women grabbing one another and hugging one another and trying to resist. Soon, though, the soldiers pushed some of them into the house. I couldn't see inside, but I started hearing shots and screams."

Finally, when the screams and the gunfire had stopped, some of the soldiers went off. A few minutes later, they returned, pushing along the last group of women, and now Rufina heard the sequence—the cries of terror, the screaming, the begging, and the shooting—all over again. After a time, those sounds ceased. In the sudden silence, scattered shooting and fainter screams could be heard echoing from the hills. A few feet from where Rufina lay hidden behind the tree, nine or ten soldiers laid down their guns and collapsed wearily to the ground.

"Well, all these old bastards are dead," one said to somebody farther off. "Go ahead and burn the house."

It was growing dark, and soon flames were rising from the house of Israel Márquez, highlighting the soldiers' faces and the trunk of the tree. It grew so hot that Rufina began to fear that the tree would catch and she would be forced to run. She had remained perfectly still, hardly daring to breathe, and her legs had begun to fall asleep. And the soldiers, still close enough to touch, remained where they were, smoking cigarettes and watching the fire.

"We'll just stay here and wait for the witches of Mozote to come out of that fire," one said.

The soldiers watched the fire and
talked, and Rufina, frozen in her terror a few feet away, listened. "Well, we've killed all the old men and women," one said. "But there's still a lot of kids down there. You know, a lot of those kids are really good-looking, really cute. I wouldn't want to kill all of them. Maybe we can keep some of them, you know—take them with us."

"What are you talking about?" another soldier answered roughly. "We have to finish everyone, you know that. That's the colonel's order. This is an operativo de tierra arrasada here—a scorched-earth operation—and we have to kill the kids as well, or we'll get it ourselves."

"Listen, I don't want to kill kids," the first soldier said.

"Look," another said. "We have orders to finish everyone and we have to complete our orders. That's it."

At about this time, up on the hill known as El Pinalito, Captain Salazar was shrugging off a guide's timid plea for the children's lives. "If we don't kill them now," he said angrily, "they'll just grow up to be guerrillas. We have to take care of the job now."

Meanwhile, the soldiers sat and gazed at the burning house. Finally, one stood up. "Well, no witches came out," he said. "There are no witches. Let's go see what kind of food they have in that store."

With that, the other men got to their feet, picked up their rifles, and trudged off. A few minutes later, Rufina could hear, from the store of Marcos Díaz, "bottles clinking—you know, as if they were drinking sodas."

The fire was still burning furiously, but the big crab-apple tree, which some miracle had kept from igniting, shielded Rufina from the heat. Over the crackling of the fire she could still hear, coming from the hill called La Cruz, the screams of the girls. Now and again, she heard a burst of gunfire.

After a time, when the soldiers seemed to have finished drinking their sodas, Rufina heard crying and screaming begin from the house of Alfredo Márquez: the screaming of the children. "They were crying, 'Mommy! Mommy! They're hurting us! Help us! They're cutting us! They're choking us! Help us!'"

"Then I heard one of my children crying. My son, Cristino, was crying, 'Mama Rufina, help me! They're killing me! They killed my sister! They're killing me! Help me!' I didn't know what to do. They were killing my children. I knew that if I went back there to help my children I would be cut to pieces. But I couldn't stand to hear it, I couldn't bear it. I was afraid that I would cry out, that I would scream, that I would go crazy. I couldn't stand it, and I prayed to God to help me. I promised God that if He helped me I would tell the world what happened here."

"Then I tied my hair up and tied my skirt between my legs and I crawled on my belly out from behind the tree. There were animals there, cows and a dog, and they saw me, and I was afraid they would make a noise, but God made them stay quiet as I crawled among them. I crawled across the road and under the barbed wire and into the maguey on the other side. I crawled a little farther through the thorns, and I dug a little hole with my hands and put my face in the hole so I could cry without anyone hearing. I could hear the children screaming still, and I lay there with my face against the earth and cried."

RUFINA could not see the children; she could only hear their cries as the soldiers waded into them, slashing some with their machetes, crushing the skulls of others with the butts of their rifles. Many others—the youngest children, most below the age of twelve—the soldiers herded from the house of Alfredo Márquez across the street to the sacristy, pushing them, crying and screaming, into the dark tiny room. There the soldiers raised their M16s and emptied their magazines into the roomful of children.

Not all the children of El Mozote died at the sacristy. A young man now known as Chepe Mozote told me that when the townspeople were forced to assemble on the plaza that evening he and his little brother had been left behind in their house, on the outskirts of the hamlet, near the school. By the next morning, Chepe had heard plenty of shooting; his mother had not returned. "About six o'clock, around ten soldiers in camouflage uniforms came to the house," Chepe says. "They asked me where my mother was. I told them she had gone to the plaza the night before. I asked them if I could see my mother, and they said I couldn't but I should come with them to the playing field"—near the
school. "They said when we got there they would explain where my mother was."

