

**TRIP TO EL SALVADOR IN SEARCH OF THE REMAINS OF
SERGIO MANCILLA CARO
MARCH 21-28, 2015**

Written by Sergio Reyes

FIRST DAY

On Saturday, March 21, three people traveling from three different countries arrived at the Monsignor Oscar Arnulfo Romero International Airport in San Salvador. From the mountains close to Santiago Chile arrived Leopoldo Luna; from Panama City, Vielka Bolaños, and from Boston, Sergio Reyes. Our common objective was to seek and find the remains of Sergio Mancilla Caro, Chilean, killed in combat in Chalatenango in 1981. Vielka was his wife and comrade. Leo was an organizer of the contingent of 4 internationalist Chileans who joined the FPL (People Liberation Front) in 1981. We wrote a book about the circumstances under which we decided to recover the memory of Sergio Mancilla, “La Historia de Sergio Mancilla Caro, un Guerrillero Internacionalista Austral” (The History of Sergio Mancilla Caro, a Southern Internationalist Guerrilla). Therefore, we will not discuss that in this report.

Vielka and Leopoldo reunited at the Tocumen International Airport in Panama. The COPA flight where Leopoldo was traveling to the El Salvador made a stop in Panama, pick up passengers there and continued to San Salvador. Leopoldo and Vielka had not seen each other since 1982. You can imagine that their reunion was full of emotion. Yet, like it happened throughout our trip, this reunion was not exempt from anecdote. Our good Leopoldo exhausted by a long trip that started very early in the morning fell flat sleep in the waiting room and Vielka couldn't find him. Only when it was time to board, Vielka recognized him by his way of walking in spite of so many years and much, much less hair.

Arriving in San Salvador our friend Berne Ayala was waiting for them. In 1981, Berne was 16 years old and was already involved in a war he didn't start. In our talks it became evident that the Chileans who joined them in the fight were considered to be in those times “older men”. They were in their 30s. My friend Jose Aleman, a Salvadoran resident in Massachusetts could have not chosen a better man to help us in El Salvador. Berne grew up, fought, and survived the war, and today has become an important writer recording stories and history of this armed conflict that took the lives of tens of thousands of people, in a small country that today has a population of about 6 million people.

I recognized Berne in the hall coming out of the United flight that took me to El Salvador. I had seen Berne's picture on the back cover of one of his books. After effusive hugs, and even though we had only talked on the phone a few times and exchanged emails previously, I realized that it felt as if we have been friends a whole life. Berne had made arrangement with the Vice Minister of Foreign Relations, Carlos Castaneda, to receive us as if we were diplomatic personnel. Berne himself looked very official with his big credential card hanging from his neck. This allowed him and us to move through areas of the airport that would have been otherwise off limits. Joking about this, he guided me toward the VIP rooms of the Ministry. On the way, however, I saw we were heading straight to an area marked INTERPOL. I confess that a shiver went down my spine as it reminded me of the days when I had to leave Chile directly out of one of the jails of Pinochet and was held still handcuffed at an INTERPOL room in Santiago, to be taken to the plane only minutes before they closed the gate on my way to exile in the United States.

Joking about my INTERPOL apprehensions, we finally left that area behind and arrived to the VIP room where Vielka and Leopoldo waited. I didn't know either one in person. It seemed to me that Leopoldo came prepared to take on another struggle in the mountains of El Salvador. This time his struggle was for memory, for which he came armed with his remembrances and perceptions of so many years gone by. A very large backpack and a normal one were all his baggage and he was dressed for the occasion. Leopoldo, although a bit older than me looked to me as an indomitable fighter, happy to confront life and its challenges. Vielka, on the other hand, had a gentle smile on her face and appeared serene, peaceful, and calm. She would be a perfect balance for a group of men full of words and ideas that surfaced like spring water. Leopoldo was again "Ramiro", which was his *nom de guerre* in the 80s. He set foot again in the country where he traveled in the past not by plane but by bus and on foot together with his own brother, Sergio Mancilla (Horacio), and Juanito, another Chilean comrade. Leopoldo had never come back to El Salvador after leaving in 1982.

Vielka's luggage didn't arrive from Panama. Our main concern was that it contained important documentation pertinent to our mission. Fortunately, it arrived eventually in the last flight from Panama, which required another trip to the airport to pick it up. The airport is located about 45 minutes away from San Salvador. We couldn't afford to leave that behind for later since our plan was to leave early next day toward Chalatenango, only to return to San Salvador on Thursday night.



(Leopoldo Luna, Vielka Bolaños, Berne Ayala, Sergio Reyes. Hotel Tazumal, San Salvador)

We spent that night at a small, family-style hotel named Tazumal, near the El Salvador University. With great happiness I discovered we had WIFI and air conditioning. Soon after, Leopoldo opened his huge backpack to take out the traditional gifts Chileans carry, the precious wines from Chile. We had supper that evening at a local neighborhood restaurant. On the way, we stop to pick up who would be the 5th member of our team, “Pedro Café”, real name Milton Ayala Suchicital.

After many stories and memories of war, we went back to our hotel. I went to bed and our patient comrades departed again towards the airport to rescue Vielka’s luggage, which luckily was successful.

SECOND DAY

Sunday, March 22. At 7AM, as soon as breakfast service was scheduled to start, we were all installed at the tables ready for it. Breakfast was great for all, typical Salvadoran breakfast with tortillas and eggs, beans, fruit and of course, coffee. At 8AM all our luggage was loaded in Berne’s vehicle and we left toward Chalatenango, where we would make our first stop to buy provisions and continue to El Jicaro, where we would set quarters to work and rest, hosted by our comrade Orbelina Mejia.

