

CARLOS—Transcript

My involvement with the army was voluntary. That is, I joined more than anything to protect my family. That was the reason why I got involved in that. I joined around 1987. I was 19 years old.

As far as I know, I was the first one to get involved from my immediate family. There were other family members, but I wasn't in touch with them. The truth is, I felt forced to join because I knew I had family in the guerrilla and there were other family members who were working for the military, without being in the military. That is, they were with the death squads. But I didn't like that way of dealing with things. I had to look for a better way, something that conformed with what I thought was right.

So on the one hand I saw that the guerrilla were looking for the relatives of those who belonged to the death squads or the civil defense groups, as we called them back then, and I found myself in the middle. I had to find a way of getting out of that situation. So I figured I would join as a volunteer, because that would allow me to be anonymous. That way, those in the FMLN and the civil defense groups wouldn't know I was involved. Because back then those who belonged to the civil defense groups were really paramilitaries. If someone got in their way, well they would just eliminate him. Same thing with the guerrilla. So if they found out I had joined, well they would have take me out too. That is why I became involved, in order to protect my family.

I did it anonymously because back then there was an opportunity for me to go the CENFA training school, which belonged to the second infantry brigade, and I went there to get trained and everything. Three months later, they took me out to the battlefield. I was a member of the military, but anonymously, since not even they knew my real name. That is, for the school officers I was someone else, you understand?

Q: Was that your decision or theirs?

Both, because when you volunteer they give you the option to remain anonymous. But if you go directly to the barracks then you don't have that option. You would have to do whatever the commander says.

I had a close family member who was part of the civil defense. The guerrilla was looking for him. We were very close; he was very important to me. And they came for me three times looking for him, trying to get information from me.

Q: Who did, the guerrilla?

Yeah. That is, I was kidnapped three times. The first two times I wasn't detained for long; it was just for a day. But the third time unfortunately two friends who were with me got killed, but still, they released me five days later. It's hard, you know? Because my two comrades lost their lives when they really didn't have to. It only happened because they were with me. They gave them the information they asked for, but what happens is, the enemy thinks, we have to destroy this tape, or else they'll give the information to someone else. And that was the reason why....

On the other hand, I also had a family member who was in another civil defense group. He tried to disappear my father twice, and my father wasn't with either side. Actually, when I was 18 years old, a civil defense group tried to forcibly recruit me and they threatened my father, saying that next time they would demolish his home, and if they had to take me out in pieces, that's what they would do. So I felt like I was already involved somehow, and I didn't know what to do. It was very unpleasant and it had its consequences too.

When I finally got involved with the military, at least I had the support of the extreme right, as we called it back then. I knew that if I went looking for their support, their help, their strength, that I would get it immediately. That's why I got involved with them. That's why I say that it was in order to protect my family. Besides, I had four younger brothers who were being recruited by both sides. They'd say, "If you want to, come with us; and if you don't want to, well, you have to come anyway." So there was no choice.

That's why at least if I was on the side of the military, they'd be protected. Because if they got recruited, I had allies. My word counted for something, and I could speak up to allow them to go back to their normal lives if they wanted to. Unfortunately, I really couldn't have done that, had I joined the other side, but since we also had family members in the guerrilla, they just let us be.

The only difference I saw between the guerrilla and the others was that the guerrilla would try to win you over politically. They would offer you things, like, if you want something we'll get it for you, and if you want something else... well, that too. That's how they would try to recruit you. They wouldn't capture you like the civil defense would. They never waited for you and kidnapped you from your vehicle. No. They would find a time when you were alone, going to work for example, or they would come to your house and talk to you, give you their spiel. But they never pressured you.

My father was a very religious man, innocently so. Without realizing it, he was collaborating with the other side. I'd like to think it was without realizing it. I remember around that time people were celebrating the anniversary of Archbishop Romero's death. Many of the tributes paid to him came directly from the FMLN. But my father didn't know that, so he participated. That's when I started thinking, is he or isn't he? It's the kind

of thing that gets in your head and you find yourself split between these contradictions. It's really hard because you're living under constant pressure. And you ask yourself, what if they find out? What's going to happen? What are they going to think? How will they react? Where am I going to stand in all of this and who will I be to them?

Actually, at one point I had my own family, while I was still involved in all of this. But to my spouse I was this bad man who said he had to go away for days, work day and night, and come back whenever. But I wasn't working, I was doing something else.

