

# Finding Oscar: Massacre, Memory and Justice in Guatemala



*Oscar Alfredo Ramírez Castañeda holds an album containing photos of Lt. Oscar Ovidio Ramírez Ramos at the back door of his home in Framingham, Mass., on May 13, 2012. (Matthew Healey for ProPublica)*

*by Sebastian Rotella, ProPublica, and Ana Arana, Fundación MEPI,  
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## **Chapter 1: ‘You Don’t Know Me’**

The call from Guatemala put Oscar on edge.

Prosecutors came looking for you, relatives in his rural hometown told him. Big shots from Guatemala City. They want to talk to you.

Oscar Alfredo Ramírez Castañeda had plenty to lose. Although he was living in the United States illegally, the 31-year-old had built a solid life. He worked two full-time jobs to support his three children and their mother, Nidia. They had settled in a small but cheerful townhouse in Framingham, Mass., a blue-collar suburb of Boston.

Oscar usually did his best to avoid contact with the authorities. But he decided to call the prosecutor in Guatemala City. She said it was a sensitive matter about his childhood and a massacre in the country’s civil war long ago. She promised to explain in an email.

Days later, Oscar sat at his computer in a living room full of toys, school trophies, family photos, a crucifix and souvenirs of his native land. He had arrived home from work late at night, as usual. Nidia, seven months pregnant, rested on a couch nearby. The children slept upstairs.

*With reporting from Habiba Nosheen, Special to ProPublica, and Brian Reed, This American Life*

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**THIS AMERICAN LIFE** This story was co-reported with *This American Life* from WBEZ Chicago, which produced a one-hour radio version airing this weekend on these stations and available for download at 8 p.m. EST Sunday. Also co-reporting was Fundación MEPI in Mexico City, which published the story in Spanish.



Oscar's green eyes scanned the screen. The email had arrived. He took a breath and clicked.

"You don't know me," it began.

The prosecutor said she was investigating a savage episode of the war, a case that had deeply affected her. In 1982, a squad of army commandos had stormed the village of Dos Erres and slaughtered more than 250 men, women and children.

Two small boys who survived were taken away by the commandos. Twenty-nine years later, 15 years after she had started hunting the killers, the prosecutor had reached an inescapable conclusion: Oscar was one of the boys who had been abducted.

"I know that you were much loved and well treated by the family in which you grew up," the prosecutor wrote. "I hope you have the maturity to absorb everything I am telling you."

"The point is, Oscar Alfredo, that although you don't know it, you were a victim of this sad event I mentioned, just like the other child I told you that we found, and the families of the people who died in that place."

By now, Nidia was reading over his shoulder. The prosecutor said she could arrange a DNA test to confirm her theory. She offered an incentive: help with Oscar's immigration status in the United States.

"This is a decision you must make," she wrote.

Oscar's mind raced through images of his childhood. He struggled to reconcile the prosecutor's words with his memories. He had never known his mother. He did not remember his father, who had never married. Lt. Oscar Ovidio Ramírez Ramos had died in an accident when he was just four. Oscar's grandmother and aunts had raised him to revere his father.

As the family told it, the lieutenant was a hero. He graduated at the top of his academy class, became an elite commando and won medals in combat. Oscar treasured the soldier's red beret, his aging photo album. He liked to leaf through the pictures showing an officer with a bantam build and youthful smile, riding in a tank, carrying the flag.

The lieutenant's nickname, a diminutive of Oscar, was Cocorico. Oscar called himself Cocorico the Second.

"You don't know me."

If the prosecutor's suspicions were correct, Oscar didn't know himself. He was not the son of an honorable soldier. He was a kidnapping victim, a battlefield trophy, living proof of mass murder.

Yet, as overwhelming as the revelation was, Oscar had to admit it was not completely new. A decade earlier, someone had sent him a Guatemalan newspaper article about Dos Erres. It mentioned his name and the supposed abduction.

But his family back home convinced him the idea was preposterous, a leftist fabrication.

Far from the harsh realities of Guatemala, Oscar put the story out of his mind. The country he had left was among the most desperate and violent in the Americas. About 200,000 people died in the civil war that had ended in 1996. The right-wing military, accused of genocide in the conflict, remained powerful.

Now, the case was pulling Oscar into Guatemala's struggle with its own tragic history. If he took the DNA test and the results were positive, it would transform his life in dangerous ways. He would become flesh-and-blood evidence in the quest to find justice for the victims of Dos Erres. He would have to accept that his identity, his whole world, had been based on a lie. And he would be a potential target for powerful forces that wanted to keep Guatemala's secrets buried.

Guatemalans wrestled with a similar dilemma. They were divided over how much effort to devote to punish the crimes of the past in a society overwhelmed by lawlessness. The uniformed killers and torturers of the 1980s had helped spawn the mafias, corruption and crime that assail Central America's small and weak states. The Dos Erres investigation was part of the battle against impunity, a fight for the future. But small victories had big potential costs: retaliation, political strife.

Like his country, Oscar would have to choose whether to confront painful truths.

## **Chapter 2: 'We're Not Dogs For You To Kill'**

The fall of 1982 was tense in Petén, Guatemala's northern panhandle near Mexico.

Government troops in the region battled a guerrilla group known as the Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes (Rebel Armed Forces), or FAR. The nationwide counterinsurgency campaign was methodical and brutal. Dictator Efraín Ríos Montt, a general who had taken power after a coup in March, unleashed search-and-destroy missions on rural villages suspected of sheltering guerrillas.

Although there had been fighting near Dos Erres, the remote jungle hamlet was comparatively calm. It had been founded only four years earlier in a government land redistribution program. Unlike areas where rebels recruited aggressively among the country's indigenous peoples, the residents of Dos Erres were mainly ladinos — Guatemalans of mixed white and indigenous descent. The 60 families who lived in the lush terrain grew beans, corn and pineapples. There were dirt roads, a school and two churches, one Catholic and one evangelical. The village name, which meant "Two R's," was a tribute to the founders, Federico Aquino Ruano and Marcos Reyes.

The area army commander, Lt. Carlos Antonio Carias, wanted the men of Dos Erres to join an armed civil-defense patrol at his base in the town of Las Cruces, about seven miles away. The men resisted, saying they would only patrol their own community. Lt. Carias turned hostile, accusing the people of Dos Erres of harboring guerrillas. He barred residents from flag-raising ceremonies. As evidence of their supposed treachery, he showed his superiors a harvesting sack that bore the initials FAR, claiming it was the insignia of the rebel group. In reality, the sack belonged to the hamlet's cofounder Ruano and was inscribed with his initials.

In October, the army suffered a humiliating defeat in which guerrillas killed a group of soldiers and made off with about 20 rifles. By early December, intelligence indicated the rifles were in the area of Dos Erres. The army decided to send its crack commandos, the Kaibiles, to recover the weapons and teach the villagers a lesson.

The commandos were the point of the spear in an anti-guerrilla offensive that had already drawn international condemnation. Kaibil means "having the strength and astuteness of two tigers" in the Mam indigenous language. With a notoriously harsh training regime in survival skills, counterinsurgency and psychological warfare, the Kaibil commandos were viewed as Latin America's most brutal special forces. Their motto: "If I advance, follow me; if I stop, urge me on; if I retreat, kill me."

The plan was to conceal the identity of the raiders. On Dec. 6, 1982, a 20-man Kaibil squad assembled at a base in Petén and disguised themselves as guerrillas, replacing their uniforms with green T-shirts, civilian pants and red armbands. The 40 uniformed troops who joined them had orders to provide perimeter support and prevent anyone from entering or leaving. Whatever happened in Dos Erres would be blamed on the leftists.

The troops departed at 10 p.m. in two unmarked trucks. They drove until midnight, then hiked for two hours into the dense humid jungle. They were guided by a captive guerrilla who had been forced into the mission.

On the outskirts of the hamlet, the attack squad deployed in the usual configuration of groups: assault, perimeter, combat support and command.

The command group had a radio operator who would communicate with army brass throughout the operation. The assault group consisted of specialists in interrogation and close-quarters, hands-on killing. Even fellow commandos in the squad kept their distance from the marauders of the assault group, whom they viewed as psychopaths.

The Kaibiles chosen for the secret mission were considered the elite of the elite. At 28, Lt. Ramírez was the most experienced of them all.

Known as Cocorico and El Indio (The Indian), Ramírez had graduated at the top of his class in 1975. He had won a scholarship for advanced training in Colombia, but got in trouble for partying and mispending funds. Suspended by the army for six months, he fought in Nicaragua as a mercenary in 1978 for the forces of the dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle, a U.S. ally. Leftist guerrillas toppled Somoza the next year, raising fears of a domino effect and reinforcing Guatemala's role as a strategic bastion for Washington's fight against communism in Central America.

Ramírez returned to Guatemala and joined an artillery unit. Wounded and decorated in November 1981, he engaged in covert operations against guerrillas, often in civilian dress, and developed a reputation for cruelty and thievery. A fellow soldier who served with him considered him "a criminal in uniform."

Other veterans, however, admired his battlefield prowess and loyalty to his troops. Ramírez was a dutiful son, wiring money to his mother each month. The mother complained frequently that the unmarried lieutenant hadn't given her a grandchild.

Ramírez became an instructor at the commando training school in Petén. In 1982, the Ríos Montt regime closed the school and created a roving squad of instructors who were skilled combatants: lieutenants, sergeants, corporals. Ramírez was deputy commander of the unit, which could be deployed rapidly as a strike force in rebel strongholds.

The squad stormed Dos Erres at 2 a.m.

Commandos kicked in doors and rounded up families. Although the soldiers had been ready for a firefight, there was no resistance. They did not find any of the stolen rifles.

The commandos herded the men into a school and the women and children into a church. The violence began before dawn. One of the soldiers, César Ibañez, heard the screams of girls begging for help. Several soldiers watched as Lt. César Adán Rosales Batres raped a girl in front of her family. Following their superior officer, other commandos started raping girls and women.

At midday, the commandos ordered the women they had abused to prepare food at a small ranch. The soldiers ate in shifts, five at a time. Young women cried as they served Ibañez and the others. Returning to his post, Ibañez saw a sergeant leading a girl down an alley.

The sergeant told him the "vaccinations" had started.

The commandos brought the villagers one by one to the center of the hamlet, near a dry well about 40 feet deep. Favio Pinzón Jerez, the squad's cook, and other soldiers reassured the captives that everything would be all right. They were going to be vaccinated. It was a routine health precaution, nothing to worry about.

Commando Gilberto Jordán drew first blood. He carried a baby to the well and hurled it to its death. Jordán wept as he killed the infant. Yet he and another soldier, Manuel Pop Sun, kept throwing children down the well.

The commandos blindfolded the adults and made them kneel, one at a time. They interrogated them about the rifles, aliases, guerrilla leaders. When the villagers protested that they knew nothing, soldiers hit them on the head with a metal sledgehammer. Then they threw them into the well.

"*Malditos!*" the villagers screamed at their executioners. "Accursed ones."

"*Hijos de la gran puta, van a morir!*" the soldiers yelled back. "Sons of the great whore, you are going to die!"

Ibañez dumped a woman in the well. Pinzón, the cook, dragged victims there alongside a sub-lieutenant named Jorge Vinicio Sosa Orantes. When the well was half-filled, a man who was still alive atop the pile of bodies managed to get his blindfold off. He shouted curses up at the commandos.

"Kill me!" the man said.

"Your mother," Sosa retorted.

"Your mother, you son of the great whore!"

Pinzón watched as the infuriated Sosa shot the man with his rifle and, for good measure, threw a grenade into the pile. By the end of the afternoon, the well overflowed with corpses.

The carnage continued elsewhere. Salome Armando Hernández, 11, lived in another hamlet near Dos Erres. Early that morning he had traveled on horseback with his 22-year-old brother to buy medicine in Las Cruces. When they arrived in Dos Erres at about 10 a.m. to visit an uncle, commandos put Hernández in the church with the women and children.

Peeping between wood slats, the boy saw commandos beat and shoot people. His brother and uncle were killed.

In the afternoon, the raiders gathered about 50 women and children from the church and marched them toward the hills. Hernández positioned himself in the front of the line. He knew they were being taken to their deaths. So did the others.

"We're not dogs for you to kill us in the field," a woman declared. "We know that you are going to kill us, why don't you kill us right here?"

A soldier near the front charged among the prisoners to grab the woman by the hair. Hernández saw his chance and bolted off the path, gunfire echoing behind him. The boy hid in the vegetation and listened.

One by one, the soldiers killed the prisoners. Hernández heard the groans of the dying, a boy crying for his mother. The soldiers executed them with single shots from their rifles, one after another, 40 or 50 shots in total.

By nightfall, only corpses, animals and commandos inhabited the village. The squad bunked for the night in looted homes. Rain fell. Hernández crept back into town through the dark and mud. He passed the cadavers of his neighbors lying in streets and clearings. Huddled in tall grass, the boy heard the soldiers laughing.

“We finished them off, bro,” a commando said. “And we are going to keep hunting.”

Hernández eventually made his way back to Las Cruces.

Five prisoners had also survived the annihilating fury of the Kaibiles. It was a fluke: The three teenage girls and two small boys had apparently been hiding somewhere. They wandered into the center of the hamlet at sunset, when most of the villagers were dead. Commandos took them to a house that had been converted into the command post. The lieutenants decided not to kill the newcomers right away.

On the morning of Dec. 8, the squad set off on foot into the jungle hills, captives in tow. The commandos dressed the girls in military uniforms. Lt. Ramírez took charge of the 3-year-old boy; Santos Lopez Alonzo, the squad's baker, carried the 5-year-old.

That night, three commandos took the teenage girls into the brush and raped them. In the morning, they strangled and shot them.

The squad spared both little boys. Both were light-skinned and had green eyes, prized features in a society stratified along racial lines.

Lt. Ramírez told Pinzón and the others that he was going to bring the younger boy to his hometown of Zacapa, in eastern Guatemala, and outfit him in the style of the region.

“I'm going to dress him up sharp, like a cowboy,” Ramírez said. “Cowboy boots, pants and shirt.”

Days later, a helicopter set down in a clearing. It was there to pick up Pedro Pimentel Rios for his next assignment. He went to Panama to serve as an instructor at the School of the Americas, the U.S. military base that trained many Latin American officers implicated in atrocities. The two boys were loaded aboard the helicopter and flown back to the Kaibil base.

In the jungle, the squad hiked on. They relied on the directions of the captive guerrilla they used as a guide. The prisoner was bound to a long rope, like a leash.

The commandos were low on provisions by now. While they sat around a fire on the side of the trail, Lt. Ramírez told a subordinate, Fredy Samayoa Tobar, that he felt like eating meat.

“Where am I supposed to get some meat?” Samayoa said.

“Go take a piece out of that guide and bring it to me,” Ramírez answered.

Samayoa drew his bayonet. He sliced a piece of skin about a foot long from the back of the captive guide. He brought the chunk of flesh to the lieutenant.

“Here's your meat.”

“Oh no, no, no, you've got to execute him,” Ramírez said. “He's suffering.”

The commando killed the guide. The lieutenant did not eat the meat.

The rampage ended near the town of Bethel, where the commandos plundered a grocery, stealing beers, cigars and water. They ran across some peasants and decapitated them.

By the time the squad returned to base, more than 250 people were dead. The Kaibiles christened the mission “Opera-

tion Brushcutter.” They had mowed down everyone they had encountered.

Four days after the massacre, Lt. Carias, the commander in Las Cruces, led troops on trucks and tractors into Dos Erres. They looted vehicles, animals and property, then burned and razed the hamlet.

Carias met with terrified relatives of the missing. Some had been away from Dos Erres that day. Others lived in villages nearby. He blamed the guerrillas for the incident.

Anyone who asked too many questions, Carias warned, was going to die.

### **Chapter 3: Living Proof**

Within just a few weeks, the U.S. Embassy in Guatemala had figured out what happened in Dos Erres.

A “trusted source” told embassy officials that soldiers posing as rebels had killed more than 200 people. It was the latest in a stream of reports to the embassy blaming the military for massacres around the country. On Dec. 30, three U.S. officials went to Las Cruces, where interviews with local residents raised further suspicions.

The team flew over Dos Erres in a helicopter. Although the Guatemalan Air Force pilot refused to land, the evidence of an atrocity — burned houses, abandoned fields — was clear enough. In an unusually blunt cable to Washington, diplomats stated that “the party most likely responsible for this incident is the Guatemalan Army.”

The U.S. government kept that conclusion secret until 1998. No action was taken against the army or the commando squad. The United States continued to support Central America’s repressive but avowedly anti-communist governments.

It would be 14 years before anyone tried to bring the killers of Dos Erres to justice.

In 1996, more than three decades of civil war ended with a peace treaty between the rebels and Guatemalan military. Both sides agreed to an amnesty that exempted combatants, but allowed for prosecution of atrocities.

There was considerable doubt about whether the new government would succeed in bringing such cases. The perpetrators of some of the worst war crimes retained power in the armed forces or in rapidly growing criminal mafias. Drug cartels recruited ex-Kaibiles as triggermen and trainers.

An unlikely sleuth who challenged those dangerous forces was Sara Romero.

Romero was short and soft-spoken, her black hair parted in the middle. She looked more like a schoolteacher or a clerk than a front-line crime-fighter. At 35, she was a rookie prosecutor. She had graduated from law school the year before and been assigned to a special human rights unit in Guatemala City. Although the crimes of the war had gone unpunished for years, she was determined to pursue the investigations no matter the odds. If not, she thought, impunity would remain entrenched in Guatemalan society.

Romero was assigned the Dos Erres case. There had been hundreds of massacres during the conflict. United Nations investigators would eventually conclude that 93 percent of the casualties came at the hands of the military, and that the systematic slaughter of indigenous people constituted genocide.

Romero had little to go on. The military still insisted that the Dos Erres incident had been the work of the guerrillas. Because of the eyewitness account of Hernández, the 11-year-old survivor, the prosecutor was convinced of the army’s involvement. But she needed more.

Romero traveled to the scene, a rattling eight-hour bus ride north to the remote region. A pall of silence hung over the

ruins. She interviewed survivors who had been away from the hamlet on the day of the slaughter. Many were afraid to talk. They whispered that they feared the wrath of Lt. Carias, who was still the area commander in Las Cruces. They suspected he masterminded the massacre because he had clashed with the residents of Dos Erres.

Romero found it hard to establish basic facts, such as the identities of victims. Trying to assemble a kind of census, she asked a former teacher in Dos Erres to list the names of all the children and their relatives she could remember.

Without confirmed victims and strong witnesses, Romero might never make a case. But she found a providential ally: Aura Elena Farfán.

Dignified and grandmotherly, Farfán had thick gray hair and a disposition that mixed sweet and steely. She led a human rights association in Guatemala City for victims of the conflict. Despite intimidation and threats, she had filed a criminal complaint accusing the army of mass murder in Dos Erres. In 1994, she had brought in a team of volunteer forensic anthropologists from Argentina to exhume the remains.

The Argentines — their skills honed by investigating their own nation's "dirty war" — worked quickly and in risky conditions. The army battalion in Las Cruces harassed them by playing loud military music and following them around. The exhumation initially identified the remains of at least 162 bodies, many babies and children retrieved from the well.

Farfán handed prosecutors a major breakthrough. She gave frequent radio interviews in the area urging witnesses to come forward. After one broadcast, U.N. officials told her a former soldier wanted to talk about Dos Erres. Farfán traveled to the man's home. The activist took precautions, concealing her identity with sunglasses, a red hat and a shawl. A Spanish U.N. official followed from a distance to help ensure her safety.

The door opened. The tipster was Pinzón, the chubby, mustachioed former cook for the roving Kaibil squad. He was having breakfast with his children. After his initial surprise, he welcomed Farfán.

Pinzón told her he had left the military and worked as a driver at a hospital. He had never been a full-fledged commando because he had washed out of training. As a lowly cook, he had been mistreated by the other soldiers. He was an outsider, a weak link in the warrior code of silence. Dos Erres haunted him.

"I wanted to talk to you because what I have right here in my heart, I cannot stand it anymore," Pinzón said to Farfán.

Pinzón told the story of the massacre and named the members of the squad. The conversation lasted four hours. Farfán was overcome by a mix of disgust and gratitude. She couldn't bring herself to shake the soldier's hand. But his repentance struck her as genuine.

Pinzón soon introduced Farfán to another repentant veteran: Ibañez. She convinced both men to give statements to Romero. They recounted their stories coldly, without emotion. It would have been impossible to know the details of the massacre if the two had not testified. Because their information was fundamental, prosecutors granted them immunity and relocated them as protected witnesses.

From the start, investigators had encountered obstruction and threats from the military. Now they had explosive first-hand testimony implicating the Kaibil rapid reaction squad.

They also had a startling new lead: the abduction of the two boys by Lt. Ramírez and Alonzo, the squad's former baker.

Romero thought it was a miracle. Finding the boys was critical. They had to know the truth — they were living with the people who'd killed their parents. No other atrocity case had this kind of evidence.



In 1999, Romero and another prosecutor went to Alonzo's home, near the city of Retalhuleu. Because her office had only meager resources, there was no police backup, no weapons. Romero was apprehensive about confronting a commando with such grave allegations. She knew the Kaibiles prided themselves on being killing machines.

