

**JOANNA CARRANZA--TRANSCRIPT**

My name is Joanna Carranza. I'm from San Miguel on the eastern side of El Salvador.

I come from a very humble, hard-working family. My father was a retired member of the military. And because he was a founding member of the Christian Democratic Party, he was always involved in politics. Back then it was considered to be a leftist party. If you knew the whole story, in reality most of the Christian Democratic Party members were killed before 1980 because they were labeled guerrilla.

My family, that is, my brother was running for political office at the time. He was elected mayor in 1980. Back then he also received a death threat and had to leave the country. He was here in the US for six months but he didn't like it and returned to El Salvador. A month later, the death squads killed him. He was Moncagua's mayor. And well, he suffered a lot because he had been tortured, disappeared and found three or four days later.

Also my family scattered throughout the country because some of my uncles, my mom's brothers, were also assassinated. They were taken down from a bus and killed by the death squads.

Later, my dad became mayor, in 1981. But it was by decree, though, not through an election. Well, because it was really dangerous back then. The president by decree told him to accept and gave him military protection, you could say. Bodyguards, members of the military, were always at our house. And then without really meaning to, we became a military objective for the left. We were, well, between two front lines.

Look, the way I grew up back then—I was 13, in the 80s—I was so scared of the night, of the sunset. You could hear the gunfire, pah! pah! And my mother would wake us all up and take us to kitchen, because it was the safest place. That was really hard. I grew up with an amazing level of stress.

I saw many times the death squads taking away poor people from their homes. They would use this small white van with tinted windows. And they would come to take away people, some of them in their underwear, and later those people would be found dead. I saw so many dead people... I think only someone who has been at war can see that number of dead people.

I was really little when my brother was killed in 1980, and then in 1987 I started college. Back then, in college, I already felt and started thinking I could do something better. But I didn't know how. When I entered college some people from the University Student Front, FEUS, came looking for me. There were some friends from high school there. They told me that they knew my case very well and my family's problems, and that they thought I would be a good member of the University Student Front and that I could fight for student rights that way. I saw an opportunity in that to... Well, not to take arms yet but to become more political.

At night we would make posters, t-shirts, screen printing, different materials... It was really nice because everyone wasn't there out of personal interest or money. Because no one got paid. We were all volunteers. You were there because you wanted to be.

But my parents found out that I was going down the wrong path. I was with this group that was seen in a bad light. They were practically considered part of the guerrilla, leftists. So my father told me that he had decided to take away his economic support for me, for my studies, and that he was going to remove me from school.

When my dad said that, I spoke with the authorities, with the leaders of the student society, and they told me that wasn't a problem, that I could continue studying there. And then, when I moved to San Salvador, we took more radical positions, we started participating in marches, in protests. I started, actually, to participate in several urban command missions. I did not stay secluded in the university.

My job became to take messages, to go to certain places that were really dangerous to find food, to send beans and rice, for the most part. And then to send to some places car batteries for generating light, which was also needed. Medicine, iodine, all those kinds of things. To channel all of that logistic support. Because those people were in the jungle, as we used to say, in the mountains, but they needed tools. They needed clothes and boots. Sometimes we would take them food. You couldn't just take the food in the open, of course, but through certain places, using different people, taking a few pounds here and there. Because there were checkpoints on all major roads and you couldn't take more than 10 pounds of beans or rice at a time. Not a lot because after all one was supposed to be poor, so you couldn't take a lot. We would take one pound here, maybe two. Devise a plan.

I lived practically of whatever they gave. I had some savings but I finally ran out, and that's when I decided to go to the base camp to live there. I decided to join the guerrilla, to get trained, to train to use arms, the AK-47 which was my favorite. I had a really beautiful one that I kept with me at all times. That was already in 1989.

It was amazing to see all the people one could find in the mountains, in those places. It was really hard to imagine. And that just gave you strength to keep going, to realize that you weren't alone. There were many people there. Even people from other countries.

There were people from France, Spain, some Mexicans, Chileans, and many Americans. And I was like, wow! These people came all the way here to fight for us. It must be because they like it, because it wasn't easy at all to live like that, to sleep always outdoors. Suffering from all sorts of things.