However, once I came very close to being discovered by one of my grandma's relatives. She came really close despite everything I did to conceal my identity. I had military garb and everything, but they would make us wear masks. Camouflaged, they called it. And I guess because of the accent, or the blood relation, you know? The thing is that we went by there looking for food. We had to. She heard my voice and said, "What are you doing here? The others were here yesterday."

Q: The others meaning...

The guerrilla. And all I could do was look at her, and we said everything to each other with our eyes. And that was that. I guess if she had been someone else, I wouldn't be here because she had a son in the guerrilla, you see.

It was such hard times. I wouldn't want for that to happen again.

Most of the time, we had to follow really difficult orders because they came from the United States. They were the ones who directed everything, and we were the ones who had to carry out the orders.

Once, people allied with the Americans came by and met with doctors, medics, journalists, and everyone. They were volunteers. They were giving away food like corn, rice, and beans. Everything was free. They would give you a certain quantity depending on the number of family members you had. And I remember my father came home and said, "Thank God and thanks to the United States we have enough to eat for a month." And that just threw me off. Say what? Wait a second.

Thank God and thanks to the United States? "Father," I said, "do me a favor. Please get ready to leave tomorrow morning at 3 am". "What's going on?", he said. "Just get ready, ok?" I didn't tell him I was with these or those other people. I just wanted him to understand, despite his illiteracy, to learn to see past the end of his nose. So I took him with me and left him waiting at this place.

We would get these boxes at the harbor, wooden crates that had rifles, munitions, and grenades in them. On them it read, "Made in the United States." So I went with him, with everyone's permission, and he saw all of that. That's when I said, "Look, yesterday you

said 'Thank God and thanks to the United States we have food for a month.' Now you also have to say, thank God and thanks to the United States we have weapons to kill each other." He just looked down.

About half-an-hour later he asked, how come you know all of this? And I simply said, we're not going to talk about that. Just think for a bit before you speak. Life tells us: see, hear, and keep quiet.

Q: Was that something that people would say back then?

Yes, in order to survive.

Q: Because I just came back from El Salvador and now people say, who's afraid? Or ¿Quién dijo miedo?

(Laughter) Really?!

See, hear, and keep quiet. Why? Because back then a person like you (I'm not saying this to intimidate you), a person like you was not free. You didn't have the luxury of walking around the streets and saying, I'm studying journalism. No way, because three or five days later you'd be thanking God if you were still alive. Not anymore. Not today. We're talking, what?, thirty years after the war?

Look, something else that we'd hear all the time was, "For us, everyone else is a dog." We were told that the campesino . . . that's what hurt me the most, the campesino, the illiterate, the ones who didn't know anything. Actually, they wouldn't say illiterate, they'd say ignorant . . . that we should treat all ignorants like dogs.

That is, out in the countryside, you feed a dog only when you want to feed him. And he got the stick if you wanted him out of the house, it didn't matter if it was raining outside. Whatever was happening outside, you'd kick him out. And I could see that the others, the guerrilla were on the campesino's side. They were protecting the campesino. And I couldn't register that, no matter how I turned it around in my head.

I had the opportunity to leave or carry on. There were many things that, I have to say, unfortunately, things about the extreme right that just didn't go with my ideals. But we had to obey orders. Even if it was against our will.

In fact, once when we were at this place, I had to make a decision. We were there for eight days, waiting for these three people who were supposedly guerrilla commanders. And for those three people we had to massacre whole families: children, the elderly, middle aged, young men and women. Everything. Just to find out later that the three people we were looking for were also members of the military. They were with the fourth infantry brigade, and they weren't even there.

Q: But how could they be from both sides?

That's how the politics worked back then. That's why I'm telling you, that many people decided to stay because they were told to, and I guess I can say I'm proud for being able to see through all that, and not just grab a rifle and go defend. There's a reason for everything. And if I hadn't understood the reason behind it, I could've stayed with the army for another 20 years. And if you asked me now why I was with them, I'd have said, just because I was.

So I told them that since I had joined them voluntarily, they should allow to leave voluntarily as well. They listened to me and made a decision—it was 11 or 12 people I believe—and gave me the green light and said that I could leave the army voluntarily. The only thing is that they made me sign some documents saying that I would agree to have two security teams investigate me for any reason. And I said, sure, I don't have a problem with that. And that was that.

Q: So why did you decide to leave the country, then?

Because of the poverty. It was poverty and the consequences of the war.

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