When she saw the soldier resting in a hammock in front of his tumbledown house, her fear faded. He's just a simple man, a humble peasant, she thought.

Family pictures in Alonzo's home confirmed her suspicions that she was in the right place. Alonzo was a dark-skinned Maya. Five of his children resembled him. The sixth, a boy named Ramiro, had light skin and green eyes.

"My oldest son has a sad story," Alonzo told the prosecutor.

Alonzo confessed. After the massacre, he had kept Ramiro at the commando school for three months. He brought the child home and told his wife he'd been abandoned. Alonzo said he had enlisted Ramiro, by now 22, in the army. He refused to disclose the youth's location. When the prosecutor's office inquired, the Defense Ministry asked Ramiro if he had a problem with law enforcement. Rather than cooperate, the ministry moved him from base to base.

Investigators worried that Ramiro would be in grave danger if the military knew he was living proof of an atrocity. Eventually, prosecutors found him and spirited him away. Ramiro told them he had memories of the massacre and the murders of his family. The Alonzo family had treated him badly, he said, beating him and using him as a near slave. During a drunken rage, Alonzo had once fired a rifle at him. Authorities convinced Ramiro to leave the army and get him political asylum in Canada.

The search for the other youth foundered.

Prosecutors learned that the boy's name was Oscar Alfredo Ramírez Castañeda. His suspected abductor, Lt. Ramírez, had died eight months after the massacre. He had been using a truck to transport wood for a house he was building. The truck overturned as Ramírez rode in the bed, killing him instantly.

Questioned in Zacapa in 1999, a sister of the lieutenant disclosed that he had brought home the boy in early 1983, claiming Oscar was his son with an unmarried woman. Prosecutors found a birth certificate for him, but no sign that the mother actually existed. The sister admitted that she had heard the boy was from Dos Erres.

Oscar had left the country for the United States. His family did not want to help the investigators find him. Romero decided to call off the search.

Investigators made headway on other leads. They had identified numerous perpetrators from the commando squad. In 2000, a judge issued arrest warrants for 17 suspects in the massacre.

In the suffocating reality of Guatemala, however, the results were anticlimactic. Police failed to execute most of the warrants. Defense lawyers bombarded courts with paperwork, appealing to the Supreme Court. They argued that their clients were protected by amnesty laws, a claim that was inaccurate but effectively stalled the prosecution.

Romero had run up against the might of the military. It looked as if justice would elude her, just as Oscar had.

## **Chapter 4: Strange News From Home**

In the summer of 2000, Oscar was living near Boston when he received a perplexing letter.

A cousin in Zacapa sent him a copy of an article published in a Guatemala City newspaper. It described Romero's search for two young boys who had survived the massacre and had been raised by military families.

“AG Looks for Abducted of Dos Erres,” the headline declared. “They Survived The Massacre.”

The story went on to explain that prosecutors had identified both young men. Prosecutors believed that one of them, Oscar Ramírez Castañeda, was living somewhere in the United States. It was quite possible that he had been too young to remember anything about the massacre or his abduction by the lieutenant, the prosecutors said.

The newspaper ran a family photo showing Oscar as an 8-year-old. The article reported more information about Ramiro than about Oscar because prosecutors had succeeded in finding and questioning the older boy before helping him win asylum in Canada.

There was a recent snapshot of Ramiro as a military cadet, holding a rifle and wearing the uniform of the army that had slaughtered his family. The story mentioned the investigators’ suspicion that the two boys, who both had light skin and green eyes, were brothers.

“The order was to finish off all the inhabitants of Dos Erres,” the article said. “No one can explain why Lt. Ramírez Ramos and Sgt. Lopez Alonzo made the decision to take the boys.”

Oscar was mystified. He called an aunt in Zacapa.

“What is this all about?” he asked. “Why is my photo in the paper?”

The aunt had seen the article. She told him she didn’t know what to make of the allegations, except that they were false. She insisted that the lieutenant was Oscar’s father, period. The story struck her as an attempt by leftists to smear the name of an honorable soldier.

In the persistent ideological strife of Guatemala, that was plausible. Many families affiliated with the military and right-wing political parties felt that the left had distorted the narrative of the civil war. They complained that Guatemalan and foreign critics exaggerated the abuses of the armed forces while playing down the violence by guerrillas.

Oscar’s aunt convinced him that the allegations were too bizarre to be credible.

“If I really have a brother like they are claiming, let him find me,” he told her. “He’ll know if he’s my brother or not.”

Oscar’s memories of his early childhood were hazy. He had never known anything about his mother. He had no real memories of the lieutenant. The boy grew up in a two-room house on an idyllic farm in the hot and dry region of Zacapa, where his family raised cows and grew tobacco. The family matriarch was Oscar’s grandmother, Rosalina. She had taken charge of his upbringing after the death of Lt. Ramírez. Oscar considered her his mother.

Rosalina was affectionate and strict. Oscar always had chores. He milked the cows at 5 a.m., worked in the fields after school, tried to make cigars — though he never quite got the hang of it. He loved life on the farm, riding horses, roaming the countryside. His aunts made sure he was clean and neat for school.

The Ramírezes were strivers. One of Oscar’s uncles was a prominent local doctor. Two aunts were nurses. The family and their neighbors and friends idolized Oscar’s father, the lieutenant, for his battlefield exploits and his generosity. He had helped pay for the education of his siblings. He had brought fellow fighters from his mercenary days in Nicaragua to settle in Zacapa. The community had even named a soccer field at a military school in Ramírez’s honor.

Curiously, though, Oscar had shown no interest in following in the lieutenant’s footsteps. His aunts urged him to go to military school, but he had an independent streak. He didn’t like taking orders.

Oscar got a vocational high school degree in accounting. It was hard to find work. After his grandmother died, he skirmished with relatives over an inheritance. He decided to seek his fortune in the United States. So in late 1998,

Oscar made his way north like so many fellow Guatemalans. He flew to Mexico and slipped illegally across the border into Texas.

After a brief stay in Arlington, Va., Oscar settled in Framingham, Mass. The suburb west of Boston had a growing community of Central Americans and Brazilians. He found a job in the produce section of a supermarket. The pay and benefits were solid, and nobody bothered him about his immigration status.

Oscar's new life soon consumed him. He reunited with Nidia, his teenage sweetheart, who had arrived from Guatemala. In 2005, they moved into a small duplex in a weathered residential complex.

Nidia gave birth to two girls and a boy, smart and energetic kids who slid easily between English and Spanish. The family kept Oscar busy: church, swimming lessons, cookouts on the outdoor grill. He rose to assistant manager at the supermarket but lost the job in an immigration crackdown in 2009. He found new jobs as a supervisor: mornings at a cleaning company, evenings at a fast-food restaurant.

Oscar was polite and poised and spoke English well. Some of the regulars at the Mexican burrito place that he managed even mistook him for the owner.

Despite the precarious nature of life as an illegal immigrant, Oscar was healthy and putting food on the table. He considered himself a happy man.

The newspaper article had stirred doubts. But he came from a part of the world where mysteries abounded, where allegations and suspicions outnumbered facts.

As the years went on, he thought about the episode less and less.

## **Chapter 5: The Hunt Moves North**

Frustrated that the Dos Erres case had ended up in limbo, Guatemalan activists sued their own government in international court.

The legal action resulted in public disclosure of the list of suspects. A few had died, but the rest were at large. And then help came from an unexpected quarter: a special unit of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement in Washington that tracks down war criminals.

The unit forwarded a lead to Jon Longo, an ICE agent in West Palm Beach, Fla. A compact Italian-American from Boston with a goatee, Longo, 39, had only two years on the job. But he had experience persuading criminals to talk. He held a master's degree in psychology and had worked for eight years as a prison therapist.

Analysts at ICE headquarters suspected that one of the Kaibil commandos on the Dos Erres list, Gilberto Jordán, was living in Delray Beach, about a half-hour drive from Longo's office. Jordán worked as a cook at two country clubs. Longo's orders were to determine if he had taken part in the massacre and, if so, to build a case under U.S. law.

It wasn't going to be a murder case. Because Jordán had become a U.S. citizen, he could not be deported to Guatemala for trial. Nor could he be prosecuted in U.S. courts for a crime committed many years earlier in a foreign country.

Longo focused instead on U.S. immigration statutes. Jordán, who was 53, had stated on naturalization forms that he hadn't served in the military or committed crimes in Guatemala. If he had been in the army or participated in the Dos Erres attack, his statements would violate laws against lying to obtain citizenship. Longo wanted to approach the case as simply as possible. He asked himself: "How do I prove these crimes?"

The agent immersed himself in the case file, circling his target. Jordán had left Guatemala soon after the massacre and

crossed into Arizona illegally. Thanks to the 1986 immigration amnesty, he became a legal resident. He obtained U.S. citizenship in 1999. He had three grown children — one of them a U.S. Marine and Iraq vet.

Longo obtained Jordán's army file from the Guatemalan government and confirmed he had been a commando. Separately, agents in Houston caught another Dos Erres suspect: Alonzo, the squad's baker, who had taken 5-year-old Ramiro. Alonzo had been deported once before. ICE charged him with breaking U.S. laws against re-entering the United States.

In early 2010, Agent Longo interviewed Alonzo about Dos Erres. He also questioned the repentant soldiers-turned-witnesses, Pinzón and Ibañez, who described Jordán's actions during the massacre. By May, Longo was ready to arrest Jordán. But U.S. prosecutors told Longo he needed more proof that Jordán had participated in the massacre and lied about it. Without direct evidence, such as a confession, they would not indict.

Longo and his bosses decided to knock on Jordán's door. It was a long shot. Murderers tend to confess more readily on television than in real-life. Especially veteran commandos versed in stealth and psychological warfare.

Longo planned carefully for the confrontation. He was dealing with a highly trained soldier who might own weapons. To help build rapport, Longo enlisted a Latino agent — a military special operations veteran — to approach Jordán with him.

As permitted by law, the ICE team concocted a ruse. Because Jordán had served in the presidential guard, they would tell him they were interested in the recent U.S. arrest of a former Guatemalan president accused of corruption. Then they would ask about Dos Erres. If Jordán refused to talk, they would have to walk away.

On the morning of the operation, Longo deployed agents to tail Jordán's wife as she worked cleaning homes in the area. The agents planned to confront Jordán at work, but he called in sick. Wearing raid jackets, the agents went to his home in a modest, multiethnic subdivision with narrow streets. Jordán's truck was parked in the driveway of his well-kept, one-story house, which sits behind a row of tropical trees. The garage door was open when the agents cruised by, but closed when they came back.

Longo called Jordán on his cell phone and identified himself. Jordán politely told him to come over. When the team knocked on his door, though, no one answered. Longo called again. No response. Minutes ticked by. The agents had their hands on their guns.

“We don't have a warrant,” Longo thought. “He could be getting a cannon ready in there, for all we know.”

Longo directed the agents shadowing Jordán's wife to stop her and explain the situation. She agreed to call her husband. He reacted like a hunted man.

“They are here to kill me,” Jordán told his wife.

“No, they are the Americans,” she said.

“They have guns,” he replied.

The tension subsided, and Jordán invited the agents into his home. He was short and stolid, with close-cropped gray hair and a lined face. He wore puttering-around clothes: baseball cap, T-shirt, jeans. They sat at a rustic wood kitchen table, photos of Jordán's children on the walls, and made small talk in Spanish and English. Soon his wife joined them.

Jordán agreed to answer questions, signing a Miranda form after Longo read him his rights. He admitted he had been a commando. He said he did not display military memorabilia in his house because his wife had heard of former soldiers attacked by Guatemalans with grudges against the military.

Longo had dealt with plenty of murderers in his career. Jordán didn't have the look of a killer. Although calm and guarded, he seemed somewhat eager to talk. He's throwing out breadcrumbs, Longo thought.

"I had problems in Guatemala," Jordán said. "They say I did things. There was a massacre."

"Where?" Longo asked.

"At a place called Dos Erres."

Longo bided his time. The conversation eventually returned to the massacre. Jordán took a deep breath. He told the story of Dos Erres. He described the slaughter at the well.

"*Todos* (everyone)," Jordán said, making a gesture to depict victims falling into the well. He began to cry. He said: "I threw a baby into the well."

Jordán told the agents that he had wept as he killed the infant. He denied raping anyone. His wife listened morosely. She knew all about Dos Erres, Jordán explained.

"I knew this day would come," Jordán said. He looked relieved. Longo felt Jordán had been dying to get it off his chest.

After about 45 minutes, Longo thanked Jordán for his candor. Heart pounding, he went out to the driveway and called a federal prosecutor to report Jordán's admissions. The prosecutor knew Longo wanted to handcuff Jordán on the spot. She told him to hold off, saying she wanted to create a clear record that the confession was voluntary.

Tell him to come to your office tomorrow morning for a formal appointment, she said.

The next day, agents arrested Jordán when he showed up with a lawyer. Within weeks, he had agreed to plead guilty to concealing facts and willful misrepresentation on his immigration application.

Prosecutors pushed for the maximum sentence. At a hearing in a Florida courtroom, they called Ramiro Cristales, who had traveled from Canada, where he lived as a refugee. Longo expected Ramiro to be a shell of a man. Instead, the 33-year-old Guatemalan impressed the agent with his courage and maturity.

In his testimony, Ramiro described commandos storming into the house where he lived with his parents and six siblings, and beating and terrorizing the family.

"We started praying because they was saying [to] us, if you believe in God, pray, because nobody will save you," Ramiro testified.

Though it is not clear how precise his memories are, Ramiro told the court he spent most of the massacre in the church with the women and children. He said the soldiers threw his younger siblings in the well.

Jordán's immigration crime rarely results in a prison term of more than six months. But U.S. District Judge William J. Zloch was disgusted by what he heard in court. He grew even angrier when Jordán's lawyer argued that her client was not a danger to the community.

"After these allegations?" Judge Zloch demanded. "How many more does he have to commit after this incident? How many more heads have to be smashed in? How many more women need to be raped? How many more people shot? How many?"

In September 2010, the judge sentenced Jordán to the maximum possible term: 10 years in federal prison.

Across the United States, ICE investigators sifted the list of suspects for leads. Agents in Orange County, Calif., arrested Pimentel, the commando who had left for the U.S. military academy in Panama weeks after killing and raping at Dos Erres. In 1985, the U.S. military had awarded Pimentel an Army Commendation Medal for his service. He was found living illegally as a maintenance worker in the United States. Authorities deported him to Guatemala to stand trial.

Federal investigators learned that Sosa, the sub-lieutenant who had allegedly thrown a grenade into the well in Dos Erres, was a U.S. citizen and prominent martial arts instructor in Orange County. Sosa moved to Canada, where he was jailed pending extradition for trial in California on charges of falsifying his U.S. immigration application. Alonzo, Ramiro's abductor, pleaded guilty in Houston. He agreed to testify against Sosa, his former superior officer.

## **Chapter 6: Cocorico2**

The U.S. arrests helped jolt Romero's investigation back to life.

The Guatemalan military had been more responsive to requests from U.S. authorities than its own prosecutors, turning over documents about the fugitive commandos caught by ICE. American investigators sent the material to counterparts in Guatemala, where Jordán's confession and other evidence strengthened the cases against about a dozen suspects still at large.

The atmosphere in Guatemala had changed. In late 2010, a new attorney general, Claudia Paz y Paz, was appointed by President Álvaro Colom. Guatemala's first female attorney general launched an unprecedented campaign against human rights abusers, charging former dictator Ríos Montt with genocide and crimes against humanity.

In addition, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in Costa Rica had ruled in favor of the lawsuit by Guatemalan activists, forcing Guatemala's Supreme Court to order the Dos Erres prosecution to resume.

Fifteen years into the case, prosecutor Romero ordered a new round of arrests in 2011. Police were able to capture three of the commandos and Carias, the former local commander.

Investigators faced danger and hostility. A witness in another atrocity case was murdered. Military families in the Guatemala City neighborhoods where suspects lived threatened to lynch police who were hunting for war criminals. Col. Roberto Aníbal Rivera Martínez, the former lieutenant in charge of the Dos Erres unit, had escaped when the arrest team arrived at his home, which was equipped with a tunnel connected to another building. Prosecutors suspected that some of the fugitives were hiding on army bases or in areas dominated by the military.

During questioning in Guatemala City, a captured commando described the abduction of the two boys. The judge supervising the case ordered Romero to redouble her efforts to find Oscar. Years before, she had been thwarted by the resistance of Oscar's family. The newspaper story about her investigation had not helped.

But once again, in May 2011, Romero returned to Zacapa, where Oscar had been raised. Again she sat down with Oscar's uncle, the prominent doctor. During her previous visit, he had accused her of slandering the lieutenant's honor with her questions about the boy. This time, the doctor was a bit more cooperative. He disclosed that Oscar was living in the United States and now had a family. He said he did not know their phone number.

"His wife's nickname is *La Flaca* (The Skinny Girl)," the doctor said.

Armed with that lead, investigators located a merchant who helped them identify Nidia and track down her family in a nearby town. The prosecutor interviewed Nidia's parents. They gave her Oscar's email address, which incorporated the word Cocorico2. Romero realized that Oscar used the same nickname as Lt. Ramírez.

A few days later, after hearing about her visit, Oscar called Romero. She kept the conversation brief, not wanting to deliver a bombshell over the phone.

Then she sat down to compose an email. She struggled to find the best words to explain that his entire life had been based on a lie. Romero knew Oscar was an illegal immigrant. She imagined his existence far from home. She thought about the impact the email might have. How would he take the news? Would he need psychological counseling?

She pushed ahead. It had to be done. She began with the phrase: “You don’t know me.”

In the moments after he read her message in Framingham, Oscar whirled through convoluted thoughts and emotions. The prosecutor was claiming that he had lived a completely different life until the age of three. He found it hard to believe. He could summon no mental picture of Dos Erres. The people he knew as blood relatives in Zacapa had treated him as a full-fledged member of the family.

Then he thought back to the newspaper article about him and Ramiro from a decade before — the story that his relatives had dismissed as unthinkable. The doubts flooded back.

Oscar called Romero and agreed to take a DNA test. Last June 20, a Guatemalan human rights investigator named Fredy Peccerelli arrived in Framingham to collect the evidence that would determine Oscar’s true identity once and for all.

The two men hit it off. With his shaved head, weightlifter’s physique and Bensonhurst accent, Peccerelli seemed more like an action hero than a scientist and human rights crusader.

Born in Guatemala and raised in Brooklyn, N.Y., the 41-year-old Peccerelli was one of the top forensic anthropologists in Latin America. His private, internationally funded Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation supported state investigations of atrocities and high-profile crimes, exhumed remains at massacre sites and clandestine cemeteries, and performed DNA tests at a state-of-the-art lab behind high walls in Guatemala City.

In 2010, Peccerelli’s foundation had analyzed the Dos Erres remains recovered years earlier by the Argentine team. The forensic investigators used sophisticated technology to take DNA from relatives of the victims and look for matches.

When they met, Peccerelli tried to imagine what Oscar had gone through as a boy. Had he seen his entire family being killed?

Peccerelli felt protective toward Oscar. The young man was wary at first. Peccerelli told him he knew what it was like to be an immigrant in the shadows. His father had been a lawyer in Guatemala, and when Peccerelli was a boy, the family had fled death threats by rushing to the United States.

Gradually, Oscar opened up, telling the story of his own clandestine odyssey from Guatemala. After the Guatemalan visitors took the DNA sample, Oscar and Nidia cooked a big meal for Peccerelli and a fellow investigator in the kitchen of their townhouse.

Peccerelli had spent years piecing together the secrets of shattered skeletons. Now, for the first time, he was face to face with living evidence. He had a rare chance to ask important questions. In past cases, children who had been abducted by soldiers had been raised abusively, like Ramiro, forced to sleep in barns and work 20 hours a day. Peccerelli was fascinated to hear about a firsthand experience.

“How did they treat you?” Peccerelli asked Oscar.

“Where I was raised, I was raised well,” Oscar said in his serene, laconic way. “I wasn’t treated differently than any

other kid.”

Peccerelli returned to Guatemala to complete the tests. He had the impression that Oscar was deeply curious, but also ambivalent.

At some level, he thought, Oscar hoped the whole thing might not be true.

## **Chapter 7: ‘Sorrows Can Swim’**

Tranquilino Castañeda had been a farmer in Dos Erres. He had escaped the massacre because he was working in the fields in another town. For nearly 30 years, he thought the commandos had killed his wife and all nine of his children.

Oscar was his youngest son: His real name was Alfredo Castañeda.

Peccerelli, Aura Elena Farfán and other investigators set up a video conversation between the two survivors.

Oscar saw his father appear on the computer screen. Castañeda was a lanky, rugged 70-year-old in a cowboy hat, his craggy face etched by decades of work, solitude and sadness.

Investigators had taken Castañeda’s DNA and talked to him for months without disclosing their suspicions about Oscar’s true identity. When they were certain and decided to tell Castañeda, they brought a doctor along just in case. One of the human rights investigators pulled Castañeda’s chair next to hers and leaned close.

“I’m going to tell you something,” she said. “Do you know that person, that young man on the screen?”

“No, I don’t know who that is,” Castañeda said.

“It’s your son.”