Carrying his little brother, Chepe went with the soldiers and walked along with them as they searched house to house. "We found maybe fifteen kids," he says. "and then they took us all to the playing field. On the way, I heard shooting and I saw some dead bodies, maybe five old people." When they reached the playing field, "there were maybe thirty children," he says. "The soldiers were putting ropes on the trees. I was seven years old, and I didn't really understand what was happening until I saw one of the soldiers take a kid he had been carrying—the kid was maybe three years old—throw him in the air, and stab him with a bayonet.

"They slit some of the kids' throats, and many they hanged from the tree. All of us were crying now, but we were their prisoners—there was nothing we could do. The soldiers kept telling us, 'You are guerrillas and this is justice. This is justice.' Finally, there were only three of us left. I watched them hang my brother. He was two years old. I could see I was going to be killed soon, and I thought it would be better to die running, so I ran. I slipped through the soldiers and dived into the bushes. They fired into the bushes, but none of their bullets hit me."

Lying amid the maguey that night, Rufina Amaya heard the chorus of screams dwindle to a few voices, and those grew weaker and weaker and finally ceased. She heard the officers order that fire be put to the house of Alfredo Márquez and the church and the sacristy, and from the maguey she saw the flames rise and then she heard faint cries start up again inside the buildings and the short bursts of gunfire finishing off a few wounded, who had been forced by the flames to reveal that they were still alive.

Soon the only sounds were those which trickled down from the hills—laughter, intermittent screams, a few shots. On La Cruz, soldiers were raping the young girls who were left. On El Chingo and El Pinalito, other soldiers busied themselves making camp. Down in the hamlet, a few troops walked about here and there, patrolling. Not far from the still burning house of Israel Márquez, two soldiers halted suddenly, and one of them pointed to the patch of maguey. He lowered his rifle and fired, and after a moment his companion fired, too. In the patch of brush, the stream of bullets sent a dark-green rain of maguey shreds fluttering to the earth. Then the soldiers charged forward and began poking among the weeds.

"She was right here," one said, pulling at some maguey. "I saw her, I know it."

Up on the hills, the soldiers listened to the shots, exchanged glances, and waited. Then they went on with what they had been doing: watching the flames rise from the burning houses and talking quietly among themselves, telling tales of the day's work.

They spoke Wonderingly about the evangelicals, those people whose faith seemed to grant them a strange power.

"They said maybe some of the people believed in God so strongly that they just delivered themselves up, they didn't resist," the guide told me. "They said some of the people were singing even as they were killed."

There was one in particular the soldiers talked about that evening (she is mentioned in the Tutela Legal report as well): a girl on La Cruz whom they had raped many times during the course of the afternoon, and through it all, while the other women of El Mozote had screamed and cried as if they had never had a man, this girl had sung hymns, strange evangelical songs, and she had kept right on singing, too, even after they had done what had to be done, and shot her in the chest. She had lain there on La Cruz with the blood flowing from her chest, and had kept on singing—a bit weaker than before, but still singing. And the soldiers, stupefied, had watched and pointed. Then they had grown tired of the game and shot her again, and she sang still, and their wonder began to turn to fear—until finally they had unsheathed their machetes and hacked through her neck, and at last the singing had stopped.

Now the soldiers argued about this. Some declared that the girl's strange power proved that God existed. And that brought them back to the killing of the children. "There were a lot of differences among the soldiers about whether this had been a good thing or whether they shouldn't have done it," the guide told me.

As the soldiers related it now, the
guide said, there had been a disagreement outside the schoolhouse, where a number of children were being held. Some of the men had hesitated, saying they didn’t want to kill the children, and the others had ridiculed them.

According to one account, a soldier had called the commanding officer, “Hey, Major!” He had shouted, “Someone says he won’t kill children!”

“Which son of a bitch says that?” the Major had shouted back angrily, striding over. The Major had not hesitated to do what an officer does in such situations: show leadership. He’d pushed into the group of children, seized a little boy, thrown him in the air, and impaled him as he fell. That had put an end to the discussion.

Now, up on the hills, the soldiers talked and argued and watched the burning houses, while the two men down below still searched among the magueys, cursing at the sharp thorns.

“I know she was here,” the first soldier said. “I saw her. She was right here.”

“No, no,” his companion finally said. “There’s no one here. You’re just seeing the dead. You’re seeing ghosts. The ghosts of the people you killed are frightening you.” With that, the soldiers looked at each other, then turned and trotted back to the center of the hamlet. Amid the maguey, Rufina Amaya closed her eyes, remained motionless. After a time, she reached out a hand and began groping about in the weeds, slowly pulling the thorny strips to her, gathering them into a pile and heaping them over her body.