I learned a lot, tons, no doubt. You learn to value certain things. You learn to value everything that you have at home. It's hard, really hard. To withstand the cold. That was really awful. And all the bugs too.

When I arrived my first day at the camp, I basically took only pants and long-sleeve shirts. And it was at the camp that they gave me a pair of boots, a green pair of pants, and a t-shirt that they had just dyed green as well.

I remember a compa Hortensia who introduced me to the place. She said, ok, we're first gonna go to the river and take a bath. She said, you can then look around and you find yourself a place for your bed. My bed! I said. Yes, your bed... This plastic here is yours, is what we use for a bed. And well, when she said bed I got all excited but... Then I realized it was just the plastic (LAUGHTER). Well, then.

She was really nice with me; she helped me to get used to the place, learn many things

Every morning at five o'clock in the morning, when we got up we had to sing to the FMLN. We would sing every morning in formation, that song you know, I don't know if you have heard it: "El FMLN, vanguardia de un pueblo que lucha." We used to sing it and then we would start our daily exercises which included running, squatting, push-ups, lunges, things like that. We really kept in shape.

When I arrived they made me a member of the health and education team. I would walk two hours, every day, between one and two hours and would have to carry my weapon. My books and notebooks. We used to improvise paper for a blackboard and teach under the mango trees.

What we used to teach the compas was a bit of politics. That included how to keep the discipline and hygiene in those areas. How to stay safe from mosquitos and bugs, because we lived outdoors. The most common disease out there was fungus infections that would develop because of the humidity. Many compas couldn't even walk. There were many things that would really ail the compas, mainly because of the poverty that we lived in.

Most of the people in the rural areas liked it when we were with them because they felt so alone, so abandoned. It was like an emotional support and also they could see that those who were with us, were there because they wanted to be. They used to pay me 110 colones per month, which was like 10 dollars. With that we would buy sanitary towels, shampoo, toothpaste and a toothbrush. That was about it.

There were many experiences we shared, like when the compas talked about their families. More than anything, who lost who. Everyone there, every single person had had assassinated family members, and many didn't have any family at all. They had all been killed. They were alone. These people, which were many, didn't want peace. That is, not because they didn't like peace but because they didn't know where they would go when it all ended. They really didn't have anywhere to go. It was really sad because we would get week-long leaves where you could go visit your family, those people never left the camp because they didn't have a place to go.

And you won't believe me, but like my son who is thirteen... I had many students who were 11, 12, 13, 14. Many 12-year olds. Many without a family, alone. And those children, you would be giving lessons and they just sat there with a cigarette in their mouths like adults. They would take lessons with a cigarette and a gun, an AK-47 on their legs. Talking as if they were adults, with a manner of speech, a warlike culture that was amazing. They could talk to you about military strategies, about the enemy and the oligarchy. They were very clear in what they wanted, and I felt a lot of admiration for them. Twelve, thirteen year-olds. But also older. 40, 45, 50-year olds. And many people like me, who were 20, 25. Most of us were that age. And then you tell yourself, well, why not? If these people can do it, why not I?

Look, when I left my house I was someone who was allergic to beans. I used to get really bloated and gassy. It was a real problem for me. When I went into the guerrilla what do you think we ate all the time? Beans. And that was how my allergy stopped. That reaction to beans stopped. I had no choice since we ate beans for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Sometimes with tortillas and sometimes without. Sometimes rice with beans and sometimes beans with rice. And sometimes mixed. That is, it was a rare occasion when someone would give us potatoes.

Many things in the camp were prohibited, and one of them was to go to people's homes asking for food, or anything really because people out of fear would just give it to us. That is, people would tell you, take it, take it. But it wasn't true. They said so because they were scared. And we knew that. It was also forbidden because after all, if you did take things you were destroying that family's economy.

What we used to do sometimes, with the same money that we had, was to pitch in among many of us and buy a chicken, for example. We would eat it between 20 of us, but we would add tons of water, a lot of onions, and sometimes we didn't use anything because we didn't have vegetables. But it was so good. Oh, it was excellent. And we would add a good five tortillas to the soup and you could eat it with delight.