Castañeda was staggered. His reaction was more sad and bewildered than joyful. The group gathered around to comfort him. He downed a shot of liquor to clear his head.

The father peered in disbelief at the screen. He tried to compare the face of the grown man two thousand miles away with the chubby toddler he remembered. As the people around him watched, tears in their eyes, Castañeda addressed his son by his real name.

“Alfredito,” he said. “How are you?”

The conversation was emotional and uncomfortable. Oscar did not know what to say. Castañeda asked if Oscar remembered that he had been missing his front teeth when he was little. Oscar said he did remember that. Mainly, they spent a lot of time looking at each other.

Father and son spoke again by phone and Skype. Soon they were talking every day, getting to know each other, filling in three missing decades.

The lieutenant’s family was equally stunned. But there was no apparent rancor. They promptly invited Castañeda to visit them in Zacapa. They marveled at the resemblance between Castañeda and the man they knew as Oscar. Castañeda joined the Ramírez family for a festive outdoor meal. In photos the family sent to Oscar, his father looked years younger.

Castañeda had been destroyed by the loss of his family. After the massacre, he holed up in a shack in the jungle. He never remarried. He became an alcoholic. He drank as much as a person can.



“I thought I would drown my sorrows, but you can’t,” Castañeda said. “Sorrows can swim.”

Oscar’s deepening relationship with his father propelled him into a new world. He did a lot of thinking. Though talkative about some topics — work, soccer, life as an illegal immigrant — it took effort for him to open up about the miracles and traumas of the past year.

The one person he found easy to talk to was Ramiro, the other abducted survivor. They had long phone conversations. They asked unanswerable questions. Why did the soldiers spare them? What kind of man slaughters families, yet decides to save and raise a boy?

During the dictatorships in Argentina and El Salvador, abduction of infants from leftist families became an organized and sometimes profitable racket. On an ideological level, the kidnappers wanted to eliminate a generation of future subversives by giving or selling them to right-wing families.

In Guatemala, such crimes were more haphazard and opportunistic. Government investigators estimated the military had kidnapped more than 300 children during the civil war. In a poor and rural society, Ramiro’s story of forced labor and abuse tended to be typical.

Oscar’s experience stood out because he was treated with care and affection. Investigators think the lieutenant brought him home to please his mother because of her complaints about not him not giving her grandchildren.

Oscar waited about six weeks for the DNA results.

On Aug. 7, Peccerelli called from Guatemala City. He explained that the tests had conclusively ruled out one of the prosecution’s theories: that Oscar and the other abducted boy, Ramiro, might be brothers.

“Thank you,” Oscar said. “I’m not surprised.”

Peccerelli paused. There was more.

“We found your biological father,” he told Oscar. “He’s a gentleman named Tranquilino.”

Oscar turned to Nidia. He said the words he still found hard to believe: “They found my father.”

Oscar now understood that his “adoptive” father oversaw the murders of his mother and siblings. He read about the medieval horrors of the massacre. He realized that a stark photo in the lieutenant’s album — of soldiers posing with an apparent prisoner tethered to a rope — perhaps showed a scene like the “guide” who was tortured and killed after Dos Erres.

Oscar sat at his kitchen table, examining the photo album. He returned, quietly and adamantly, to two facts. The lieutenant saved him. And the Ramírez family treated him as one of their own.

“He’s still a hero for me,” Oscar said. “I see him the same way I did before.”

And then: “He was in the army. And in the army they tell you things, and you have to do things. Especially in times of war. Even if someone doesn’t want to.”

For the investigators, Oscar had become a powerful new witness. He had to be protected. Peccerelli helped him find a high-powered American lawyer. R. Scott Greathead, a partner in the New York office of the firm Wiggin and Dana, had been active in human rights work across Latin America for three decades. Among other major cases, Greathead represented the families of U.S. nuns who were raped and murdered by Salvadoran soldiers in 1980.

Greathead and fellow pro bono lawyers in Boston filed a claim seeking political asylum in the United States for Oscar on the grounds that he would be a high-profile target if he had to return to Guatemala.

“There are people,” Oscar said, “who don’t want to dig up the past.”

## **Chapter 8: Two Guatemalas**

Last August, a Guatemalan court found three former commandos of the Dos Erres squad guilty of murder and human rights violations. The defendants each received sentences of 6,060 years in prison, or 30 years for every one of the 201 identified victims plus 30 more for crimes against humanity.

The court convicted and sentenced Col. Carias, the former lieutenant and local commander who helped plan and cover up the raid, for the same crimes. He received an additional six years for aggravated robbery for looting the hamlet.

Two months ago, another Guatemala court handed a sentence of 6,060 years to Pimentel, the former School of the Americas instructor arrested by ICE agents in California and deported. During this trial, prosecutors used Oscar’s story for the first time, introducing his DNA test into evidence.

Attorney General Paz said the convictions sent an unprecedented message.

“It’s very important because of the gravity of the facts,” Paz said in an interview. “Before it seemed impossible.”

The case is by no means over. Seven suspects remain at large, including two of the squad’s top officers. Authorities think they could be in the United States or at home in Guatemala, sheltered by powerful networks linking the military and organized crime.

The convictions have stirred resentment. Critics argue that the left’s focus on historic human rights cases is out of touch with the realities of life. Most Guatemalans under 30 are more concerned with crime, poverty and unemployment, according to recently elected President Otto Pérez Molina, a former general and one-time commander of the Kaibil school.

When it comes to the prosecutions of atrocities, the president walks a narrow line. The silver-haired 61-year-old ran on a tough-on-crime platform. During the peace talks of the 1990s he played a leading role, and he has cultivated the profile of a moderate military man since then. After initial uncertainty about his intentions, he has expressed support for Attorney General Paz and a special U.N. team investigating corruption.

On the other hand, Pérez Molina accuses the left of exaggerating the abuses by the military and failing to acknowledge the historical context for atrocities. He says Guatemala, and all of Central America, face more immediate challenges.

“There are emblematic cases, like Dos Erres,” Pérez Molina said in an interview. “I believe the courts are the ones that have to respond and the ones that have to provide answers. Emblematic cases should be known, but it’s not the path or the route that Guatemala should follow, should get stuck in, this fight in the courts.”

This week, there was another judicial breakthrough in the Dos Erres case that has wider political repercussions for Guatemala. A judge ordered former dictator Ríos Montt to stand trial as the alleged mastermind of the Dos Erres massacre. Ríos Montt, already being prosecuted in a separate case for genocide and crimes against humanity, told the judge that he is innocent under military law.

Central America has become a front line in the drug war spreading south from Mexico. The Obama administration is battling the rise of mafias in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, all hubs for smuggling cocaine and immigrants north. The onslaught threatens to overwhelm the region. The 38 homicides per 100,000 citizens in Guatemala is about

10 times the rate in the U.S. It combines with an impunity rate (cases with no convictions) of about 96 percent. The numbers in Honduras and El Salvador are even worse.

In response, Pérez Molina wants more regional teamwork and U.S. assistance and a bigger role for the military. He wants to deploy Kaibil commandos on surgical missions, as opposed to the all-out combat with traffickers launched by Mexico's army.

U.S. legislators and human rights advocates worry that enlisting the military in the drug war, especially the Kaibiles, could lead to new abuses of civilians. But Pérez Molina said critics are behind the times. "Thinking that this army, now in 2012, is from the '70s or the '80s is a major mistake," he said.

Military officials insist that the armed forces have reformed. They deny allegations that officers have interfered with the Dos Erres prosecution or others.

Investigators say they believe the military — or factions within it — still plays a sinister role.

Days after the Dos Erres verdict last August, Peccerelli saw a car pull up alongside him as he was driving in Guatemala City with an American anthropologist. A man leaned out and stabbed at one of Peccerelli's wheels. Fearing an ambush, the burly Peccerelli sped away on the punctured tire.

Days later, a threatening note arrived at the home of his sister. It described the recent movements of Peccerelli, whose forensic work provided key evidence in the trial, and promised revenge for the prison sentences.

"Because of you, ours will suffer," the note said. "The tire was nothing. The next time it will be your face ... Son of a bitch, we have you all under surveillance with your kids, your cars, your pickups, the house, schools ... When you least expect it, you will die. Then revolutionaries, your DNA won't be good for anything."

Prosecutors say threats will not deter them.

"We are doing this precisely so that there will not be two Guatemalas," said Attorney General Paz, "so that there is not a Guatemala that has access to justice and another Guatemala of citizens who do not have access to justice."

Oscar knows both Guatemalas now. He is still trying to decipher the larger meaning. Dos Erres was one of more than 600 mass killings during the war. The pattern recurred across the map: Women raped, children slaughtered, entire villages erased. Oscar is ready to testify at future trials.

"For me, yes, it's important to investigate Dos Erres, because I am connected to this," he said. "Probably if this hadn't happened to me, I would have said, 'Look at the violence in Guatemala right now, this other stuff already is past us.'"

"Before, I thought the guerrillas and the army killed each other in the war. But I didn't know that they massacred innocent people. I imagine there is a connection between the violence of the past and the present. If you don't catch these people, it keeps spreading. People do whatever they want."

Oscar's father is not much for political introspection. Castañeda's new mission in life is to meet Oscar in person. Peccerelli and human rights activist Farfán plan to bring him to the United States soon. The waiting makes him anxious. He still wrestles with his drinking problem. Sometimes he has trouble with his memory.

But some things he hasn't forgotten. During a conversation in Guatemala City, Castañeda made a sudden request.

"Can I give the names of my children?" he said.

He recited the list. Esther, Etelvina, Enma, Maribel, Luz Antonio, César, Odilia, Rosalba.

And Alfredo, the youngest. Now known as Oscar.

“I believe it is my duty to mention them by name because they were my children,” the father said. “Out of the nine, one is still living. But all of the rest are dead.”

# How We Reported Oscar's Story

*ProPublica, May 25, 2012, 5 a.m.*

To tell the story of massacre survivor Oscar Alfredo Ramírez Castañeda, reporter Sebastian Rotella chose a narrative approach that would put readers at the scene of the Dos Erres tragedy and key events that led Ramírez Castañeda to discover the truth about his identity.

This style of nonfiction storytelling drops the conventions of a typical news story — routine attribution, lengthy quotations from subjects and documents, for example — and emphasizes action, character and dialogue to tell a story the way it actually happened.

Yet the story is no less factual. Rotella's reporting was rigorous and extensive. Anecdotes, scenic description and dialogue are drawn from the voluminous legal and historic record about Dos Erres and multiple interviews with participants in the events described.

Rotella wrote the story. To report it, he joined with Ana Arana, a veteran Mexico-based U.S. journalist with Fundación MEPI, with independent journalist Habiba Nosheen, and with producer Brian Reed of This American Life, which prepared an hour-long radio version. Arana approached ProPublica with the story and helped report it in Guatemala and elsewhere.

Most subjects were interviewed on more than one occasion to suit the differing needs of print and radio. Rotella interviewed Ramírez Castañeda and the other Spanish-speakers in Spanish. Arana (also a Spanish-speaker) and Rotella were present for most of the radio interviews, which were conducted in English with interpreters when necessary.

The team reported in numerous locales, including Guatemala; Framingham, Mass.; Washington, D.C.; West Palm Beach, Fla.; and New York. They interviewed almost all of the major characters including Ramírez Castañeda; prosecutor Sara Romero; human rights activist Aura Elena Farfán; massacre survivor Salome Hernández; the commando-turned-protected witnesses César Ibañez and Favio Pinzón (in an undisclosed location for their protection); Agent Jon Longo of Immigration and Customs Enforcement; forensic anthropologist Fredy Peccerelli; Oscar's father Tranquilino Castañeda; R. Scott Greathead, Ramírez Castañeda's lawyer; Guatemalan Attorney General Claudia Paz y Paz; and Guatemalan President Otto Pérez Molina. They also interviewed defense lawyers, Guatemalan military officials, U.S. law enforcement officials and Guatemalan and U.S. political analysts. A request to interview Gilberto Jordán, the former commando in a Florida prison, went unanswered.

Almost all the interviews were on the record, though the reporters granted anonymity to sources whose safety would have been at risk otherwise.

Rotella and the team researched extensive court files (Spanish) in Guatemala on the Dos Erres prosecutions; the U.S. court files on Jordán and the other three ex-commandos arrested in North America; declassified U.S. embassy cables obtained by the National Security Archive at George Washington University; the ruling on the Dos Erres case by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights; and background articles, books, videos, films and photos about the case and Guatemala's past and present.

This research provided a rich foundation for events depicted in the story. Rotella used multiple sources to corroborate what he describes. Conversations and quotes are based on a combination of witness testimony and other documents in the case files, court transcripts, and the accounts and recollections of people interviewed. Thoughts attributed to

individuals in the story are based on interviews with those individuals.

The official accounts and testimonies of this case have evolved over the years. They often contain uncertain or contradictory information because of the difficulty of establishing facts about an event that occurred long ago and because of the limited number of eyewitnesses, some of whom were children at the time. As in reporting any story with a vast amount of documentation and a large number of participants, some discrepancies inevitably occur. In such instances, Rotella and the team carefully weighed the evidence and presented the version of events with the strongest factual basis.

The story itself contains links to some of the key documentary sources. Readers can view this material directly. Support for anecdotes and conversations that draw on multiple sources is described below.

## Source Notes

### Chapter 1: “You Don’t Know Me”

*Oscar opening email* — Quotes and paraphrase from text of prosecutor Sara Romero email to Oscar, interviews with Oscar and Sara Romero.

*Oscar’s reaction, background on lieutenant* — Interviews with Oscar and Sara Romero and review of photo album.

Return to the story.

### Chapter 2: “We’re Not Dogs For You To Kill”

*Background on Dos Erres and Carias* — Verdicts, witness testimony and other investigative and court documents in Dos Erres trials in Guatemala of Pedro Pimentel Rios, (verdict March 12, 2012), and of Carlos Antonio Carias, Reyes Collin Gualip, Daniel Martínez Méndez and Manuel Pop Sun (verdict Aug. 2, 2011) and from interviews with prosecutor Sara Romero, human rights activist Aura Elena Farfán and others.

*Prelude to assault on Dos Erres, profile of Kaibiles and unit* — Dos Erres trial documents, witness testimony and our interviews with César Ibañez and Favio Pinzón, prosecutor Sara Romero and other investigators and experts, U.S. court files.

*“Criminal in uniform”* — Quote from our interview with a former Guatemalan military man.

*Portrait of Lt. Ramírez* — Distilled from interviews with Pinzón, Ibañez, Romero, Oscar, Dos Erres court files and testimony, Guatemalan military documents.

*Account of attack and sexual abuse* — Testimony and interviews of Pinzón, Ibañez, interviews with Romero and Agent Jon Longo of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Guatemalan and U.S. court documents.

*Account of Jordán killing baby and the “vaccinations”* — Court files in U.S. vs. Gilberto Jordán case (United States District Court, Southern District of Florida, West Palm Beach Division), interviews and testimony of Pinzón and Ibañez, Guatemalan court documents, interviews with Romero and U.S. Agent Jon Longo.

*Account of exchange of insults and scene at well* — U.S. court files in Gilberto Jordán case, interviews and testimony of Pinzón and Ibañez, Guatemalan court documents, interviews with Romero and Agent Jon Longo.

*Account of dialogue and Sosa throwing grenade and shooting into the well* — Interviews and testimony of Pinzón and Ibañez, Guatemalan Dos Erres court files, U.S. court files in Jordán and Sosa Orantes cases, interviews with prosecutor Romero and others. Sosa’s lawyer and family have defended his innocence and disputed the allegations.

*Woman's statement about "not dogs to kill" and Hernández's account* — Court testimony of Salome Armando Hernández in the two Dos Erres trials and our interview of Hernández, Guatemalan and U.S. court files; testimony and interviews of Pinzón and Ibañez; interview of Romero.

*Commando's statement "We finished them off" and description of scene* — Hernández court testimony cited above and interview of Hernández.

*Lieutenant's comment "I'm going to dress him up" and account of taking the prisoners* — Testimony and interviews of Pinzón and Ibañez, testimony of Ramiro Cristales, Guatemalan and U.S. court files, interviews of Romero and Longo.

*Helicopter scene and Pimentel going to School of the Americas* — Verdict in Guatemalan trial of Pedro Pimentel Rios, other court documents, interviews with prosecutor Sara Romero and U.S. Homeland Security officials, U.S. military documents.

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*Account of Ramiro's childhood and how investigators found Ramiro* — Interviews with Sara Romero and U.S. Agent Jon Longo of ICE, testimony of Ramiro Cristales in Guatemalan Dos Erres trials of Pimentel and other suspects, and U.S. case against Gilberto Jordán.

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*“We started praying”* — Testimony of Ramiro Cristales from hearing transcript in Jordán case, Sept. 15, 2010.

*“After these allegations”* — Judge’s comments from transcript of plea colloquy in Jordán case, July 7, 2010.

*Account of Pimentel and Sosa cases* — Verdict in Pimentel trial in Guatemala, U.S. court documents in Jordán and Sosa cases, interviews with Romero, Longo and other U.S. and Guatemalan officials, U.S. military documents.

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## **Chapter 7: “Sorrows Can Swim”**



*Account of news broken to Oscar, conversation* — Interviews with Oscar, Fredy Peccerelli.

*Account of handling of Tranquilino Castañeda, Skype call, conversation* — Interviews with Tranquilino Castañeda, Peccerelli, Aura Elena Farfán, Oscar.

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## **Chapter 8: Two Guatemalas**

Sources in this chapter are cited in the text and include interviews in Guatemala with President Otto Pérez Molina on Feb. 7, 2012, and with Attorney General Claudia Paz y Paz on Feb. 9, 2012.

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## 465: What Happened At Dos Erres

MAY 25, 2012

In 1982, the Guatemalan military massacred the villagers of Dos Erres, killing more than 200 people. Thirty years later, a Guatemalan living in the US got a phone call from a woman who told him that two boys had been abducted during the massacre — and he was one of them. ProPublica's print version:

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The transcript is also available in [Spanish](#).

This story was co-reported with Sebastian Rotella of [ProPublica](#), Ana Arana of [Fundación MEPI](#), independent journalist [Habiba Nosheen](#) and *This American Life* producer Brian Reed. Their essay "[Finding Oscar](#)," which is accompanied by a [timeline](#), [slideshow](#) and [character guide](#), can be read at [propublica.org](#) and is also available as an [eBook](#). [Annie Correal](#) helped with research and translations.

### PROLOGUE



Ira tells the story of how Oscar Ramirez, a Guatemalan immigrant living near Boston, got a phone call with some very strange news about his past. A public prosecutor from Guatemala told Oscar that when he was three years old, he may have been abducted from a massacre at a village called Dos Erres. Ira also talks to Kate Doyle, a senior analyst at the [National Security Archive](#), about the Guatemalan military's scorched earth campaign, which was going on when the massacre at Dos Erres happened. (4 minutes)

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### ACT ONE



Reporter [Habiba Nosheen](#) tells the story of how investigators first heard of human remains at Dos Erres, and how they discovered what the Guatemalan military did there. (28 minutes)

### ACT TWO



Habiba's story continues. Nearly 16 years after investigators first started looking into the Dos Erres massacre, a prosecutor tracks down Oscar and asks him to take a DNA test to see if he is a survivor. But they find out much more. (25 minutes)

Photos from Matthew Healey for ProPublica and Alex Cruz/El Periodico de Guatemala:



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## 465: [What Happened At Dos Erres](#)

**Transcript** Originally aired 05.25.2012

Note: *This American Life* is produced for the ear and designed to be heard, not read. We strongly encourage you to [listen to the audio](#), which includes emotion and emphasis that's not on the page. Transcripts are generated using a combination of speech recognition software and human transcribers, and may contain errors. Please check the corresponding audio before quoting in print.

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### Prologue.

**Ira Glass:** Oscar was 31, working two jobs with three little kids and a fourth on the way. His living room in Framingham, Massachusetts, a Boston suburb, was covered with toys, and in the kitchen in a corner were some trophies that he won as a bull fighter as a teenager back in Guatemala where he grew up. He'd been in the United States since he was 19, a dozen years.

And then, he had a strange phone call. A woman from the public prosecutor's office back in Guatemala was looking for him. Now, he was in the United States illegally. And he worried, could it be about that somehow?

And then, he spoke with this woman. Her name was Sara Romero, and it had nothing to do with that. It was way stranger. She had been looking into a massacre that had happened back in the early 1980s out in the countryside in a tiny town during Guatemala's civil war. And she believed Oscar was one of the survivors.

**Oscar Ramirez:** I was, like, confused. I didn't know what she was talking about. She said, "I know you don't know much about it or you probably don't know anything about it," because I was quiet. I was just listening to what she was saying.

**Ira Glass:** Clearly, they have the wrong person, Oscar thought. He had never been to the little town where this massacre happened. He grew up far away from there. He didn't have any questions about his past. In fact, he had a pretty idyllic childhood.

Yes, his mom had died when he was a baby. Yes, his dad was killed in a truck accident when he was four. But his dad's mom, his grandmother, raised him comfortably. He felt loved.

What Sara told Oscar was this. The massacre that she was investigating happen in 1982, when Oscar was three at a village called Dos Erres. More than 200 people were killed there Sara had spoken to several soldiers who were at the massacre, and they told her that two boys had been spared.