She lay there still when the stars began to disappear from the lighten sky. She heard sounds of movement from the hills, rising voices as the men woke, urinated, ate, prepared their equipment. Shots echoed here and there, interspersed with the barking and howling of dogs and the lowing of cows as the soldiers killed the animals one by one.

From up on La Cruz came a burst of high-pitched screaming and begging, followed by a prolonged chorus of gunfire, and, at last, silence. And then the men of the Atlacatl, having completed the operation in El Mozote, moved on.

Hours earlier, when the chill of the night came on, Rufina Amaya had shivered, for the maguey had badly ripped her blouse and skirt. The thorns had torn the flesh of her arms and legs, but at the time she hadn’t noticed. Now she could feel the cuts, swelling and throbbing, and the blood, dried and prickly, on her limbs. And as she lay sobbing amid the thorns, listening to the soldiers pass, her breasts ached with the milk that had gathered there to feed her youngest child.

Marching past the church, which was burning still, past the carcasses of cows and dogs, and out of El Mozote, the men of the Atlacatl did not see the dark shape in the maguey patch, the heap of dark-green leaves. Their minds were on their work, which on that Saturday morning in December lay ahead in the hamlet of Los Toriles.

In Los Toriles, “the soldiers pulled people from their houses and hustled them into the square,” the guide told me, “and went down the line taking money and anything of value out of people’s pockets. Then they just lined the people up against a wall and shot them with machine guns. The people fell like trees falling.”

Even so, the killing in Los Toriles took much of the day. Some of the residents, having seen the columns of smoke rising the afternoon before from El Mozote, had fled their homes and hidden in caves above the hamlet. But most had stayed, wanting to protect their homes: they remembered that on a previous operation soldiers had set fire to houses they found empty, claiming that they belonged to guerrillas.

By afternoon, the streets of Los Toriles were filled with corpses. “It was so terrible that we had to jump over the dead so as not to step on them,” the guide told me. “There were dogs and cows and other animals, and people of all ages, from newborn to very old. I saw them shoot an old woman, and they had to hold her up to shoot her. I was filled with pity. I wished we had gone out and fought guerrillas, because to see all those dead children filled me with sadness.”

As night fell, the soldiers walked through the town setting fire to the houses. It was dark by the time they left Los Toriles, to march south toward the guerrilla stronghold of La Guacamaya. They made camp in open country, rose at dawn, and, as they prepared to move out again, Captain Salazar motioned them over. The men of the Atlacatl gathered in a circle, sitting cross-legged on the ground as he stood and addressed them.

“Señores!” the Captain said angrily.

Domingo Monterrosa was “that rare thing: a pure, one-hundred-per-cent soldier, a natural leader, a born military man.”

“What we did yesterday, and the day before, this is called war. This is what war is. War is hell. And, goddammit, if I order you to kill your mother, that is just what you’re going to do. Now, I don’t want to hear that; afterward, while you’re out drinking and bullshitting among yourselves, you’re whining and complaining about this, about how terrible it was. I don’t want to hear that. Because what we did yesterday, what we’ve been
doing on this operation—this is war, gentlemen. This is what war is.” And for perhaps half an hour the Captain went on speaking in his angry voice, and the men shifted uneasily.

“...and Andrea Márquez was too terrified to go back toward La Joya. Holding her child in her arms, she climbed higher into the mountains, found a cave, and tried to care for her daughter’s wound with leaves and with water from a stream. Eight days later, she found a stick and dug a hole and buried her little girl. Then, delirious with grief and shock and terror, she wandered high into the northern mountains.”

Months later, the surviving villagers, those few who remained in Morazán, began to murmur fearfully to one another that a witch had come to haunt the mountains—a savage woman, who could be glimpsed from time to time late at night by moonlight, naked but for her waist-length hair, as she crouched by a stream and stripped the flesh from a wriggling fish with long, sharp fingernails. The villagers were frightened of her, for they knew that it was after the matanza, the great killing of El Mozote, that the witch had come to haunt the mountains.

**THE FIRST REPORTS**

*After the Army pulled out, the guerrillas returned, and, within days, word of what they found reached a New York human-rights office.*

As the tide of soldiers ebbed from northern Morazán, the guerrillas flowed back in. “We knew there would be killing, but we never expected what we found,” said Licho, who was with one of the first units to return. “It was desolation, total desolation—not a person alive, not an animal alive, not a house that hadn’t been burned. There were bodies in the houses, bodies in the fields, bodies in the wells.”