Once in a blue moon we would find an injured cow that was dying. Wow! That was a big feast! Forget it, everyone would come by to take a few slices of meat. But that was really rare.

The afternoons were really nice because we'd come back from giving class or taking care of our responsibilities. We would gather to talk, to make an evaluation of the day. And then soon enough someone would take out a guitar, start singing. We would socialize.

We had parties every weekend. We would dance, no doubt, even if it was just with a radio. Everyone danced with their gun on their shoulder. And sometimes we danced in the dark. Sometimes we would bring light from a few miles away. We had this really long cable and attached it to this little house. We even paid them for the use of the electricity. I didn't really dance, but I liked to be in charge of the music.

I was also very dedicated to the daily work at the camp. I used to cut their hair. Sometimes, whole battalions would come by, and I would cut the hair of 10, 15 people. I really earned the love of my buddies. Sometimes I took care of their wounds, always took care of them.

*And did you ever have to fight in combat?*

Yes, yes I did. Once we had to flee, leave running because the enemy was getting close. Someone said, get all your things, let's go! Each of use grabbed their weapon, clothes, anything we could. That's when as I grabbed my gun I heard, take the iodine! We put it in a backpack. It was about two gallons of iodine, and I had to carry it on my back. We started running.

But that was the worst thing I could've done, and now that I think about it I don't know why I didn't just throw it away. Look, to run with a thing like that where the water is moving all over. When you run with that thing it shakes and wobbles, and shakes you with it. It made me stagger so much, on top of the fear that I felt at that moment. You feel, pum, pum, pum! The bullets going right by you. And you think that you're gonna get shot in the head at any moment. Night was already coming, but I swear that as I ran I couldn't feel I was running anymore. I felt my legs burning, but I couldn't feel myself running. I'm gonna die today. That's all I could think of because my legs weren't working anymore. And most people were well ahead of me. I was alone. I felt so alone. And I said, this is it. They're gonna kill me.

That's when I decided to stop following them, and I took a right. I walked for a really long time. A couple of miles. There was a stack of maize and I dropped right there. I took off that stupid backpack that I really don't know why I didn't take off before. My heart was racing, and I was a bundle of nerves.

And I really thought I was going to die that day because I saw all these soldiers in the undergrowth. I grabbed my weapon and told myself, ok, I'm going to die but I'm taking a bunch of them down with me. I had already made the decision.

I had many of them in my sight, but if I had taken a shot that would've been murder. I

mean because I really could've killed them but also knew that they would kill me since they were already within our area.

That's when someone told them to retreat. They're leaving, I thought. And yet, I stayed in my position a good two or three hours, without moving. Around 8 p.m. I got up. There was no one around and I started walking very slowly, alone.

When I got back to the camp, everyone took me for dead. They thought that Peque Bu had got killed. It was the biggest scare I ever got. It was really intense and in the end I arrived with the iodine.

As I take it off, they tell me, damn, the iodine spilled! You got stains all over. Since iodine is brown, a dark brown, we thought that 's what it was. I'm bleeding iodine, I say. But then, all of a sudden someone says, "You're hurt, you're bleeding!" Oh shit, I say, those assholes killed me. I really didn't know how big the wound was. It was just a scratch, and I didn't even feel it. I have this little scar now. But when I saw myself all stained like that, I really thought then... Shit, I got killed! I almost even fainted.

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When the peace accords were signed, I was already back in San Salvador. That was really something. They stopped massacring people, and that was really enough for us. From that point on, the FLMN was able to become its own political party. It was really beautiful to hear the compas say that their biggest realization would be, for example, to go to Liberty Square and call out liberty! That was already a big deal. Another was to be able to walk around with an FMLN t-shirt, in the middle of anywhere, and to do so without worries. More so now that we think we're going to win the elections. That will really be our biggest accomplishment.

*Original audio can be found at [www.memoryandpeace.org](http://www.memoryandpeace.org). All credits belong to the El Salvador Oral Histories Project. October 2008.*