One of the boys, the soldier said, was taken by a lieutenant named Oscar Ramirez Ramos. That was Oscar's dad. If Sara's suspicions were right, the man that Oscar thought was his father, the man he had looked up to his entire life, had stolen him from his biological family. His unit killed them and their entire village, Dos Erres. Though, Sara says, when she first contacted Oscar--

**Sara Romero:** I told him about the two boys. We felt getting into any specifics about the participation of his dad so as not to hurt his feelings. But I let him know that he could be one of the surviving boys.

**Ira Glass:** Well, today on our radio show, we have investigators trying to solve an unsolved murder of more than 200 people from the 1980s in a case that could potentially nudge the political climate of their entire country, and finally hold military officials responsible for massacres that happened there. Just this week, the former president of the country was indicted for genocide in this case.

And at the center of the whole thing is a guy, Oscar Ramirez, who discovers that everything he thought about his past-- his dad, who he really is-- is all a lie. Oscar's DNA, the DNA of this guy in some Boston suburb, becomes the final piece of evidence in this case. The idea is that if they could just prove with his DNA that he was stolen from Dos Erres, they could link the lieutenant who raised him and his unit to this massacre. For the very first time, they might bring high level soldiers and officers to justice for one of these massacres, which had never been done in Guatemala.

From WBEZ Chicago, it's *This American Life*, distributed by Public Radio International. I'm Ira Glass. Our program today is a co-production with *ProPublica* and the Fundacion MEPI in Mexico City. It has taken months to report and research. It is truly an amazing, heartbreaking tale that takes us deep inside some experiences that I think we all see headlines about that can often seem very far away and hard to imagine the reality of, that, as you'll hear, are not far away at all. We're devoting our entire program to it. Stay with us.

OK, before we dive into this story, just a quick history review. Now, I myself was the kind of insufferable, politically correct person who was obsessed with Latin America back in the 1980s. I called Nicaragua "Neek-ar-ah-wah," and actually went to Nicaragua for a month during the fifth anniversary of the Sandinista revolution. I traveled in Guatemala during the civil war.

You, however, might be what we call a normal person and didn't do any of that. So to provide some context, I turned to Kate Doyle, who's testified as an expert witness in the trials of human rights abuses by senior military officials in Guatemala. She's a senior analyst at a watchdog group in Washington, D.C., called the National Security Archive.

**Kate Doyle:** The violence in Guatemala made the country an outlier, because you don't have anything on the scale of what happened in that country in places like Peru or Argentina or Chile.

**Ira Glass:** And so when you talk about this, I picture, OK, somewhere in the back of your mind, there's a list of the ranking of most f'ed up countries in the region.

**Kate Doyle:** Right.

**Ira Glass:** And is Guatemala number one?

**Kate Doyle:** Guatemala is way up there.

**Ira Glass:** Give me the rankings. OK, so number one f'ed up is?

**Kate Doyle:** Honduras probably right now.

**Ira Glass:** Honduras?

**Kate Doyle:** Honduras is bad.

**Ira Glass:** OK, and then number two?

**Kate Doyle:** Guatemala is pretty bad.

**Ira Glass:** Pretty bad going back decades. Starting in the 1960s, small guerrilla groups challenged what was a corrupt and repressive government. There was also a broader movement calling for political rights, land reform, workers' rights. This always met with brutal violence. Reformers were assassinated. Civilian populations in the countryside were accused of harboring guerrillas and exterminated in the name of anti-communism. This violence peaked in the 1980s.

**Kate Doyle:** These were essentially scorched earth operations. Soldiers would sweep through targeted areas. They were using plans drafted by the Army High Command. And they would essentially kill everything in sight.

**Ira Glass:** She says that what's amazing is the pattern. You see the same techniques again and again. A warning-- this description gets violent. A patrol would enter the community, usually on market day when everybody was gathered.

**Kate Doyle:** And they would immediately separate out the men from the women and children. And they would put them into some of the village's biggest buildings, like the school or the church. And then, the soldiers would proceed to destroy everything.

They would burn the fields where the villagers grew their food. They would slaughter the animals. They would destroy the houses. They would burn them to the ground. They would bring the men, then, out and execute them.

They would then take the women and the children. They would rape most of the girl children and the women. And then they would kill them.

**Ira Glass:** This happened in over 600 villages, tens of thousands of people. A truth commission found that the number of Guatemalans killed or disappeared by their own government was over 180,000. And unlike many other Latin American countries, none of the soldiers and leaders who did all this were held accountable.

**Kate Doyle:** Many of them transitioned into civilian government. Most of them continued to be very notable, very prominent figures in Guatemalan society.

**Ira Glass:** For years, the government denied the massacres happened at all. Even after a peace treaty with the rebels in 1996, a truth commission was set up but told specifically not to name names, not to gather evidence for trials. No soldier or military leader was brought to justice for the massacres-- until Dos Erres and the investigation into what happened there.

Several people were involved in reporting the story that you're about to hear. There's Sebastian Rotella and Ana Arana. There's our producer, Brian Reed, and Habiba Nosheen. Sometimes, you're going to hear Brian in the tape. Habiba narrates this story. Here she is.

## **Act One.**

**Habiba Nosheen:** When investigators started looking into the Dos Erres massacre in the '90s, people trying to uncover the truth about that sort of thing were being killed like an anthropologist, Myrna Mack, who was trying to expose the details of the military's scorched earth campaign and then was stabbed 27 times by a member of the president's intelligence team.

Or like in 1998 when a Catholic bishop headed a truth commission that concluded that the military was behind the vast majority of the atrocities during the civil war. Just two days after the report came out, he was found bludgeoned to death with a concrete block in his garage.

But none of this stopped a woman named Aura Elena Farfan when she first started looking into rumors of a secret grave at a place called Dos Erres. Aura looks like someone's grandmother. She's 72 years old with short, graying hair. In 1984, a member of her family was disappeared. Aura suspected the military was behind it, so she and her brother started looking into what happened.

Two months later, her brother vanished, too. So Aura started an organization to investigate and bring these kinds of cases to justice. And that's how she came across the massacre of Dos Erres.

**Aura Farfan:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** At the beginning of 1994, we received reports of bones being found just on the surface of the Earth. And in addition, there were reports of a well.

**Habiba Nosheen:** The well, Aura heard, had bodies inside of it. It was in the jungle, located in what used to be the village of Dos Erres. In 1982, Dos Erres disappeared. One day, the residents were there. The next day, they were nowhere to be found.

When Aura heard about the bones, she put together a team of forensic anthropologists. She told my producer, Brian Reed, and me they trekked 7 and 1/2 miles into the jungle.

**Aura Farfan:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** It was desolation. Overgrown weeds, trees, and bushes would cover us. We couldn't see each other. And because we couldn't see each other, just by whistling or yelling we would call on each other.

**Brian Reed:** Do you remember the moment that you saw the well?

**Aura Farfan:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** I remember it. It was sunk. It sank one meter, or maybe more. It was three meters below. And then, this tree was growing in the well.

**Habiba Nosheen:** They began digging-- one meter, two meters, three meters. Nothing. Day after day, they went back to the well. They invited the local public prosecutor. He came by, looked into the well, told them they wouldn't find anything there but dog bones.

Finally, they hit four meters. A warning that the next minute or so gets very graphic and probably isn't suitable if you're listening with small children.

**Translator:** We were able to see the shirt of a small boy, the bones inside. And that made us think that all the inhabitants of Dos Erres were there.

**Habiba Nosheen:** So they kept digging. And they found more and more bones, more and more bodies, more and more clothing. They dug up shirts, shoes, hair pins, heart-shaped earrings, boots with silver spurs. In a video they shot at the time, one of the anthropologists stands at the bottom of the well. It's about 40 feet deep. She looks exhausted. There's a tiny skeleton at her feet.

**Female Anthropologist:** [SPEAKING SPANISH].

**Habiba Nosheen:** Just to think that they were thrown from that height into the well, she says, it's hard to even imagine it. It's hard to convince herself of these things. At the end of it all, they found at least 162 bodies plus lots of incomplete remains. 67 of the bodies were victims under 12 years old. Their average age was seven.

Aura and her team wanted to identify these bodies. So they took the remains to the center of the nearest town. They put them together as best they could into skeletons and laid them out. Alongside, they placed the clothing they found in the well next to the body they thought each piece belonged to. Then, they put out an invitation for the community to come and look.

There is video of this, all the bones and clothing spread out on a concrete floor. People filed by, taking it all in. Some of them recognized clothing worn by their relatives and friends from Dos Erres.

**Female:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]:

**Habiba Nosheen:** But only 10 people came forward to specifically identify relatives. Most were still afraid to admit they knew anyone who had disappeared from Dos Erres. People still remembered how, in 1982 right after the village vanished, family members went to the army commander in the nearest town and asked what happened. This commander, Lieutenant Carlos Antonio Carias, said the guerrillas were responsible. The guerrillas had killed or taken everyone.

But he also told family members that if they talked about the incident, even asked about it, they would die-- which just reinforced people's suspicions that the Army was probably behind it. So Aura put herself out there even more to try to get people to talk. She appeared on local media in the province they were in, Peten.

**Aura Farfan:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** Each time that we visited in Peten, we took advantage of that moment to speak on the radio, to speak on the TV, to ask people that whoever knew something about Dos Erres to come forward.

**Brian Reed:** Why were you chuckling just then?

**Aura Farfan:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** Because sometimes I think that I was too daring.

**Aura Farfan:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** The life of Guatemalans doesn't cost a thing. It's not worth a thing. And just anything could have happened to us.

**Habiba Nosheen:** Aura was worried about how members of the military might react when they heard her announcements. But she never expected the reaction she got from this guy.

**Favio Jerez:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** I heard this. And I looked at my little children playing. And I decided I'd do this so the same thing would not happen to them, as happened to the children in the massacre at Dos Erres.

## **Habiba Nosheen**

Favio Pinzon Jerez is a former sergeant in the military. And after hearing Aura on the radio, he got on a bus and took the 12-hour ride to Guatemala City. He walked into the UN office and told them he knew what had happened at Dos Erres, because he had taken part in it. He did something no one soldier had ever done in Guatemala-- he confessed.

Aura went to see Favio in Peten. A UN official trailed her to make sure she was safe.

**Aura Farfan:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** We went to his house. We knocked on the door. His children were playing nearby around a table. He says, "Come in, sit down." And so I told him, "I just come from the UN office. And they told me that you wanted to speak to me." He told me, "That's right. I wanted to talk to you because what I have right here, in my heart, I cannot stand it anymore. It's hurting me so much." That's how we talked for four hours. He told me everything that had happened.

**Habiba Nosheen:** The story Favio told Aura was deeply upsetting. For nearly 15 years, he'd kept it a secret even from his wife. He told Aura what he and other soldiers had done at Dos Erres.

**Habiba Nosheen:** Were you mad at him?

**Aura Farfan:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** Of course I was. I didn't want to shake his hand.

**Habiba Nosheen:** Why did you not want to shake his hand?

**Aura Farfan:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** Because I didn't. It wasn't in me to shake his hand.

**Habiba Nosheen:** After Favio confessed, he convinced another soldier to do the same-- to confess in exchange for immunity. This soldier's name is Cesar Franco Ibanez. They're both in hiding now. We met them secretly at a hotel.

The story they told us is disturbing. So again, if you have children with you, it's probably not appropriate for them. Also, if you're sensitive to violence, you may want to tune back in in about 15 minutes.

Favio joined the military when he was 18. His dad worked for the Air Force and got him a job, he says, because he had nothing else to do. He eventually became an Army cook. And in 1979, the Army assigned him to a place called The Schools of the Kaibiles. The Kaibiles are an elite special forces unit. They refer to themselves as killing machines.

The school is where they trained in jungle warfare, like how to jump out of planes and moving vehicles. As part of survival training, Favio says, they ate raw snake and dog. He saw people being tortured.

Favio says he tried to make it as a full-fledged Kaibil.

**Favio Jerez:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** I just really only lasted about two weeks. My knees just couldn't take it.

**Brian Reed:** So that's when you went back to cooking?

**Favio Jerez:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** Well actually, I spent a week sleeping. And then, I went back to cooking.

**Habiba Nosheen:** In 1982, the president of Guatemala, Efraín Ríos Montt, formed a secret ops unit of all the instructors at the school. These soldiers were the elite of the elite. Favio was their cook. And their job was to deploy on urgent missions all over the country. One of those was to Dos Erres.

It was fall of that year, and the Army had just suffered a humiliating attack from the rebels. Several soldiers had been killed. So commanders called up the special unit. Cesar, the other soldier we talked to, told us the story.

Unlike Favio, Cesar has the bearing of a soldier. He's serious, rarely smiles. They have the same interpreter.

**Cesar Ibanez:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** They said that a unit from our brigade had been ambushed by the guerrillas, and they had taken 21 rifles.



**Habiba Nosheen:** At the time, the military was waging its scorched earth campaign where they destroy any village they suspected of helping guerrillas, even something as small as giving them some food. In this case, officers told the unit that guerrillas were keeping the rifles in Dos Erres.

**Cesar Ibanez:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** And they told us that our mission was to recover the 21 rifles that had been taken. And so the plan was we'd go in in the dead of night for a surprise.

**Habiba Nosheen:** Their strategy was to pretend that they were guerrillas. That would make it easier to sneak in. It would also make it easier to later blame guerrillas for this attack.

So they disguised themselves. They wore green t-shirts, camouflage pants, and red arm bands. They rode in vegetable trucks that they car jacked off the highway. When they reached Dos Erres at 2:00 in the morning, they found a quiet, peaceful village. Too small, in fact, to even be a full village.

Residents were still asleep. They were mostly small time farmers who grew beans, corn, and pineapples. Though when the Kaibiles arrived, Cesar says, they expected something different.

**Cesar Ibanez:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** Well, we were expecting that they were going to shoot at us because we thought that the people in Dos Erres were all communists. And so were expecting them to attack us. We were waiting for them to attack us with heavy armament. And it didn't happen. Nobody shot at us.

**Habiba Nosheen:** They split off into smaller groups, including an assault group of the fiercest soldiers. Cesar says these were the soldiers who were normally in charge of capturing prisoners, interrogating them, and killing them. Psychopaths, he called them.

**Cesar Ibanez:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** This assault group was given the task of getting everybody out of their houses. They put the women and children in the church and the men in the school. And so when they had everyone together, some of the women at the church began to scream for help. And they were raping them. They didn't respect anyone.

**Habiba Nosheen:** Both soldiers, Cesar and Favio, say this was the moment when the mission turned from recovering rifles to something darker. It started with a lieutenant who grabbed a girl and raped her in front of her family. And because he was one of the highest ranking officers, other soldiers started doing it, too, throughout the day. Here's what Favio saw.

**Favio Jerez:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** There was a girl about 12 years old. And a guy grabbed her by her hair and dragged her along. And there in the little field to the side, that's where he raped her.

**Habiba Nosheen:** One group of soldiers, including Cesar, was ordered to guard the perimeter of the village. People could enter, but no one could go out. Others, including Favio, were ordered to start bringing people from the church and the school to a nearby well.

**Favio Jerez:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** The first massacre was of a baby. I heard crying. And I looked. And I saw Gilberto Jordan and Manuel Pop Sun carrying the baby. They threw the baby alive into the well. And that's the way the massacre began. The first were the children.

**Habiba Nosheen:** It was like an assembly line. One by one, soldiers grabbed villagers, blindfolded them, and dragged them to the edge of the well. Along the way, many of the women were raped. This is Cesar. He brought people to the well, too.

**Cesar Ibanez:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** And as they were brought to the well, they were asked, "Where are the rifles?" They said nothing about rifles. And they were hit on the back of the head with a sledgehammer and thrown in the well.

**Brian Reed:** Did they ensure that they were killed before they were thrown in the well?

**Cesar Ibanez:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** No. People fell into the well. Then, all of a sudden, they reacted. They screamed.

**Brian Reed:** How many people did you bring to the well? Did you bring to their death?

**Cesar Ibanez:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** About 15, around 15.

**Habiba Nosheen:** Were you ever asked to kill anyone?

**Cesar Ibanez:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** Yes, when I took the first person to the well, Lieutenant Rivera told me to throw the person in the well. He did it so that we'd all be implicated in what happened.

**Brian Reed:** What would have happened if you said no?

**Cesar Ibanez:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** They would have killed us.

**Habiba Nosheen:** Incredibly, one person managed to escape from all this. He was 11 years old. His name is Salome Armando Hernandez. And he didn't live in Dos Erres. He and his brother showed up later in the morning to visit their uncle.

By sundown, the well was filled with bodies. And soldiers forced a group of women and children, including Salome, out of the church where they had been held, put them in a line, and led them to the forest. Some women carried their children. Some were pregnant. We talked to Salome in Guatemala City. He's 42 now.

**Salome Hernandez:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** All the women were resisting. They didn't want to go. So the soldiers started pushing and beating them. I remember one of the women saying, "We're not dogs for you to kill us in the field. We know that you're going to kill us. Why don't you kill us right here?" That's when I decided to run.

**Habiba Nosheen:** Salome waited for a soldier to turn away. And then, he sprinted into the woods. He ducked behind a tree trunk and hid. The soldier fired a shot in his direction. He fired again. Salome didn't move.

**Salome Hernandez:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** I was very scared. I was trembling. And then I saw them gathering the women. And they took several steps back. And they started firing, shooting the women. And you could hear all the women in mourning. They were screaming. And then you could still hear some of them wounded. But they were still alive. And after that, you could hear some solid shots like they were killing them one by one, the ones that were still alive.

**Habiba Nosheen:** At the end of it all, the entire village was wiped out. No rifles were ever found. Salome escaped. And according to Favio and Cesar, this patrol of killers spared just two other people, both young boys with light skin and green eyes. Three months later, the second in command of the squad that wiped out Dos Erres, Lieutenant Oscar Ramirez Ramos, showed up at his mother's house with a three-year-old boy and a fake birth certificate. He introduced him to his family as his son.

In 1996, the Dos Erres case landed on the desk of Sara Romero, the assistant prosecutor who contacted Oscar. She was a rookie, just a year out of law school. And she had almost no support from her own ministry. This is the same ministry that, at one point, had dismissed the remains at Dos Erres as dog bones. So the case wasn't exactly a priority for them. It was just Sara and one other colleague working it on their own. They had almost nothing to go on. They couldn't even prove the military was behind the massacre, never mind which unit of the military or which members in the unit.

So when Favio and Cesar came forward, it was an unprecedented break. Sara's office had to create a witness protection program specifically for the two of them, because before that they hadn't had any witnesses to protect.

**Sara Romero:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** The next step was to confirm all the pieces of information that the Kaibil witnesses had given.

**Habiba Nosheen:** Remember, Sara was trying to do something that had never been done before in Guatemala. There hadn't been a single trial against members of the military for crimes they had committed during the war. So she knew if she was going to build a case that would win, she needed more evidence.

She didn't have names for most of the victims. So she poked around until she found a teacher who lived near Dos Erres who had taught some of the children from the village back in the '80s. Sara asked her to remember, as best she could, the names of her former students. Sara used those names to track down relatives.

Because of Favio and Cesar, Sara did have the names of the other Kaibiles who had been at the massacre. So she started tracking them down, too, which meant walking up to their doorsteps and confronting them face to face, including a Kaibil who took one of the green-eyed boys who was spared that day. The Kaibil's name was Santos Lopez Alonzo.

**Sara Romero:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** I had never faced a Kaibil before. And because of the description that I had of the Kaibiles, I thought that he was going to be armed, and that if he knew that I knew something about Dos Erres he was going to shoot at me. Or perhaps he was going to capture us and torture us.

**Brian Reed:** Were you armed?

**Sara Romero:** No.

**Brian Reed:** Your colleague?

**Sara Romero:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** No, he wasn't either. None of us was armed.

**Habiba Nosheen:** Sara and her partner had to leave their car on the road and walk through the woods to Lopez Alonzo's house. They told their driver to call the police if they didn't come back.

They approached the house. And there was Lopez Alonzo, lying in a hammock.

**Sara Romero:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** When I saw him, I wasn't fearful at all.

**Brian Reed:** Why not?

**Sara Romero:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** Because he looked like a campesino, like a peasant. He was just a simple person, a person without education and not as ferocious as I imagined him to be.

**Habiba Nosheen:** Lopez Alonzo was polite and invited them in. At first, he wouldn't talk about Dos Erres. Then, Sara told him that two soldiers from his squad had already come forward. And he started telling the truth. "My oldest son, Ramiro, has a sad story," he told them. And he confessed to taking him from Dos Erres.

When Sara tracked Ramiro down, he was serving in the military that had killed his family. The fact that he existed and that he was saved by one of the Kaibiles, and raised by one of the Kaibiles, made it nearly impossible for the Kaibiles to deny their involvement in the massacre.

At the same time, Sara started to look for the other boy who Favio and Cesar told her was spared. But it wasn't as easy. The soldier who allegedly took him was dead. That soldier's mother who supposedly raised the boy was also dead. The soldier's brother refused to talk. His sister was also reluctant, but told Sara that in 1983, he did indeed come home with a three-year-old boy. The boy was chubby with broken teeth. His name was Oscar.