The guerrillas immediately sent reports of the killing to their commanders; but there was a problem. “The comandancia didn’t believe us—they didn’t believe the numbers,” Licho said. “So we began to count. We sent units all over looking for bodies. A lot of them were not in the houses—they were lying out in the grass, in the fields, in the woods. We sent three reports up to the comandancia, and finally they sent other people down to the zone, because they still couldn’t believe the numbers.”

Survivors were straggling back from the caves and mountain gullies to find the plazas of their ruined villages so thick with vultures that, in the words of one man I talked with, “they seemed covered by a moving black carpet.” People wept, mourned, and, when they could, buried their dead. Pedro Chicas, who had hidden in a cave above La Joya, returned to the hamlet to find “everything burned, everything dead—corpses everywhere in the street,” he said. “Everything was dead—cows, horses, chickens, pigs. We couldn’t do anything with the badly charred people, but the others we buried.”

As the survivors returned to the hamlets around El Mozote, people from the zone were making contact with representatives of Socorro Jurídico (which was then the human-rights organization of the Archbishopric of San Salvador). Roberto Cuellar, a Socorro Jurídico official at the time, remembers hearing
from "members of church groups, and just people there, you know, neighbors." Within days—it is unclear how many days: limited and sometimes conflicting memories make this sequence particularly difficult to reconstruct—Cuellar telephoned the Reverend William L. Wipfle, who was the director of the human rights office of the National Council of Churches, in New York. "Cuellar said the Atlacatl Brigade had committed a massacre in a town called El Mozote and in another called La Joya, and that he thought there might be hundreds killed, and nothing had been cleaned up yet," Wipfle says. "Socorro had an eyewitness account—it had got two people into El Mozote."

Wipfle immediately sent a telegram to Ambassador Hinton, asking "confirmation or otherwise" of "reliable reports received here [that] indicate that between December 10 and 13 joint military and security forces operation took place in Morazán Department which resulted in over 900 civilian deaths." He also telephoned officials at Amnesty International and other leading human rights agencies in New York and Washington, and left a message for Raymond Bonner, at the New York Times' bureau in Mexico City. As Wipfle remembers it, Cuellar's call came no later than December 20th and probably earlier. (The telegram to Hinton, sent under the name of the Reverend Eugene Stockwell, Wipfle's boss, has been dated December 15th, only four days after the massacre, but there is a possibility that it was actually sent a few days later.)

On December 17th, an exhausted Santiago staggered into a guerrilla camp at Jucuaran—a town fifty miles south of La Guacamaya—along with the other Venceremos people, and there, he says, he found waiting for him a radio message from Morazán: "The Atlacatl Battalion massacred a thousand peasants in various hamlets and villages." If Santiago's memory of the date is accurate, then this number, arrived at less than a week after the killing, could only have been a very rough estimate; soldiers still occupied La Guacamaya and the area of El Mozote, and the guerrillas could have made no precise count. But after days of counting in some of the stinking hamlets, and the compilation, with the help of survivors, of partial lists of names, the comandantes had finally been forced to believe that many hundreds had died, and they had apparently settled on the round number of a thousand. And now they wanted Santiago and the others back, with a new transmitter that had been awaiting them in Jucuaran, so they could begin to make the world believe as well.

After five days of all-night marches, the small Venceremos crew trudged into the ravine at El Zapotal. It was noon on December 24th. On Christmas Eve, according to his memoirs, Santiago was able to take to the airwaves and tell the world that Radio Venceremos had been reborn—and to announce that during its two weeks of silence a great killing had taken place in northern Morazan. It was the inauguration of an ambitious propaganda campaign, which gathered steam steadily through December and January, and into February. The propaganda was based on truth, which is supposedly the most effective kind, but the Salvadoran government and, later, the American government would skillfully use the fact that it was propaganda—and particularly the fact that the number of dead seemed to increase with each broadcast—to undermine its truth.

On December 29th, the guerrillas stormed the Army detachments that had been left to occupy some of the hamlets in the zone, including at La Guacamaya and at or near El Mozote itself: "The attack on La Guacamaya became a major bloodbath," Villalobos, the guerrilla comandante, told me. "The lieutenant in charge knew he was in a hopeless position, but he refused to surrender—probably because he knew what had happened at El Mozote, and feared reprisals. We annihilated his position, and he died in combat. We buried him in his uniform to honor him."

The guerrillas took seven prisoners in the operation, and two of them were made use of a few days later in what Santiago calls the "information battle to denounce the genocide." Each prisoner described what he had seen in Cerro Pando, a village three miles south of El Mozote. "I expected to see dead, because we had talked to troops who had already been out and they said they had killed many guerrillas," a sergeant said. "Then we looked in the houses... and I realized that it wasn't the way they said, because I saw dead children, and the