After his grandma died, he'd moved to the US illegally. She told Sara she had no way to reach him. So Sara stopped looking for 10 years.

**Ira Glass:** Coming up, and the Oscar goes to-- where did he go to? That's in a minute from Chicago Public Radio and Public Radio International when our program continues.

It's *This American Life*. I'm Ira Glass. If you're just tuning in, we're devoting our entire program today to a massacre of a village in Guatemala called Dos Erres in 1982, and the attempt to bring the killers to justice, which took years. One of the ways that we know about what happened at Dos Erres is from secret cables that have been declassified that were sent back and forth between the United States embassy in Guatemala and Washington, D.C.

These cables show that back in 1981 and '82, embassy officials heard lots of reports about the Army massacring whole villages throughout Guatemala, which they dismissed until finally, in 1982, at the urging of the State Department back in Washington they got in a helicopter to see for themselves if the stories were true. And this is just a coincidence-- the site that they happened to investigate was Dos Erres.

They flew their helicopter low over the village. They saw the burned-out houses. They looked for but found no survivors. They landed in a nearby town where the mayor told them that the disappearance of every man, woman, and child from Dos Erres was simply a mystery. The United States concluded that the Guatemalan Army was responsible. But they kept

this a secret, didn't discuss it publicly. And for years afterwards, the killings continued. And the US knew about it but stood by.

Before the break, you heard about how Sara Romero started her investigation, how she found one of the two boys who'd been taken from the village but couldn't find Oscar. She had enough evidence to start trying the case, though, and got arrest warrants for 17 members of the Army squad that was at Dos Erres. And then, nothing happened for nearly 10 years.

The soldiers filed motions and appeals and stalled the case before it ever got started in the Guatemalan court system. Finally, the Interamerican Court of Human Rights looked at what was going on and declared that these appeals were paralyzing justice and ordered Guatemala to bring the soldiers to trial. And that is where our story picks up, with Sara Romero still working on the case 13 years after she started it. Habiba Nosheen takes it from here.

## **Act Two.**

**Habiba Nosheen:** Finally the case was moving forward, and the judge ordered the investigators to do a bunch of things including find Oscar, the green-eyed boy who had been abducted from Dos Erres who they still hadn't located. So Sara got back to work.

She traveled back up to Oscar's hometown where she'd gone looking for him 10 years before. Back then, Oscar's uncle had stonewalled her. He refused to tell her anything about his nephew.

This time, Sara squeezed a bit more out of him. He gave her two pieces of information-- that Oscar's girlfriend was from a nearby town and that her nickname was La Flaca, the skinny one. Sara went to the town, asked around about La Flaca, located her parents. And that's how she tracked down La Flaca and Oscar in Massachusetts and convinced Oscar to take a DNA test to see if he was actually a survivor from Dos Erres.

Fredy Peccerelli, the forensic scientist who was working the case, was excited at the prospect. Usually, he's dealing with dead bodies, people who've been assassinated or massacred.

**Fredy Peccerelli:** To actually be able to talk to one of the people that we're looking for is a privilege that I've never felt before.

**Habiba Nosheen:** In June, 2011, Fredy took a swab of Oscar's saliva, his DNA, back to Guatemala and ran a series of tests. One was against Ramiro, the other green-eyed boy who was taken from the massacre to see if Ramiro was Oscar's brother. They also tested Oscar's DNA against the DNA of other people who were related to the victims of Dos Erres.

On a Sunday night in August, Fredy called Oscar with the results.

**Fredy Peccerelli:** I said, you know, remember that test we did?

**Oscar Ramirez:** So at that point, I was a little bit nervous. You never know.

**Fredy Peccerelli:** And I told him that I had the news. The news is that Ramiro is not your brother.

**Oscar Ramirez:** He told me that we weren't brothers. I said, "I knew it! I knew that wasn't true!" He says, "Yes, but I haven't finished yet. You guys are not brothers. But we compared with other people's. And we found that you have a father." I said, "What are you talking about?" "It's your father. We found your father," he said. "And you are one of the survivors."

**Fredy Peccerelli:** I just told him. "Your father's not who you think he is. The guy who you think is your father is not your father. Your father is alive. His name is Tranquilino. And he's old, but he's alive."

**Habiba Nosheen:** Yes, that's right. Fredy's team matched Oscar to his biological father. And that biological father is alive. He survived. Aura found him as part of her ongoing search for anyone related to the victims of Dos Erres.

**Tranquilino Castaneda:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** My name is Tranquilino Castaneda Valenzuela.

**Habiba Nosheen:** You hardly need a DNA test to know that Tranquilino is Oscar's dad. The resemblance is striking. Both have green eyes and curly hair. They're both thin. Tranquilino is 70, and he limps when he walks. When we met him, he wore a white cowboy hat and carried two machetes.

Tranquilino's pregnant wife was killed at Dos Erres, along with all of his children-- nine of them. Or so he thought.

For 30 years, he's lived alone in the jungle. He never remarried after the massacre, never had another child. And in the middle of our interview, Tranquilino interrupted with a request.

**Tranquilino Castaneda:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** Can I give the name of my children?

**Habiba Nosheen:** Of course.

**Tranquilino Castaneda:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** My first born was Esther Castaneda. Second one was Etelvina. Enma was the third. After that was Maribel. She was around 13 when she died. Then, it was Luz Antonio, part of my sons. Then, it was Cesar. Cesar was seven years old. Then, two other girls, Odilia and Rosalba.

**Habiba Nosheen:** Anyone else?

**Tranquilino Castaneda:** Si, Alfredo.

**Habiba Nosheen:** Alfredo was Oscar's given name.

Tranquilino was out of town when Dos Erres happened visiting relatives. When he learned about the massacre, that everyone including his wife and kids had been killed--

**Tranquilino Castaneda:** Ha, ha, ha. [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** I got all crazy. I really can't put into words. But I felt like I was stupid, dumb. I really thought I was becoming mad.

**Habiba Nosheen:** Tranquilino told us that after that, he just couldn't sleep. He would stay up night after night patrolling his house. He says he started to lose his mind. He would forget simple things, like which turn to take to get to work. His head dropped constantly.

**Tranquilino Castaneda:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** Listen, I started to drink. I was really, really deep into drinking. It was just really, really deep, because I was sad. I thought I could drown all my sorrows. But then I figure out that my sorrows could swim.

**Habiba Nosheen:** When I met Tranquilino, as soon as he leaned in to say hello, I could tell he'd been drinking. He told me it's still hard for him to talk about Dos Erres without a drink. After 20 minutes, he broke down and said he couldn't continue.

Fredy and Aura told us what it was like when they revealed the news to him that one of his children, his son Oscar, was still alive. They asked Tranquilino to come to Guatemala City. They needed to see him in person.

**Fredy Peccerelli:** Well, he hadn't been told because he's old. He's like 75. You want to be careful with how you deal with this information. So when he was told, I had a doctor standing by just in case he had a heart attack.

**Brian Reed:** Really?

**Fredy Peccerelli:** Oh, yeah. I was afraid that he might be too excited about it or something.

**Aura Farfan:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** He was told that Oscar had been found, that a DNA test had been conducted, and that the results showed with 95% certainty that it was a match. And he would take his hat off, scratch his head, laugh, cry. He didn't know what to do, because he wouldn't believe us. He felt that all his children were dead.

**Brian Reed:** What was he saying?

**Aura Farfan:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** "Incredible, incredible, incredible!"

**Habiba Nosheen:** Here's how Tranquilino remembers it. He has a different interpreter.

**Tranquilino Castaneda:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** First when they told me, I wasn't happy. I was sad somehow, and then in a bit of a shock. And I remember that because they had to give me some hard liquor for me to come back to my senses, because I was in a bit of a shock.

**Habiba Nosheen:** If that wasn't enough to handle, there was more. One of the anthropologists walked in with a laptop. She turned on Skype. And there, on the screen, sitting in Massachusetts, was Oscar.

**Tranquilino Castaneda:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** We were there talking. She pulled my chair. She put it next to her. She grabbed me hard. And then, she said, "Do you know the person, the young man on the screen?" And I said, "No, I don't know who that is." And then, she said, "It's your son." I said, "Not him." And then, I couldn't speak anymore. I couldn't speak anymore.

**Oscar Ramirez:** When we first see each other, he couldn't talk. He was just crying. And he said, "I can't talk."

**Habiba Nosheen:** Oscar just sat there looking at Tranquilino. He didn't know what to say. Oscar was just three when he was taken from Dos Erres. Seeing this man triggered nothing for him, no memories. The first thought that he had was that Tranquilino looked really old. It was hard to believe that this was his father. Then, Tranquilino spoke.

**Oscar Ramirez:** He said, "Alfredo." That was the first word that he said, "Alfredo." I said, "Yes, yes, I'm Alfredo."

**Habiba Nosheen:** That name was familiar to Oscar because it's his middle name. The lieutenant kept it for him. He also kept Oscar's original last name, which is Tranquilino's last name, Castaneda. So Oscar realized that his full name, Oscar Alfredo Ramirez Castaneda, is a combination of his biological dad's name and his Kaibil dad's name.

Tranquilino kept talking. He told Oscar that he was chubby as a kid, which was true. Oscar was chubby as a kid. Tranquilino told him he used to boss around his siblings even though they were older than him. To this day, Oscar says, that's still true. He is bossy. But the thing that really hit Oscar in the gut was something that was a mystery to him as a little kid.

**Oscar Ramirez:** He told me that I didn't have my teeth. And that was true. I didn't have my teeth for a long time.

**Habiba Nosheen:** Until he was eight or nine, he was missing a bunch of teeth. He says he looked like Dracula. Tranquilino told him his teeth had been rotten when he was young, so they had to pull them out.

**Brian Reed:** When he said that, what went off in your head?

**Oscar Ramirez:** Then I started to, you know-- suddenly, this is true. This is really happening.

**Fredy Peccerelli:** I was right there. I was on the screen with them.

**Habiba Nosheen:** Here's Fredy.

**Fredy Peccerelli:** We were all crying. There wasn't a person in that room that wasn't crying. Everybody-- I don't know. It was amazing. It was one of the most fulfilling things I've done in my life.

**Habiba Nosheen:** But the happy ending for Fredy and Aura and Sara didn't feel that way for Oscar. Oscar says it's hard to describe how he felt.

**Oscar Ramirez:** I don't even know what to tell you. I think blank. Like, what could I say? I was happy. I was more happy than sad. I didn't know what to think about it, you know what I mean? My mind was just blank.

**Habiba Nosheen:** The difficult thing for Oscar is that he really loves the family that raised him. He wasn't treated the way other children who were stolen from massacres were often treated. Ramiro, for instance, the other boy who was taken from Dos Erres, he was treated horribly growing up, beaten and used almost like a servant. But for Oscar, there's no one to easily hate. His whole life, he's looked up to Ramirez Ramos, the man he thought was his father.

**Oscar Ramirez:** I said it was very, very, very tough because he's still a hero for me.

**Habiba Nosheen:** Oscar never really knew Ramirez Ramos since he died when Oscar was so young. But growing up, he heard amazing things about him. His family praised the guy all the time, how he was the first in his class at military school, how he rose through the ranks and was able to pay for his siblings' education. In the end, Oscar's actually grateful to the lieutenant. He may have stolen Oscar, but he also saved him. Some 200 people were killed at Dos Erres-- infants, the elderly, all of Oscar's siblings, his pregnant mother. "Imagine being taken out of that pile," Oscar says. "Why me?"

We've tried to figure out why Oscar was taken. And the most plausible theory we've heard comes from Oscar's aunt. She told Sara that Ramirez Ramos wasn't married and he didn't have any children, and that his mother wanted a grand-kid. She kept asking him to give her one. So one day, he showed up saying, "This is my son. I had him with a woman I'm no longer with."

**Habiba Nosheen:** You had said to me last time we met that you wanted to know more about your dad.



**Oscar Ramirez:** Yes.

**Habiba Nosheen:** While my producer, Brian Reed, and I were reporting this story, Oscar asked us if we could find out more about Ramirez Ramos, this man who chose him. So we did.

**Habiba Nosheen:** We've talked to a lot of people. And different people have said different things. There's some good stuff. There's some descriptions. And there's some bad stuff. What do you want to know from what we've learned?

**Oscar Ramirez:** All of it.

**Habiba Nosheen:** You want to know everything?

**Oscar Ramirez:** I want to know it all, oh yeah. I want to know everything.

**Brian Reed:** The bad stuff, some of it is going to be upsetting.

**Oscar Ramirez:** That's OK. I want to know everything. It probably is not going to change the way that I think about him. But I want to know.

**Habiba Nosheen:** We told Oscar, sitting at his kitchen table. It was very difficult. Some of what Cesar and Favio said about Ramirez Ramos was positive. Soldiers looked up to him. They say they never saw him rape anyone.

In fact, Cesar said Ramirez Ramos was angry about the rapes at Dos Erres. He heard him tell another lieutenant, "This is an attack unit, not a rape unit." We asked them if they ever saw Ramirez Ramos kill anyone. Cesar said, "No, the lieutenant spent much of the massacre overseeing the operation from a tree trunk with the other commanders." But Favio said yes, he definitely saw Ramirez Ramos kill people at the well.

He said the lieutenant was actually showing soldiers how to use the sledgehammer to murder people. "It's easy to give a blow to the head," Favio heard Ramirez Ramos say as he was demonstrating. Favio says this happened while Cesar was away guarding the perimeter, so Cesar didn't see it.

We talked to a third person who knew Ramirez Ramos, a soldier who went to school with him and was stationed at a base with him before he became a Kaibil. The soldier said Ramirez Ramos had a reputation for being bloodthirsty, that he would dress as a civilian and go out in covert operations to capture people and torture them for intelligence.

**Brian Reed:** He called him "a crazy sadist," someone who took pleasure in hurting people. And that's basically what we've learned from the three people we talked to.

**Oscar Ramirez:** Obviously if you're in the army, at some point you ended up doing bad things, even if you don't want to. But killing, the killing, that's bad. But he wasn't bad with his family. He wasn't bad to me. He was my father for me. He was my father, you know?

**Habiba Nosheen:** In the summer of 2011, 16 years after Aura first found the bones in the well, a judge finally handed down a verdict in the case. Three Kaibiles and Lieutenant Carias, the local military commander who had threatened victims' families, were found guilty of murder during the Dos Erres massacre. The judge sentenced them to 6,060 years in prison-- 30 years for each confirmed victim, plus another 30 for crimes against humanity.

This was unprecedented. It was the first time any member of the military was put away for a massacre they had committed during the war. Two months ago, Sara Romero's prosecution team did it again. One of the soldiers who was at Dos Erres was found living in California. He was sent back to Guatemala and also sentenced to 6,060 years.

And even more incredible, just this week, the man who was the president of Guatemala during the massacre, Efraín Ríos Montt, was indicted for genocide at Dos Erres. Now, there are half a dozen cases like Dos Erres moving forward in Guatemala. The climate in the country is changing. And some people worry about this new direction. First among them, this man.

**Otto Perez Molina:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Habiba Nosheen:** The president of Guatemala, Otto Perez Molina. He took office five months ago. During the war, he did counter-insurgency. At one point, he was director of military intelligence. He also headed the School of the Kaibiles for a while. When Perez Molina was elected, there was concern that he might put an end to the Dos Erres case and investigations like it.

He hasn't. He's letting them move forward. There's a lot of international pressure for him to do that. It's a precondition for the US to resume military aid.

But at the same time, he says publicly that seeking justice for crimes of the past is not the best way for Guatemala to move on. He told us that 16 years ago the Guatemalan Congress granted amnesty to most people who committed crimes during the war, so the war wouldn't continue in courts. He says trying these cases is counterproductive to reconciliation. It just stirs bad blood.

**Otto Perez Molina:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** Emblematic cases like Dos Erres should be known. But it's not the path or the route that Guatemala should follow. We Guatemalans should be able, on both sides, for the benefit, for the sake of the future generations, to find forgiveness and to look forward without stumbling upon the past at every moment.

**Habiba Nosheen:** People involved in these cases are amazed at the changes now happening in Guatemala. And if you look back at Dos Erres, the Kaibiles made a few mistakes that allowed that case to be the first one of its kind-- mistakes that came back to haunt them 30 years later.

They let an 11-year-old escape, Salome, who testified against them. They abducted two boys, who later became living evidence linking specific soldiers in that unit back to Dos Erres. And probably the biggest mistake, they brought along a weak link, a guy who hadn't gone through all the intense Kaibil training, a cook who had flunked out and who, years later, couldn't stand the guilt and cracked.

Without Favio, there would be no case. He and Cesar are still in witness protection.

As for Oscar, this coming Monday, he's doing something he almost never does-- he's taking the day off from work. He's got plans.

**Oscar Ramirez:** Next Monday, yes. Next Monday's going to be a big day for me. My father is coming over to the USA.

**Habiba Nosheen:** Tranquilino is getting on a plane with Fredy and Aura to come see Oscar for the first time since they were separated at Dos Erres.

**Habiba Nosheen:** Are you nervous?

**Oscar Ramirez:** Yes.

**Habiba Nosheen:** It's fair for Oscar to be nervous. His dad's visa allows him to stay with him for six months. There is a lot to talk about. Oscar has questions for Tranquilino. He wants to know what his mom looked like. He wants to hear about

all his eight brothers and sisters. He talks to Tranquilino almost every day on the phone. But he still hasn't asked him any of that stuff. He doesn't even know basic things about his old life, like if he was the youngest of all the kids.

And there will probably be challenges. Tranquilino is old. He's never left Guatemala. He still drinks. Oscar works 80 hours a week, and his wife has four kids to take care of. They live in a two-bedroom house. But amazingly, Oscar's not focusing on that.

**Oscar Ramirez:** I'm so happy to have him over. Everybody's so happy. So all that we need is a little bit more space.

**Habiba Nosheen:** Where's he going to sleep?

**Oscar Ramirez:** In my bed, I guess. Maybe the couch.

**Brian Reed:** You're going to give him your bed?

**Oscar Ramirez:** Of course, yes.

**Habiba Nosheen:** Where are you going to sleep?

**Oscar Ramirez:** The couch, maybe, or on the carpet. We have missed so much time. So we have a lot of time to spend together. We have to spend together a lot of time.

**Ira Glass:** Habiba Nosheen, and Brian Reed, and their co-reporters for this story, Ana Arana and Sebastian Rotella, have a slide show and an even more detailed ebook version of this story at [propublica.org](http://propublica.org). The ebook's also available at Amazon and at iBooks. It's called *Finding Oscar*. The story is also running in Spanish in a bunch of publications in Guatemala and throughout Latin America. There are links to all that stuff at our website, [thisamericanlife.org](http://thisamericanlife.org).

## Credits.

**Ira Glass:** Our program and our story about Guatemala were produced today by Brian Reed with Alex Blumberg, Ben Calhoun, Sarah Koenig, Jonathan Menjivar, Lisa Pollock, Robyn Semien, Alissa Shipp, and Nancy Updike. Our senior producer's Julie Snyder. Annie Correal helped with research and translations. Seth Lind is our production manager. Emily Condon's our office manager. Production help from Matt Kilty. Music help from Damien Gray and Rob Geddis.

## [ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS]

This American Life is distributed by Public Radio International. WBEZ management oversight for our program by our boss, Mr. Torey Malatia, who stopped begging during the pledge drive so soon after he started.

**Favio Jerez:** [SPEAKING SPANISH]

**Translator:** I just really only lasted about two weeks. My knees just couldn't take it.

**Ira Glass:** I'm Ira Glass, back next week with more stories of *This American Life*.

**Announcer:** PRI, Public Radio International.

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## Separated By Massacre, a Father And Son Reunite Three Decades Later



*Tranquilino Castañeda is surrounded by his son, Oscar, top right, and grandchildren after arriving from Guatemala at Newark Liberty International Airport on May 28, 2012. (Torsten Kjellstrand for ProPublica)*

*by Sebastian Rotella*

*ProPublica, May 29, 2012, 1:21 p.m.*

*Read our original story, “Finding Oscar: Massacre, Memory and Justice in Guatemala.”*

It was a day of firsts for Tranquilino Castañeda, a 70-year-old farmer from a jungle village in northern Guatemala.

His first trip on a plane. His first visit to the United States. And the first time that he would see his son, Oscar Alfredo Ramírez Castañeda, in person after almost three decades during which he thought Oscar had died in a massacre in Guatemala.

“I was very anxious last night,” Castañeda said Monday evening after disembarking at Newark Liberty International Airport in his trademark white cowboy hat. “I couldn’t sleep because I knew I was making the trip today.”

His arrival culminated an extraordinary odyssey. During the height of Guatemala’s bloody civil war in 1982, a squad of commandos stormed the hamlet of Dos Erres and killed more than 250 men, women and children. The slaughter wiped the village off the map.

But Lt. Oscar Ramírez Ramos, the deputy commander of the unit, spared 3-year-old Oscar and brought him home to his family. After the lieutenant died in an accident, his family raised the boy as one of their own. Oscar knew nothing about his true origins and revered the soldier who had overseen the murders of his mother and eight siblings.

Castañeda, meanwhile, survived because he was away from Dos Erres that day. He lived alone mourning his wife and nine children until last summer, when an investigation by dogged Guatemalan prosecutors revealed that one son was alive. Oscar had gone north to the United States in 1998. He was living in a Boston suburb, an illegal immigrant working two jobs to support his family.

Oscar, now 32, came to the Newark airport Monday with his wife, Nidia, and their four U.S.-born children: Andrea, 11; Nicole, 7; Oscar, 5; and baby Dulce, 10 months. The children had drawn signs with magic markers welcoming their newly discovered grandfather. The girls wore dresses; little Oscar donned a blue suit and tie. The welcoming committee, which included Oscar's lawyer, R. Scott Greathead, and his wife Juliette, congregated outside the airport security checkpoint. The children kept asking why it was taking so long.

Oscar allowed that he too was anxious. He had worried that his father's health and problems with alcohol might scuttle the trip. He was relieved that Guatemalan human rights activists Aura Elena Farfán and Fredy Peccerelli, who were instrumental in the investigation, had taken charge of Castañeda and were accompanying him.

Oscar scanned the stream of arriving passengers. He had hoped his father might be among the first.

"But of course he has to be the last one," he said. "More drama this way."

Then: "There he is! There he is!"

Because of a leg ailment that makes him limp, Castañeda emerged in a wheelchair. He has a craggy, weather-beaten face with alert green eyes. He has missing teeth and talks in speedy bursts. He resembles a lean Guatemalan version of Walter Brennan, the actor who played grizzled cowboy sidekicks in classic Western films.

Oscar stooped, cradling Dulce in his left arm, and enveloped his father in a silent embrace. The children bounced excitedly. Castañeda beamed, hugging each grandchild in turn, hoisting the baby. He dabbed at his eyes with a checkered handkerchief. After years alone with ghosts and sorrows, he was surrounded by family again.

"How are you?" Oscar asked

"I'm fine," Castañeda said. "I've got an earache."

"It's the plane," Oscar said. As his father started to climb out of the wheelchair, Oscar laughed and said, "No wait, don't get off the horse yet."

"Happy?" Nidia asked her father-in-law.

"Oh, yes," Castañeda said. He insisted that he wasn't tired after his first flight. "In Guatemala, some guys lied to me. I'm going to tell them off when I get back. They said planes were rough. It's nothing. It's like riding a bus."

Oscar and Castañeda learned of each other's existence last August after a DNA test done at the request of Guatemalan prosecutors proved they were father and son. Investigators introduced them over Skype. They have talked almost every day since then on the phone, getting to know each other. Both had a new mission in life: to reunite.

The revelation of Oscar's true past changed his future. He is living proof of the massacre at Dos Erres, evidence for authorities still trying to bring the perpetrators to justice. During a trial in Guatemala that convicted a former commander this year, prosecutors used the DNA results and Castañeda testified about losing his family. Eight suspects

have been jailed in the case, but another seven, including two commanders of the killer unit, remain at large.

As a result of the revelation, Oscar took the risk of stepping out of the shadows. He has applied for political asylum in Boston on the grounds that he would be a target if he had to return to Guatemala. The military retains great power in his native land and most atrocities from the 36-year civil war, which ended in 1996, have gone unpunished.

Oscar's interview for his asylum application is scheduled for June 21. Greathead, a veteran of human rights cases in Latin America, is representing Oscar pro bono. He believes Oscar's chances of staying in the United States are good.

"I have never had a political asylum client who more deserved asylum than Oscar Ramírez," Greathead said. "In an incredible twist of fate, Oscar is a victim of one of the worst massacres by a government that we helped install, and he didn't even know it."

Oscar's story is emblematic of a larger phenomenon, the lawyer asserted: U.S. support of repressive anti-Communist regimes in Central America played a central role in spawning the violence, corruption and lawlessness that linger today, long after the return of democracy.

"The brutality and corruption going on in the 1980s — we created it," Greathead said. "We set off that chain of events that created the social, political and economic conditions that have made Guatemala one of the basket cases of the Western Hemisphere, which works to drive people like Oscar to go north, because his future was picking melons.

"Now he's working 80 hours a week raising a family, trying to live," Greathead said. "To a certain degree, every Central American up here now is fleeing the same kind of conditions that we are responsible for in that region."

From the airport, the group piled into a rented van and drove into New York City. Castañeda and Oscar rode together, little Oscar Jr. on their laps. Castañeda watched the industrial landscape of New Jersey whiz by, the Manhattan skyline approach. They made intermittent small talk. Castañeda was eager to buy cigarettes. He amused Oscar when he asked if there was somewhere he could have a pair of pants mended.

"Here it's better to just buy them, Papa," Oscar explained. "It'll cost you more to fix them than to just buy new ones. They have all the sizes you want."

Castañeda will stay at the family's small two-bedroom townhouse in Framingham, Mass., during his visit. Greathead and the Guatemalan investigators helped Castañeda obtain a U.S. visa to participate in a U.S. program to raise awareness about the ongoing fight for justice in Guatemala.

On Wednesday at 6:30 p.m., Castañeda and Oscar will discuss their story in a venue that is decidedly a first for both of them: the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at Harvard University. Future events are scheduled for New York, San Francisco and Washington, D.C.

Asked about the prospect of speaking in public at one of the world's top academic institutions, Castañeda did not sound intimidated.

"Well, I'm short on words," he said. "But I can talk about my experience."

## Video: Oscar Reunites With His Father

*Video by Melanie Burford, Special to ProPublica. Introduction by Sebastian Rotella, ProPublica., June 1, 2012, 9:41 a.m.*

Last week, ProPublica, This American Life and Fundación MEPI produced in-depth stories about a father and son who'd been separated for nearly 30 years after a massacre at their Guatemalan jungle village. Tranquilino Castañeda, now 70, believed his youngest son Alfredo -- now called Oscar -- was dead. On Monday, they reunited -- and Castañeda met his grandchildren for the first time.



*Note: Annie Correal helped with translations.*

# Immigration Charges For Accused Commando In Dos Erres Massacre

by *Sebastian Rotella*  
*ProPublica, Sept. 21, 2012, 4:53 p.m.*

A former Guatemalan Army lieutenant was extradited Friday from Canada to stand trial in Southern California on federal charges related to the massacre of 250 people in a Guatemalan village in 1982, a case that has resulted in landmark human rights prosecutions in Guatemala and the United States.

U.S. federal officers took custody of Jorge Vinicio Sosa Orantes in Calgary Friday morning and were en route to Los Angeles, U.S. officials said. Sosa, 54, is the highest-ranking officer to have been arrested on charges alleging direct involvement in the massacre by a 20-man unit of elite commandos in the northern Guatemalan farming hamlet of Dos Erres.



*Jorge Vinicio Sosa Orantes as a young soldier.*  
*(Sebastian Rotella)*

In May, ProPublica reported the story of Oscar Alfredo Ramírez Castañeda, who learned only last year that he was a Dos Erres survivor. He had been abducted by a commander of the unit and raised by his family.

Sosa, a karate instructor who holds both U.S. and Canadian citizenship, fled his home in the Los Angeles area in mid-2010 as agents of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) closed in on him. He went to Mexico and then to Lethbridge in western Canada, where he has family, and was arrested in January of last year, according to U.S. and Canadian court documents. Last month, a Canadian appeals court ended his legal fight to avoid extradition to the United States.

Because U.S. courts do not have jurisdiction for the massacre, federal prosecutors indicted Sosa on charges of lying on immigration forms. He allegedly concealed his military service and involvement in Dos Erres on the forms when he obtained citizenship in 2008 and residency 10 years earlier, according to an indictment filed in 2010. The trial could start in about two months in federal court in Riverside, Calif.

In Dos Erres, Sosa allegedly oversaw the slaughter of men, women and children who were dumped in a well during a day-long frenzy of torture, rape and pillage, according to U.S. and Guatemalan court documents. He allegedly fired his rifle and threw a grenade into a pile of living and dead victims in the well, according to the testimony in Guatemalan courts of two former soldiers who are now protected witnesses.

Sosa was a sub-lieutenant at the time, junior in rank only to three lieutenants in the squad of highly-trained commando instructors. Sosa denied guilt during a recent telephone interview with ProPublica from jail in Calgary. He said he was in another village doing a military public works project on the day of the massacre in December 1982. He described the charges against him as the product of a conspiracy.

The Dos Erres case was one of the worst of hundreds of massacres during Guatemala's 30-year civil war, which ended in 1996 and resulted in more than 200,000 deaths. In "Finding Oscar: Massacre, Memory and Justice in Guatemala," ProPublica told the story through the odyssey of Oscar Ramírez Castañeda, now a 33-year-old father of four living in



Boston. After a dogged investigation by Guatemalan prosecutors, Oscar learned last year that his life until that point had been based on a lie.

DNA tests proved that when Oscar was age 3 and living in the village, a commando lieutenant spared his life and abducted him after the unit killed the boy's mother and eight brothers and sisters. The lieutenant died in an accident months later, but his family raised Oscar as if he were one of their own. Oscar, an illegal immigrant who came to the United States in 1998, is now a father of four and works two full-time jobs.

After he learned that he was living proof the massacre, Oscar applied for political asylum. A decision is pending. He met in recent months with a prosecution team from the U.S. Department of Justice and is prepared to tell his story as a witness against Sosa, according to his lawyer, R. Scott Greathead.

"Oscar is ready to provide them with whatever assistance they need," said Greathead. "The Sosa prosecution is very significant. It represents an important law enforcement effort on the part of the U.S. government to punish human rights abusers who make false representations to the U.S. government to get asylum and citizenship."

A key eyewitness will likely be Santos Lopez Alonzo, a former member of the commando unit. Alonzo abducted and raised a 5-year-old boy from Dos Erres who, like Oscar, had survived the attack. Alonzo migrated illegally to Texas, where he was arrested in 2010 for illegal re-entry after deportation and offered to testify against other Dos Erres suspects, according to court documents. He was sentenced to time served and is in federal custody as a material witness, according to court documents.

The prosecution's approach to the Sosa case resembles the investigation of Gilberto Jordan, a former commando who was tracked down in Florida by ICE agents in 2010. Jordan confessed his role in the massacre and pleaded guilty to similar immigration charges. Jordan received the maximum 10-year sentence and is serving time in federal prison.

U.S. authorities deported to Guatemala another former commando who was arrested in California. He became one of five suspects in the case who were convicted by Guatemalan courts. Seven suspects, including the two senior officers in the unit, remain at large.

The suspects were first charged in Guatemala in 2000, but the case remained in limbo because of legal appeals and political resistance by the powerful armed forces. The hunt for the killers in Guatemala and the United States began in earnest in 2010 as the result of a ruling by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and the appointment of Attorney General Claudia Paz y Paz, who has aggressively pursued war crimes and corruption.

Dos Erres is the first massacre of the civil war to result in convictions in Guatemala. It has become a test of the capacity of that nation's embattled justice system to confront impunity and lawlessness. Prosecutors have also charged Gen. Efraim Rios Montt, Guatemala's former dictator, in the Dos Erres case.

# Guatemalan Massacre Survivor Wins Political Asylum in U.S.

by *Sebastian Rotella*

*ProPublica, Sept. 24, 2012, 12:30 p.m.*

**Update, Sept. 24, 6:27 p.m.:** This story has been revised to include comments from Oscar Ramírez Castañeda.

U.S. immigration authorities have granted political asylum to Oscar Ramírez Castañeda, an illegal immigrant from Guatemala who learned only last year that he was a survivor of a civil war massacre of 250 villagers in 1982.



Ramírez, a 33-year-old father of four who lives near Boston, received a letter Saturday from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services approving his application for political asylum, his lawyer, R. Scott Greathead, told ProPublica, which reported on the case with *This American Life* and Fundación MEPI.

Obtaining legal status opens a panorama of opportunities to Ramírez after 14 years of living in the shadows. “I am relieved,” Ramírez said in a telephone interview. “We are really happy. I am a lot calmer now. I have been thinking, I have a lot of plans.”

Ramírez filed the request late last year after a Guatemalan investigation proved that he had been abducted as a 3-year-old by an officer in a commando squad that wiped out the village of Dos Erres, one of the worst massacres in Guatemala’s 30-year civil war.

Ramírez’s mother and eight brothers and sisters were killed, but the soldier’s family raised him as one of their own. Last year, Guatemalan human rights activists traveled to the United States to reunite Ramírez with his real father, a 70-year-old farmer who had survived the massacre because he was in another town.

Recounted in “Finding Oscar: Massacre, Memory and Justice in Guatemala,” the story has become a high-profile case in both the United States and Guatemala. After almost three decades of impunity, authorities in both nations have pursued the killers of Dos Erres, bolstered by DNA evidence proving that soldiers abducted and raised Ramírez and another boy from the hamlet in northern Guatemala.

Guatemalan courts have convicted five soldiers, the first guilty verdicts for a massacre in the conflict that ended in 1996, and are prosecuting former dictator Efraín Ríos Montt as the mastermind. U.S. federal agents have caught four fugitive commandos who migrated to the United States, including Jorge Vinicio Sosa Orantes, a former Army lieutenant who was extradited Friday from Canada to stand trial in Southern California on immigration charges related to the case.

The U.S. government’s decision to grant asylum status to Ramírez ratifies his claim that he could be in danger of persecution in Guatemala. He is living proof of a crime carried out by a military that retains great power in a nation racked by lawlessness and corruption.

Ramírez’s wife, Nidia, also received asylum status as his dependent, according to a Sept. 19 letter from U.S. Citizen-

ship and Immigration Services. The couple will be eligible to apply for permanent residency in a year as well as obtaining work authorization, Social Security cards and other benefits.

“This makes them as normal and regular as they can be without being documented in this country,” Greathead said. He said he believed the news coverage of Ramírez’s case had played an important role in the approval of the asylum request.

Despite his illegal status, Ramírez has managed to provide for his family by working two full-time jobs, most recently as a supervisor at a fast food restaurant and a cleaning company. He studied accounting in Guatemala and has training in asbestos removal in the United States. He routinely spends more than 16 hours a day working and commuting.

Now that he can function as a legal immigrant, Ramírez no longer has to watch over his shoulder fearing discovery each time he deals with officialdom or drives to work. He said he would like to study a trade, perhaps as an air conditioning technician or a plumber. He also said he enjoys working at the eatery. “In the future, I would like to have my own restaurant one day,” said Ramírez. “With Latin food.”

His real father, Tranquilino Castañeda, spent the summer living with the family at their two-bedroom duplex in Framingham, Mass. It was an enjoyable and emotionally powerful visit for all involved, Greathead said. Castañeda’s visa allowed him to stay for a limited period of time, and he is complying with the terms, Greathead said. He declined to provide further details about Castañeda’s whereabouts because of security concerns.

Ramírez said he is grateful to the U.S. government, his lawyers and others who expressed interest and support after his case became public. He said he feels inspired and relieved about the future.

“I’d like to find a job in which I can reach my full potential,” he said. “And maybe in which I can have a little more time to enjoy being with my family.”

## How an Accused Guatemalan War Criminal Won U.S., Canadian Citizenship



*Jorge Vinicio Sosa Orantes, seen here as a young soldier, denies any role in the slaughter of 250 villagers at Dos Erres in 1982.*

*by Sebastian Rotella*  
*ProPublica, Oct. 18, 2012, 8 a.m.*

**Editor's Note:** *This story has also been published in Spanish.*

In May 1985, a Guatemalan Army lieutenant named Jorge Vinicio Sosa Orantes deserted, flew to San Francisco and requested political asylum, asserting that leftist guerrillas in his war-torn homeland were gunning for him.

The 27-year-old officer described his combat exploits in his application for asylum. He said he had served as an instructor in the elite “Kaibil” commandos and as a “commanding officer” in Guatemala’s bloody civil war.

“It is impossible for me and family to return as we have been sentenced to death due to my participation in the various combats in the conflictive area,” he wrote in his asylum application.

Immigration officials rejected his request, but Sosa sought asylum in Canada and became a citizen there. He eventually returned to the United States and became a U.S. citizen as well.

Recently, Sosa’s odyssey took an extraordinary turn. The self-proclaimed refugee stands accused of committing mass murder in uniform. Last month, Canada extradited him to Los Angeles to face trial on charges related to one of the

worst war crimes in the recent history of the Americas. He had fled north after prosecutors charged him with lying on immigration forms to conceal his alleged role in the slaughter of more than 250 people in the village of Dos Erres in 1982.

Sosa, now a 54-year-old karate instructor, avoided detection for years because of oversights and lack of scrutiny by the Canadian and U.S. governments, according to court documents and interviews with Sosa, his relatives, officials and others. His trial will offer an up-close look at an accused leader of the commando unit implicated in the Dos Erres massacre: a landmark case for the Guatemalan and U.S. governments, which are connected by Guatemala's violent past and present.

During years that many refugees struggled in the shadows, Sosa lived comfortably in North America. He bought a home, operated karate schools and traveled around the world.

"Imagine how different things can be for one person and another," said Oscar Ramírez Castañeda, a survivor of Dos Erres.

Ramírez spent 14 years as an illegal immigrant living near Boston, working two full-time jobs to support four children. His mother and eight siblings died in the massacre, but the 3-year-old Ramírez was abducted by a commando and raised by the officer's family. U.S. authorities recently granted asylum to Ramírez because he is living proof of the mass killing. He has agreed to testify against Sosa.

Sosa, who is jailed in Southern California, insists that he is innocent. He denies eyewitness accounts that he oversaw the killings of men, women and children and threw a grenade into a well piled with victims. He alleges a leftist conspiracy to frame him.

"It's a game being played by the guerrillas," Sosa said during a brief telephone interview last month, when he was still jailed in Calgary, Canada. "It's all a conspiracy." He added: "I am fighting still for my innocence."

Sosa maintains that he was working on a civil affairs project in another village on the day of the massacre. His omissions on U.S. immigration forms were innocent lapses, he says, pointing out that he made no secret of his past when he sought asylum.

"Both governments knew of my Guatemala military membership and my action in war," Sosa wrote in a letter provided to ProPublica by his brother, Hugo. "The United States knew perfectly well that I was a Guatemalan army officer."

Documents and interviews suggest that U.S. officials overlooked or failed to detect records of Sosa's military service at least twice when they reviewed his case. The story also raises questions about why Canada gave him refuge. Although there is no sign immigration officials knew of his alleged crimes, the Canadian government knew of serious accusations against the Guatemalan military: A Canadian diplomat participated in a U.S. investigation that found the army had committed the Dos Erres massacre.

Thirty years later, the case has become a test of Guatemala's fight against lawlessness. Courts have convicted five soldiers in the past 14 months. They were the first guilty verdicts in one of the bloodiest massacres in the war, which ended in 1996 and resulted in more than 200,000 deaths. Prosecutors have also charged former dictator Efraín Ríos Montt in the Dos Erres case, alleging that he was the mastermind of the strategy behind the massacre.

Sosa is the highest-ranking soldier in the commando unit to face trial. Seven suspects, including the unit's two top officers, remain at large in a nation where the security forces, often intertwined with mafias, retain great power. Guatemalan investigators believe some fugitives have been sheltered by the military and others move back and forth across the porous border with Belize.

U.S. authorities have arrested three other fugitive commandos who migrated to the United States. Gilberto Jordán, a

former sergeant living in Florida, pleaded guilty to similar charges as those filed against Sosa and is now serving a 10-year sentence in federal prison. Another former sergeant arrested on immigration charges has agreed to testify against Sosa in the federal trial set for Nov. 27 in Riverside, Calif.

## **Martial Arts Expert**

Born in Guatemala City in 1958, Sosa is the third of six children of a military family.

Their late father was an internationally known karate master who oversaw martial arts training for the Guatemalan military, Sosa's brother, Hugo, said in an interview. Hugo Sosa is a former Guatemalan army captain who now lives in Sacramento, Calif.

The short, sturdily built Jorge Sosa graduated from officer school as a sub-lieutenant in 1979. He held posts in various regions, underwent paratroop training and served as commander of 40 soldiers in an honor guard, according to army records and his account. He won a reputation for martial arts prowess. A former military comrade recalled seeing him take on visiting Taiwanese soldiers in karate matches.

"He was tremendously skilled," said the former soldier, who requested anonymity for his safety. He described Sosa as "gentlemanly and friendly."

Sosa underwent a grueling training program to join the Kaibil commandos, one of the toughest special forces outfits in Latin America. In July 1981, he became a self-defense instructor at the commando training school in the Petén region of Guatemala's northern panhandle, according to military records and his account.

"This group of instructors and sub-instructors get their orders directly from the Director of the Center for Military Studies," Sosa said in his letter provided to ProPublica. "Our mission was to provide counter-insurgency training to selected military personnel through a physical test. This course trained regular troops to become more combat effective against the guerrilla forces."

The 30-year war with leftist guerrilla movements reached its peak in the early 1980s. The rebels assassinated a U.S. ambassador and committed other acts of terrorism, but the United Nations later attributed 93 percent of the human rights violations to the military. The U.N. concluded that the systematic campaign against indigenous groups constituted genocide.

The killing escalated in 1982 when Ríos Montt, a general, came to power after a coup. The commando school closed, and 20 instructors became a rapid reaction force for roving missions in a nationwide offensive against the guerrillas.

Sosa was one of four lieutenants who led this special patrol, though he was the lowest in seniority, according to Guatemalan court files and military records. The commander was Lt. Roberto Aníbal Rivera Martínez, who is still at large, according to the court files and records.

In October 1982, a guerrilla ambush resulted in the deaths of about 20 soldiers and the loss of their rifles. Intelligence later indicated the rifles could be in the vicinity of Dos Erres, a farming hamlet of 60 families deep in the jungle near the Mexican border. Army brass sent in the special commando patrol to recover the rifles and teach the villagers a lesson.

Disguised as guerrillas, the 20-man unit assaulted Dos Erres early in the morning of Dec. 7, backed by a support force of 40 uniformed commandos. The troops did not find the rifles or evidence of guerrilla activity. The raid disintegrated into a frenzy of rape, torture and murder that wiped out almost the entire population of the village, according to Guatemalan and U.S. court files.

The investigation began 14 years later, but it produced unique evidence. Breaking a code of silence, two soldiers

became protected witnesses in the 1990s and testified about the slaughter. And prosecutors connected the unit to the massacre with DNA tests and other evidence proving that two boys from Dos Erres were abducted by commandos and grew up in military households.

## Abducted Boys

Lt. Oscar Ramírez Ramos abducted a 3-year-old, now known as Oscar Ramírez Castañeda. The lieutenant died in a traffic accident nine months later, but his family raised Oscar as one of their own.

Sgt. Santos López Alonzo abducted a 5-year-old, Ramiro Osorio Cristales, who unlike Oscar was old enough to remember the attack and his previous life. Alonzo raised the boy in harsh and abusive conditions, according to Guatemalan court files and interviews with Osorio and investigators. When the youth was 22, Guatemalan prosecutors found him, made him a protected witness and got him refugee status in Canada.

The Guatemalan and U.S. investigations identified Sosa as a commander of the assault on Dos Erres. Sosa played a lead role in a hideous scene in the center of the hamlet, according to the former soldiers. Commandos brought blindfolded villagers one by one to the village well, where they were questioned, struck on the head with a sledgehammer and dumped over the side. Soldiers also threw babies and children into the well, which overflowed with corpses by the end of the day.

Sosa not only gave orders, he killed people, according to witnesses. Former commando César Ibañez identified Sosa as one of seven lieutenants and sergeants who executed prisoners at the well, according to a transcript of his testimony in 2000.

Sosa and the others “hit them on the head with a sledgehammer and then threw fragmentation grenades at them so they died,” Ibañez testified. “The comment on the part of the officers was that no one had seen anything and that he who opened his mouth should remember that it would be closed forever.”

Sosa went into a rage when a villager cursed him from the well, said Favio Pinzón, a former cook for the squad. The wounded man managed to remove his blindfold and found himself lying atop a pile of living and dead bodies, Pinzón told prosecutors in 1996.

“He said to the officer [Sosa] Orantes ‘Kill me,’” Pinzón testified. “So the officer answered ‘Your mother,’ and the gentleman answered ‘Your mother, son of the great whore,’ so when the officer Orantes saw him he shot him with his rifle, but that was not enough and he threw a grenade into the well.”

(Pinzón and Ibañez repeated their stories during interviews this year for “Finding Oscar: Massacre, Memory and Justice in Guatemala,” an account of the massacre and Ramírez’ discovery of his true identity by ProPublica, This American Life and Fundación MEPI in Mexico.)

In the Florida case, the guilty plea of Jordán, one of the former sergeants implicated, included a similar account of a lieutenant firing and throwing a grenade into the well, according to a 2010 presentencing document in which the lieutenant is not named.

Sosa denies the allegations. He asserts that Pinzón and Ibañez were not part of his commando squad and that his squad did not take part in fighting.

“**I was not in ‘Las Dos Erres,’**” he wrote (the bold and underlines are from his letter). “We worked training selected troops. ... **We were not combative** [sic] **troops.**”

On the day of the massacre, Sosa says he was working in a civil affairs program in Melchor de Mencos, a town about a hundred miles away. He says participated in the program from October 1982 through March 1983.

“I met with the town’s Mayor, military commissioners, and teachers,” he wrote. “I went to the Capital City and had interviews with some Guatemalan Ministers and I was able to secure help for the citizens of Melchor de Mencos: 16 mobile libraries for the schools, educational materials (such as blackboards, chalk, books, pens, pencils, crayons), and sporting goods. ... We also helped in the construction of the ‘Salsipuedes’ town school. I sponsored a basketball team named ‘Jimbas.’”

It’s unclear whether Sosa can produce witnesses or other evidence to support his version of events.

“I know there are witnesses, the question is finding them,” his brother said in a telephone interview.

The Sosas argue that the massacre may have really been committed by rebels, but that defense has been discredited by the confessions of military men in Guatemalan and U.S. courts.

Guatemalan prosecutor Sara Romero, who has spent 16 years investigating the case, dismissed the alibi.

“It’s a lie,” she said in a telephone interview. “We have witnesses who saw him throw a grenade in the well. He was one of the chiefs of the patrol. He was there.”

Sosa’s trial will feature unprecedented testimony from a new witness: Alonzo, the ex-sergeant who raised the 5-year-old boy from Dos Erres. In 2010, federal agents in Texas arrested Alonzo on charges of illegal re-entry after deportation. He was sentenced to time served and agreed to testify for the prosecution. He is now being held as a material witness in Southern California.

Documents in the Canadian extradition file indicate that Alonzo will identify Sosa as a commanding officer and describe Sosa’s involvement in the massacre. The boy Alonzo abducted, Osorio, is now 35. In a telephone interview from Canada, Osorio said he is glad the former sergeant will testify.

“Everyone has to pay for what they did,” Osorio said. “The psychology of these soldiers is really ugly. I think these elite military men in Dos Erres were people trained to destroy, to kill everything in front of them. They were a machine.”

## **Assassination Attempts**

Sosa remained in the Army for two and a half years after the massacre, according to military records.

In 1984, he took an assignment training cadets at the military academy in Guatemala City. In July of that year, he says he spent a week on vacation in Florida with other officers, entering with official military passports. He cites this visit as one reason that the U.S. government should have known about his army service.

A year later, however, his career came to an abrupt end. The reasons for his departure to California in early May 1985 are murky.

Sosa provided the Canadian courts and ProPublica with pages from his 1985 asylum application that say he did his combat missions on “orders from the high echelons of the military” and that he had been “sentenced to death.”

“He had caused so many casualties for the guerrillas that they wanted to kill him,” his brother Hugo said in the interview.

But Sosa and his relatives now make an assertion that is not in the pages of the U.S. asylum application: He had grown disenchanted with the war and was fleeing from the military as well.

“I escaped from Guatemala on May 10, 1985 because I was not happy ... with the Guatemala army in the way they were dealing with the war,” Sosa wrote recently in a letter to Amnesty International, obtained by ProPublica. “And also



for the constant threats and attacks from the Guerrilla forces toward my family and myself.”

Sosa survived three assassination attempts, according to his brother. Fellow soldiers tried to kill the lieutenant and his father because of internal feuds, his brother said.

“He left because there were threats against the family,” Hugo Sosa said. “The perpetrators were both the guerrilla forces and the army. Lamentably, there were envies in the armed forces. Many did not like us because of envy. We knew some of the attacks were done by G-2, which is military intelligence. ... He had many achievements, many medals. He had obtained good posts. This created envy.”

In one attack in 1985, Hugo Sosa said, intelligence officers with automatic weapons ambushed Jorge Sosa and his father while they drove in the Guatemalan capital. The Sosas fended off the assailants by drawing their own guns, according to the brother’s account.

Sosa’s former military comrade said he had heard that intelligence officers wanted to kill Sosa. Rather than envy, however, he cited a different motive: He said military intelligence targeted Sosa because of a dispute having to do with his personal life.

Sosa’s brother said he knew nothing about that allegation. Sosa’s military service record says he was discharged as a deserter on May 20, 1985.

## **Welcomed by Canada**

Sosa arrived in California with his wife and a young daughter, according to his account and U.S. records. His parents and a sister also came to San Francisco. The new arrivals lived with Hugo Sosa, who had moved there earlier after marrying a U.S. citizen.

The Sosas were part of an exodus of Central Americans fleeing wars. Military men were a minority compared to refugees from persecution by the Guatemalan armed forces, which had the longtime backing of the U.S. government, though ex-soldiers won asylum as well.

Three months after Sosa applied for asylum, the State Department’s asylum office sent an advisory opinion to the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service finding that he had not proved a well-founded fear of persecution, according to a State Department letter in August 1985. The INS informed him of its decision to reject his asylum request in a letter dated Sept. 19, 1985, records show. The INS began deportation proceedings, documents show.

Sosa remained in San Francisco for three years while he and his family sought political asylum at the Canadian consulate, documents show. Canada had a more generous asylum policy than the United States at the time.

Sosa’s background invited scrutiny. He says he described his military service in his asylum request to Canada and that U.S. officials communicated with Canadian counterparts about his case. If so, that means he made it clear he was an officer and combat veteran in an elite unit of an army that was internationally notorious for massacres, torture and corruption.

In addition, the Canadian government had specific knowledge of the Dos Erres massacre. Tips about the incident had reached the U.S. embassy from Guatemalan government sources at a time when diplomats were under pressure to look into reports of military massacres across Guatemala, according to State Department cables declassified by the National Security Archive at George Washington University.

As a result, three U.S. embassy officials traveled from the capital to northern Guatemala on Dec. 30, 1982, three weeks after the massacre, and conducted an inquiry. They were accompanied by the first secretary of the Canadian embassy, according to the cables.

The U.S. officials concluded that the Guatemalan army had wiped out the village, the cable says. The Canadian diplomat, meanwhile, “was unsure of what to conclude from what he had seen and specifically was reluctant to speculate as to who might have destroyed Dos R’s”, the cable says.

Despite the Canadian’s hesitant response, the cable shows that Canadian diplomats knew about serious allegations against the Guatemalan military — and the U.S. view that Dos Erres was the work of soldiers. Assuming Sosa detailed his Army service in his asylum request, Canadian immigration officials could have seen that he served as an officer in northern Guatemala and other violent areas during years when the army was accused of wholesale abuses.

Sosa and his brother say Canada gave him political asylum. But Canadian justice and immigration officials, citing privacy restrictions, would not discuss the type of status he received and whether Sosa’s military history was a consideration. Regardless, Sosa and his family moved to Canada as legal immigrants in 1988 and he became a citizen in 1992, according to documents and his account.

Francisco Rico Martínez, a longtime advocate of Central American refugees in Canada, said Canada has accepted other former Central American soldiers with questionable pasts.

“The acceptance rate was very high back then,” Rico said. “There were a lot of deficiencies in the system that have been corrected. I am not surprised he entered.”

The Sosas moved to Lethbridge in the province of Alberta. The father and son set up a karate school. But Sosa soon divorced his wife, with whom he had two children, and went to New York to teach karate.

“He came to the United States because he divorced,” his brother said. “He came to improve himself. Business is stronger here than in Canada.”

In the 1990s, Sosa met a Guatemalan-born woman in New York, a U.S. citizen who was the mother of one of his karate students, according to public records and her account. They began a relationship. Sosa settled in New York and the two were married. She now believes he manipulated her in order to obtain his immigration papers.

“He fooled me,” said the woman, who asked to be identified by only her first name, Sonia, to protect her family’s safety. “He is not honest. He married me to get residency. In his head, I imagine he wanted to achieve that. He is a very strange person.”

Sosa made no secret of his military past, though he never mentioned the Dos Erres massacre, Sonia said. He told her he had left Guatemala fleeing the guerillas and the army, according to her account.

“I never understood why the military was persecuting him,” she said.

Sonia believes that Sosa’s wartime commando experience had a damaging psychological effect on him.

“Being a Kaibil is a very strong thing,” she said. “You have to be very centered for it not to affect you. He had like a double personality.”

## **Missed Clues in U.S.**

Thanks to his marriage to Sonia, Sosa sought a green card.

U.S. prosecutors charge that he lied on his application for permanent residency and during an interview with a U.S. immigration officer on Nov. 30, 1998, according to the Canadian extradition file. When asked if he had done foreign military service, Sosa answered “none,” according to the file.

Thirteen years earlier, however, he had described his military experience as the basis of his failed U.S. asylum request in California. In 1998, U.S. immigration officials already had an existing file number for him because of the earlier asylum bid, documents show.

Why didn't the officials in New York spot the contradiction with the previous California documents?

The answer involves a shift by the INS from paper files to digital recordkeeping in the early 1990s, according to two DHS officials. The INS officers who reviewed Sosa's case would have seen in his file that he had applied for political asylum in the past, the officials said. But to see details such as his past military service, they would have had to request the 1985 file from paper archives, where pre-1990 cases are kept, a DHS official said.

"When someone files for a green card, the individual goes through a thorough background check," the DHS officials said. "But they routinely don't go into that level of scrutiny as far as requesting a cold case file. They are relying on background checks, FBI fingerprints and so on."

Sosa's omission slipped by. He received his green card in 1998. He left his wife and moved to California, where he settled in Riverside County east of Los Angeles, according to his brother, ex-wife and public records.

In 2000, as a fledgling democracy took hold in Guatemala, prosecutors there charged Sosa and the rest of the commando squad for the Dos Erres massacre. The power of the army and a flurry of appeals by defense lawyers kept the case in limbo, impeding arrests for a decade. The Guatemalan media reported on the case and Sosa was aware of the charges, according to his brother.

Over the decade, Sosa did well. He worked as an office manager but focused increasingly on teaching karate, setting up four schools in Southern California, according to his brother. Sosa gave frequent martial arts seminars overseas, traveling at least once a year to countries including Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Japan and Mexico, according to his family.

Sosa divorced Sonia in 2006 and remarried in California, according to his brother and public records. In 2007, he applied for U.S. citizenship in San Bernardino, Calif., court records show.

Federal prosecutors accuse him of committing three crimes during the application process and an interview with an immigration officer on March 18, 2008.

On his citizenship form, Sosa responded negatively to a question asking if he had committed a crime for which he had not been arrested, when in fact, an indictment alleges, "he had committed crimes including but not limited to murder at Dos Erres." Asked about past membership in organizations, he failed to mention the Guatemalan army, the indictment says. And it says he denied giving false information in the past, despite having concealed his military service on his green card application in 1998.

Sosa defends himself by asserting that officials should have known about his military service from their records. He cites his response to question No. 27 on the citizenship application that mentions his asylum request, which had described his combat experience.

"The first time I and my family entered into the United States was on May 10, 1985," Sosa wrote, according to a page from the citizenship form. "I submitted a political asylum application in San Francisco, California. It was at a later time that I submitted my case to the Canadian embassy."

Sosa's written answer further explained that U.S. officials rejected his asylum request and ordered his deportation, but canceled the order after learning that Canada accepted him as an immigrant in 1988. The answer to the question does not specifically cite his military service.

If U.S. officers had asked Sosa about his reasons for requesting political asylum in the United States and Canada, it seems logical that the questions might have elicited disclosure of his military past.

By 2008 the prosecution of the Dos Erres case had received news coverage in Guatemala and beyond. Sosa said in his letter that he also disclosed his army record when he testified on behalf of a fellow Guatemalan in a San Francisco immigration court in 1986 and 1987.

Immigrants routinely run into problems with the system because of inaccuracies or omissions on forms and in interviews. But in 2008 as in 1998, Sosa apparently did not raise enough interest to warrant retrieving the file on the rejected asylum request or even asking him about it. Moreover, officials point out, he had gone through a previous round of screening to obtain the green card.

The U.S. government granted citizenship to Sosa in September 2008.

The accused war criminal had avoided detection once again.

Three months later, though, an investigator at the Department of Homeland Security opened an inquiry into Sosa related to Dos Erres, according to U.S. court documents.

The Inter-American Court of Human Rights had recently ruled against Guatemala for its failure to pursue the massacre prosecution. The court, which is based in Costa Rica and is a regional arbiter for major human rights disputes, published the list of suspects. The war crimes unit of Homeland Security took an interest in the list and identified Sosa and three other fugitives who had come to the United States as immigrants.

After a lengthy investigation in Florida, Texas, California and elsewhere, in May 2010 federal agents searched Sosa's home in Moreno Valley east of Los Angeles. Sosa left for Mexico soon afterward. In January of last year, he traveled from Mexico to Canada. Police tracked him down in Lethbridge, where his parents still lived.

Because Canadian courts have jurisdiction over crimes against humanity, Canada could have prosecuted Sosa for the massacre. Authorities also could have extradited him to Guatemala to stand trial.

Instead, Canada chose to extradite him to the United States to be tried for the immigration crimes, which carry a maximum sentence of 10 years. Canadian officials declined to comment on that decision.

Guatemalan prosecutor Romero said she was disappointed. She said a Guatemalan extradition request to Canada went unheeded.

"The U.S. is judging him for a minor offense that is immigration," she said. "It postpones our case."

U.S. federal officials say the extradition is part of a crackdown on human rights abusers who seek refuge here. They say it also bolsters the Guatemalan prosecutions. Some evidence used to convict the commandos in Guatemala last year came from U.S. investigations. If convicted, Sosa faces eventual loss of his citizenship and deportation to Guatemala.

"I think it's a very significant case," said Claude Arnold, the special agent in charge of Immigration and Customs Enforcement in Los Angeles and a former chief of the war crimes unit. "It's always good to get someone in a leadership role. ... Although it's an immigration case, we gather all the evidence as if we were prosecuting him for a war crime. Our goal is to help our international partners."

## **Politics and Punishment**

The Sosas say the prosecution is politically motivated. They blame Guatemalan human rights activists looking to settle

old scores.

“The famous human rights people, since they haven’t succeeded in accusing the masterminds, they look for someone to pay,” said Hugo Sosa. “They are people of the guerrillas. The U.S. government doesn’t know what happened in the war. They base what they do on what the ex-guerrillas say, the ones who are now involved in human rights.”

Sosa claims he is protected by an amnesty law in Guatemala for participants in the civil war and that the charges against him in his homeland have been annulled. He says his record is clean.

**“I desperately need people to know that I have NOT committed a crime nor do I have a criminal mind,”** he said in his letter. **“I have lived in North America for around 25 years and have absolutely no criminal record.** I have been dedicated to helping immigrants that come to North America. In our Martial Arts traditional teachings, **we teach respect and support for our neighbours; peace and love between all human beings; and to avoid any fights or confrontations without sense.”**

Guatemalan prosecutors point out that the amnesty law has a specific exception for crimes against humanity that has enabled the convictions in the Dos Erres case. Prosecutor Romero said the charges against Sosa have not been annulled. Sosa would be arrested and tried if he set foot in Guatemala, Romero said.

Osorio, the survivor abducted from Dos Erres as a boy, was startled last year when police informed him that Sosa had been caught in Canada and was a fellow Canadian citizen. If the charges against Sosa are true, he was a commander of the troops who stormed into Osorio’s home and slaughtered his family.

Osorio has watched the case with disbelief. He finds it disturbing that Sosa might have manipulated the system in two countries and evaded capture for years.

“It is an injustice,” Osorio said. “When I came to Canada as a refugee, I was asked if I had participated in any massacres. And I was a survivor of a massacre. This man had three nationalities. He came and went as he pleased. The state gives people like him the power to kill. They abuse power. That sense of arrogance stays with them. But then, when the hour comes for them to pay for what they did, they deny their crimes.”

# The Faces of Dos Erres

by Sebastian Rotella and Krista Kjellman Schmidt  
ProPublica, May 25, 2012, 5 a.m.

The December 1982 massacre of 250 civilians in the jungle hamlet of Dos Erres stands as one the worst atrocities of the country's civil war. Only within the last year have trials begun for the Kaibil commandos who did the killing. Here are the principal survivors, soldiers and investigators involved. | [Related story »](#)

## THE SURVIVORS



### OSCAR ALFREDO RAMÍREZ CASTAÑEDA

Three years old at the time of the Dos Erres massacre, Oscar survived and was taken by Lt. Oscar Ovidio Ramírez Ramos, one of the commandos who led the attack. The lieutenant died months later in a truck accident, and the green-eyed boy was raised by the Ramírez family. Investigators and human rights activists helped determine Oscar's true identity last year. He lives in Framingham, Mass., with his wife and four children. He has petitioned for political asylum in the United States.



### RAMIRO CRISTALES

At age 5, Ramiro was the other green-eyed child abducted from Dos Erres by the soldiers. He was raised by Santos Lopez Alonzo, a baker for the attack squad. Ramiro served in the Guatemalan military before emigrating and now lives in Canada under political asylum. He has been a prosecution witness against former Kaibiles, testifying about his memories of the massacre.



### TRANQUILINO CASTAÑEDA

Castañeda, a farmer, was away on the day of the Dos Erres massacre. For nearly 30 years he lived under the belief that all nine of his children, and his pregnant wife, had been killed. Castañeda learned this year that Oscar, whose real name at birth was Alfredo, was in fact alive. Tranquilino, now 70, and Oscar are scheduled to meet in person in the United States.



### SALOME ARMANDO HERNÁNDEZ

Hernández was 11 at the time of the Dos Erres attack. His brother and uncle were killed by commandos. He witnessed some of the killing but escaped from the Kaibiles as they took other children and women away from the village to be executed in the hills nearby. His testimony helped convict several perpetrators in recent trials.

## THE MILITARY



### GEN. JOSE EFRAÍN RÍOS MONTT

*Guatemalan Dictator, March 1982 - August 1983*

After gaining power in a coup, Ríos Montt ordered a search-and-destroy campaign against rural villages thought to shelter guerrilla fighters. He has been charged with genocide and crimes against humanity. This week, a Guatemalan court ruled that he could also be prosecuted as the mastermind of the Dos Erres massacre.



### LT. CARLOS ANTONIO CARIAS

*Las Cruces Army Commander*

Carias was the area commander in a nearby town. He helped plan the Dos Erres raid and covered up the evidence afterward, leading troops who looted and razed the hamlet. He threatened civilians with death if they asked questions. He was found guilty of murder, human rights violations and aggravated robbery and sentenced to 6,066 years in prison in August 2011.



### LT. OSCAR OVIDIO RAMÍREZ RAMOS

*Kaibil*

Ramírez was the deputy commander of the quick-reaction squad of Kaibil commandos that led the Dos Erres attack. He was the most experienced soldier in the squad with a reputation for brutality, battlefield prowess and loyalty. Ramírez's mother wanted a grandchild. The unwed commando took Oscar home after the massacre, claiming him as his son, then died eight months later in an accident.



### FAVIO PINZÓN

*Kaibil squad's cook*

Haunted by the killing at Dos Erres, Pinzón became the first repentant soldier to provide a firsthand account in one of the many massacres committed during the Guatemalan conflict. As a cook who had washed out of Kaibil training, he had been mistreated by others in the unit. For his cooperation, Pinzón was granted immunity from prosecution and relocated as a protected witness.



### SGT. CÉSAR IBAÑEZ

*Kaibil*

After being introduced to human rights activists by fellow soldier Favio Pinzón, Ibañez recounted the Dos Erres raid to prosecutors and was granted immunity and relocated as a protected witness. Unlike Pinzón, he was a full-fledged commando. He provided a detailed account of the massacre and confessed to dragging residents to a dry well, where they were bludgeoned and dumped.



### CÉSAR ADÁN ROSALES BATRES

*Kaibil*

One of the senior officers in the Dos Erres raid, Batres is accused of raping a young girl in front of her family, an event that triggered other soldiers to engage in rape, according to testimony and prosecutors. Batres remains at large.

**SGT. MANUEL POP SUN***Kaibil*

Pop Sun was one of three former commandos found guilty of murder and human rights violations in an August 2011 trial in Guatemala. All three were sentenced to 6,060 years in prison, or 30 years for each of 201 identified Dos Erres victims plus 30 years for crimes against humanity. Pop Sun was described by witnesses as one of the most vicious commandos.

**DAVID MARTÍNEZ MÉNDEZ***Kaibil*

One of three former commandos found guilty of murder and human rights violations in an August 2011 trial in Guatemala. All three were sentenced to 6,060 years in prison, or 30 years for each of 201 identified Dos Erres victims plus 30 years for crimes against humanity. After his arrest in 2011, Méndez's description of the abduction of the boys caused a judge to order prosecutors to renew the hunt for Oscar.

**SUB-LT. JORGE VINICIO SOSA ORANTES***Kaibil*

Sosa allegedly threw a grenade into the dry well after a wounded man in the well cursed him, according to testimony. He emigrated to the U.S. and became a prominent martial arts instructor in California. He was arrested in Canada and awaits extradition for trial on charges of falsifying his U.S. immigration application.

**SGT. PEDRO PIMENTEL RIOS***Kaibil*

Pimentel was picked up by helicopter the day after the Dos Erres massacre and taken to Panama to serve as an instructor at the School of the Americas. In 1985, the Guatemalan Army awarded him a commendation medal. U.S. agents arrested Pimentel in California in May 2010 and deported him to Guatemala in July 2011. He was tried, found guilty of atrocities at Dos Erres and sentenced to 6,060 years in prison in March 2012.

**REYES COLIN GUALIP***Kaibil*

One of three former commandos found guilty of murder and human rights violations in an August 2011 trial in Guatemala. All three were sentenced to 6,060 years in prison, or 30 years for each of 201 identified Dos Erres victims plus 30 years for crimes against humanity.

**SGT. GILBERTO JORDÁN***Kaibil*

U.S. immigration authorities caught up with Jordán in Florida. He had become a U.S. citizen. "I knew this day would come," Jordán told agents. He confessed to throwing a baby into the dry well at Dos Erres. He was arrested by federal agents and pleaded guilty to concealing facts and willful misrepresentation on his U.S. immigration application. He is serving a 10-year sentence in a U.S. prison.

**SANTOS LOPEZ ALONZO***Kaibil squad's baker*

Alonzo took Ramiro Cristales, then 5, from Dos Erres to live with his family. In a 1999 meeting with prosecutor Sara Romero, he confessed to the abduction and participation in the massacre. Alonzo had moved to the U.S. and was deported once. He was later arrested in Houston, charged with re-entering the U.S. after being deported and pleaded guilty. He agreed to testify against Sub-Lt. Sosa.

**THE INVESTIGATORS****SARA ROMERO***Special Human Rights Prosecutor, Guatemala*

Romero was assigned to the case after the 1996 peace treaty that ended Guatemala's 36-year civil war. In the years after, Romero tracked down and took statements from former Kaibiles Favio Pinzón and César Ibañez that opened the door to the first trials of Dos Erres perpetrators in August 2011 and March 2012. She also tracked down the abducted boys, Ramiro and Oscar. She continues to pursue the investigation.

**JON LONGO***Immigrations and Customs Enforcement Agent*

Longo, a former prison therapist who joined Immigration and Customs Enforcement, tracked down and built a case against former Kaibil Sgt. Gilberto Jordán, who had become a U.S. citizen. Longo worked with Homeland Security Investigations agents hunting other Kaibiles in the United States. He managed to elicit a confession from Jordán in a dramatic encounter at the former commando's Florida home. Jordán was sentenced to 10 years in prison for covering up his commando past on immigration forms. The unusually tough sentence reflected the judge's anger at the evidence of Jordán's role in the massacre.

**FREDY PECCERELLI***Human Rights Investigator*

Peccerelli founded the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation, which supports state investigations of atrocities, exhumes remains at massacre sites and performs DNA tests. In 2010, his organization analyzed the Dos Erres remains recovered years earlier by the team from Argentina. Results helped establish that Oscar Alfredo Ramirez Castañeda, abducted from Dos Erres at age 3 by commandos, was a survivor and that his real father is Tranquilino Castañeda.

**AURA ELENA FARFÁN***Human Rights Activist, Guatemala*

Farfán leads an association of relatives of victims of the Guatemalan civil war called FAMDEGUA. She was the first to interview Favio Pinzón and Cesar Ibañez about Dos Erres. She filed a criminal complaint accusing the army of mass murder there and brought in a team of forensic anthropologists from Argentina to exhume remains in 1994.

**CLAUDIA PAZ Y PAZ***Attorney General, Guatemala*

Since her appointment in 2010, Paz has reinvigorated efforts to prosecute civil war atrocities and has pushed to try former dictator Jose Efraín Ríos Montt with human rights violations and genocide for a policy of razing villages. She has also played a leading role in pursuing investigations of corruption and criminal mafias, which are often linked to former and active military officers.

## Slideshow: Oscar's Story

by Sebastian Rotella and Krista Kjellman Schmidt  
ProPublica, May 25, 2012, 5 a.m.



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*Oscar Alfredo Ramírez Castañeda, right with his 7-year-old daughter Nicole, created a solid life in the suburbs of Boston after leaving Guatemala in 1998. (Matthew Healey for ProPublica)*





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*Oscar had reunited with his teenage sweetheart, Nidia, left, in 2005, and worked two full-time jobs to support his growing family, including — most recently — their 9-month-old daughter Dulce, seen in Oscar's arms on a recent Sunday in May. (Matthew Healey for ProPublica)*



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*When Oscar got homesick, he often took out an aging photo album that belonged to his father, Lt. Oscar Ovidio Ramírez Ramos, who had died when Oscar was four. (Matthew Healey for ProPublica)*



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*After Lt. Ramírez's death, Oscar, seen in the front at age 8, was raised by the lieutenant's mother and sisters in Zacapa, Guatemala.*



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*The Ramírez family taught Oscar, seen here at age 15, to revere the lieutenant, a member of the Guatemalan Army special forces called Kaibiles.*



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*Lt. Ramírez had graduated at the top of his class from military school, become an elite commando and won medals in combat. He was deputy commander of the assault squad that attacked the village of Dos Erres in 1982. Ramírez died in a truck accident less than a year after the assault. (Matthew Healey for ProPublica)*



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*Lt. Ramírez was admired on the battlefield for his prowess and loyalty, according to some who had served with him. He was a dutiful son, who wired money to his mother each month. (Matthew Healey for ProPublica)*



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*The lieutenant's nickname was Cocorico, a diminutive of Oscar, who called himself Cocorico the Second. (Matthew Healey for ProPublica)*



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*Sara Romero is a special human rights prosecutor in Guatemala who investigated the assault on Dos Erres, which left 250 civilians dead. In May 2011, she emailed Oscar to tell him that she had reached an inescapable conclusion: Oscar was one of the boys who had survived the Dos Erres massacre and had been abducted by the commandos. (Habiba Nosheen)*



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*Oscar struggled to reconcile his memories with the prosecutor's words. If her theory was correct, Oscar had been kidnapped by the man he admired. Romero offered to arrange a DNA test to test her theory. Oscar agreed. (Matthew Healey for ProPublica)*



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*It took about six weeks for the DNA results. When Oscar, seen here with Nidia, left, and Dulce in his arms, finally heard the results, they came with a surprise: Oscar's biological father was still alive. (Matthew Healey for ProPublica)*



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*Tranquilino Castañeda, a farmer, was away visiting relatives on the day of the Dos Erres massacre. For nearly 30 years, he believed that his pregnant wife and all nine of his children had been murdered. (Alex Cruz/El Periódico de Guatemala)*



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*Once the DNA results proved that Tranquilino and Oscar were father and son, human rights investigators set up an emotional video conversation reuniting the two. (Alex Cruz/El Periódico de Guatemala)*



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*Soon, the father and son were speaking every day and filling in three missing decades. Oscar labeled the folder on his computer with photos of Tranquilino as “mi padre,” my father. (Matthew Healey for ProPublica)*



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*Soon, the father and son were speaking every day and filling in three missing decades. Oscar labeled the folder on his computer with photos of Tranquilino as “mi padre,” my father. (Matthew Healey for ProPublica)*



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*Finding Oscar has given Tranquilino, seen holding a photograph of his son and his family, a new mission in life. He is scheduled to meet Oscar in person in the United States. (Alex Cruz/El Periódico de Guatemala)*



# Timeline: The Dos Erres Massacre and the Hunt for Oscar

by *Krista Kjellman Schmidt and Sebastian Rotella*  
*ProPublica, May 25, 2012, 5 a.m.*

In December 1982, one of the worst atrocities in Guatemala's 36-year civil war occurred when the army wiped out the hamlet of Dos Erres. A commando, Lt. Oscar Ovidio Ramírez Ramos, abducted a 3-year-old village boy he named Oscar. | [Related story »](#)

*Click an event marker or the "previous" and "next" buttons to move through the timeline.*

Civil War



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## CIA Operation



Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán steps down after a coup -- codenamed "PBSUCCESS" -- orchestrated by the CIA and United States government, which feared that Arbenz's policies bordered on communism and threatened U.S. commercial interests.

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**June 27, 1954**

## Slideshow: A Day of Anticipation, Anxiety, Family

by Torsten Kjellstrand, Special to ProPublica, and Sebastian Rotella, ProPublica,  
May 29, 1:21 p.m.



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*Oscar Alfredo Ramírez Castañeda holds his 10-month-old daughter Dulce as he walks with his family through the American Museum of Natural History in New York City on Monday. The museum was the first stop on the family's trip from to meet Oscar's biological father, Tranquilino Castañeda, in person for the first time. (Torsten Kjellstrand for ProPublica)*



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*Oscar and daughter Dulce pose for a snapshot. It was the family's first trip away from Framingham, Mass. They were anxious, Oscar said, in anticipation of the meeting with Tranquilino, who was arriving later by plane from Guatemala. Daughter Nicole, 7, stands by. (Torsten Kjellstrand for ProPublica)*



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*Oscar's wife, Nidia Franco, adjusts Dulce's headband as the family prepares to head to Newark Liberty International Airport. "Oscar is such a good man. He always gives to other people," she said. "Now he gets something. It is good." (Torsten Kjellstrand for ProPublica)*



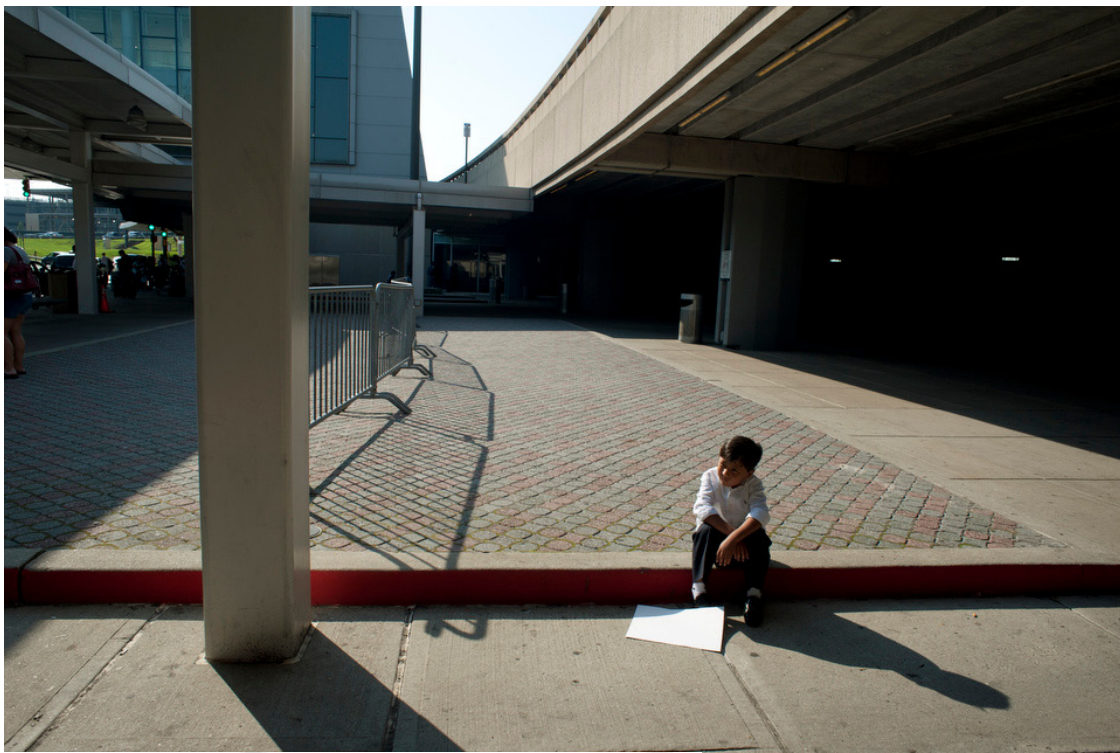
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*Oscar gathers Nicole, Oscar Jr., 5, and Dulce in the museum's main hall. (Torsten Kjellstrand for ProPublica)*



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*Oscar holds his daughter Dulce as the family prepares to leave for the airport. (Torsten Kjellstrand for ProPublica)*



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*Just before entering Newark airport, Oscar Jr. steps away from the group and has a moment to himself. At his feet a sign welcoming Tranquilino and others. (Torsten Kjellstrand for ProPublica)*



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*Dulce sleeps while her parents and siblings await Tranquilino's arrival. (Torsten Kjellstrand for ProPublica)*



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*As they hear that their grandfather's plane has landed, Andrea, 11, right, and Nicole look to spot their grandfather exit security. (Torsten Kjellstrand for ProPublica)*



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*"I am very excited," Andrea Ramírez said as she waited. "But I'm a little nervous, too." (Torsten Kjellstrand for ProPublica)*



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The Ramírez children, Oscar Jr., Nicole and Andrea hold their homemade signs up high. (Torsten Kjellstrand for ProPublica)



Slideshow: ◀ prev 11 of 20 next ▶

Tranquilino Castañeda holds his grandchildren for the first time. (Torsten Kjellstrand for ProPublica)



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*Tranquilino and Oscar embrace. Until recently, neither knew the other existed. Tranquilino believed he had lost his wife and all nine children in a 1982 massacre by army troops in their home village Dos Erres. Oscar thought he was the son of an army lieutenant who abducted him after the attack but died months later in an accident. (Torsten Kjellstrand for ProPublica)*



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*Nidia kisses Tranquilino on the cheek. (Torsten Kjellstrand for ProPublica)*





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*Oscar and Nidia with Andrea, Nicole, Oscar Jr., Dulce and Tranquilino. (Torsten Kjellstrand for ProPublica)*



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*Tranquilino holds his grandchildren close. (Torsten Kjellstrand for ProPublica)*



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*Tranquilino with his hands on the shoulders of his only grandson, Oscar Jr. (Torsten Kjellstrand for ProPublica)*



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*After their emotional reunion, the family piled into a van and head to New York City. Oscar, Oscar Jr. and Tranquilino sat together. (Torsten Kjellstrand for ProPublica)*



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*Tranquilino shares a moment with grandson Oscar Jr. as his son looks on. (Torsten Kjellstrand for ProPublica)*



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*Tranquilino leans on Oscar as he navigates the sidewalks of Manhattan. (Torsten Kjellstrand for ProPublica)*



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*Tranquilino holds his grandchildren Oscar Jr. and Nicole. (Torsten Kjellstrand for Pro-Publica)*

# The Dos Erres Fugitives

by Sebastian Rotella

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The massacre of 250 civilians in the jungle hamlet of Dos Erres in December 1982 stands as one of the worst atrocities in Guatemala's civil war. Over the past year, courts have convicted five Guatemalan army soldiers of related crimes. U.S. authorities are holding one suspect, former army Lt. Jorge Vinicio Sosa Orantes, in California on immigration charges. Prosecutors in Guatemala are looking for seven other ex-commandos accused of taking part in the massacre.

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**ROBERTO ANÍBAL RIVERA MARTÍNEZ**

**Born:** 8/24/1954  
**Last Known Residence:** Guatemala City  
**Rank:** Lieutenant  
He allegedly commanded the unit that committed the Dos Erres massacre. He rose to the rank of colonel, holding senior posts in the defense ministry and presidential guard. When investigators in 2010 served an arrest warrant at his home in a military neighborhood, they discovered an escape tunnel.



**CÉSAR ADÁN ROSALES BATRES**

**Born:** 6/11/1957  
**Last Known Residence:** Guatemala City  
**Rank:** Lieutenant  
He had the third-highest seniority in the commando unit. Witnesses alleged that he was the first to rape a young girl during the raid on Dos Erres. The other officers chastised him and excluded him from a meeting that preceded the slaughter of the villagers at the town well, in which he allegedly took part.



**ALFONSO BULUX VICENTE**

**Born:** 1/13/1953  
**Last Known Residence:** Retalhuleu  
**Rank:** Sergeant  
During the massacre, Bulux showed mercy on a family at an outlying home, letting them flee, according to testimony. But the testimony also places him among a group of commandos who interrogated villagers, hit them with a sledgehammer and dumped them into the town well. In government documents in 1999, he listed his profession as pilot.



**MANUEL CUPERTINO MONTENEGRO HERNÁNDEZ**

**Born:** 9/15/1956  
**Last Known Residence:** Guatemala City  
**Rank:** Sergeant  
He served as the unit's radio operator, communicating with Army brass outside Dos Erres during the operation. He therefore could have information on the involvement and knowledge of senior officers. In 2008, he identified himself as a businessman, according to Guatemalan documents.



**MARDOQUEO ORTIZ MORALES**

**Born:** 4/26/1962  
**Last Known Residence:** Ayutla  
**Rank:** Corporal  
He has been identified by witnesses as one of the commandos who killed villagers at the well. More recently, he has worked as a businessman in the Petén region, where the Dos Erres massacre took place, according to Guatemalan investigators.



**CIRILO BENJAMÍN CAALAC**

**Born:** 2/9/1949  
**Last Known Residence:** Melchor de Mencos  
**Rank:** Sergeant  
He has been identified by witnesses as one of the commandos who killed villagers at the well. In 2007, he described himself as a farmer, according to Guatemalan government documents. He is also believed by Guatemalan investigators to have been involved in business in the Petén region in recent years.



**CARLOS HUMBERTO OLIVA MARTÍNEZ**

**Born:** 1/19/1954  
**Last Known Residence:** Poptun  
**Rank:** Sergeant  
He has been identified as one of the commandos who killed villagers at the well. He is also believed to have dedicated himself to business activity in the Petén region in recent years.

**Have Information? Need Help?**

Anyone with information about foreign nationals suspected of human rights abuses or war crimes may call a Department of Homeland Security tip line at 1-866-DHS-2-ICE or fill out an online form. The toll-free number for confidential victim assistance is 1-866-872-4973. Tips may be provided anonymously.