On the road, the memories of war continued. Berne has an amazing memory and it seemed that he knew every nook of the territory we were traveling. Once on the highway, Leopoldo told us how the 4 Chileans traveled by a regular local bus, to come out at a point where they would start walking into the hills from where they never came out to the city again until they left. Leopoldo then never really knew San Salvador city. The 4 Chileans arrived without weapons in 1981. The only weapons they carried were their libertarian ideology and the conviction that it was worth to die for it if necessary. For Vielka, Leopoldo and I, it was overwhelming to think that our friend Sergio Mancilla made the same route we were traveling to end up dead and buried in one of the hills of El Salvador. For our Salvadoran friends, this was a learning experience about one more comrade who sacrificed his life fighting for a peace and justice that are still not present in their country.

Meanwhile, Leopoldo struggled to remember where exactly they got out of the bus to start walking on what was then war territory. After 34 years, the road and surrounding areas had changed, only the hills remained as reference point. Many of the towns we went by, Leopoldo recognized by name only since he explained that many of those he never saw by daylight. The guerrilla mostly moved at night.

About an hour and a half later we arrived to Chalatenango city. The entire department has 260,000 inhabitants and its main economic activity is agrarian. Chalatenango city is the commercial center of the department and this was noticeable as soon as we went in the supermarket where we bought provisions for our stay in El Jicaro. From Chalatenango to El Jicaro our ride was real slow as we had to drive on narrow dirt roads. In the vehicle, the struggle to remember continued. Our Leopoldo was fighting the 30+ years of absence and would point to the hills indicating that could be La Montañita or La Montañona, or the Ocote Redondo, or this or that hill name, which was either patiently validated or refuted by Berne.



(At the supermarket in Chalatenango. Berne, Leopoldo, Bielka)

We finally arrived to our hosting destination. A gentle, petite lady, Tia Orbelina, welcomed us with love, which we felt very much at ease to reciprocate. Our resting areas consisted of 3 beds and 2 hammocks. Pedro and Leopoldo graciously volunteered to take the hammocks. We rested a bit and waited for the intensity of the sun to go down and started our trip to the Quebrada del Zope (Vulture's Ravine) where Sergio Mancilla's dead body was found, next to his machine gun in 1981. It is important to say that Berne and Pedro had previously identified that area following the narrative of a war statement issued by Benito the Medic. As I asked about these "war statement" (which included a forensic analysis of cause of death), Berne and Pedro explained that these were rarely issued, and that, in fact, Horacio's was the first one they have ever seen. This document was an exception given the fact that Horacio was an internationalist and that immediately after his death they had presumed he was missing in action. When a small guerrilla patrol found his remains and suspected it could be Horacio's, the central command ordered Benito to verify it and issue a cause of death report. Benito the Medic describe the location where the body was found and drew a rudimentary sketch of the terrain.



(Tia Orbelina's house and yard at El Jicaro)

On the way to our destination, right off the road, we met with a comrade who also fought and survived the war. In 1981 this man was very young. His war name was "Fonchito", his real name Jose Alberto Casco. I was able to record part of the conversation with him. He told us how during the same military siege, he had to bury 4 children who had been assassinated by the army. He also said that after so many years, even he would have a hard time identifying exactly where he had buried them. He then gave Leopoldo his best wishes that his memory would be good enough to find the remains of our Horacio.



(Fonchito, Berne and Leo, on our way to El Potrero)

After driving through small roads that became more and more rough, we ended up at a point where we needed to continue ascending on foot. Walking up hill on loose dirt and rocks was rather demanding for all, but particularly for me whose strength has never been trekking. Our dear friend Pedro, without words, took upon himself the task of carrying the heaviest back pack and stay at the rearguard, surely to assist any of us who could be in trouble going up. Berne and Leopoldo took on the leadership in animated conversation as they walked up hill. After walking for about 30 minutes, we reached a plain area that Berne told us was called El Potrero (the paddock), the home of Rogelio Ortega.



(Walking up hill to El Potrero, Vielka and Pedro)

Our first objective was to find the place where the body of Sergio Mancilla was found dead in 1981. The place previously selected by Berne coincided with Benito's description of a small hut. There was in fact a base where such small construction could have been erected in the past. Yet, Leopoldo struggled with that location, since it didn't synchronize with his memory of having the Montañita hill on his back as he looked to the ravine (also Benito called this hill by another name that nobody in the locality recognized and was surely a mistaken name). Confronted with these doubts, Berne, Leopoldo and Pedro decided to walk down the ravine and across the stream to the other side. On that side they also found an old house base such as the one described by Leopoldo. The hill then aligned on his back, and it was determined that was the place where Horacio died. Leopoldo was also confused by the narration of Benito that the body would have been found about 5 months after his death. His death occurred under the circumstances that the army discovered the site of the guerrilla command with its main leader, Salvador Cayetano Carpio, "Marcial", present there. This military siege is recognized by all surviving guerrilla fighters as the October 1981 Retreat (they call it "guinda" in Spanish). The guerrilla retreated taking with them all civilians in the area, since it was customary that the army would simply kill all civilians deemed to be supporting the guerrillas. That was a large operation by the army to destroy the Local Vanguard Unit located there and capture and kill an important leader of the guerrilla.

While our friends explored the ravine, I took the opportunity of using the natural mountain background and the place where we knew our friend Sergio Mancilla had fallen in combat, to interview Vielka on

video. She reflected upon the meaning of this physical and spiritual journey to this land after so many years since the death of her husband and comrade.



(Panoramic view of El Zope Ravine)

Thus concluded our first day of work. We started walking back as it was turning dark. It was hard to imagine how in such rugged terrain men and women, girls and boys that composed the guerrillas in the 80s could even walk in the dark.

THIRD DAY

Monday, March 23. Again we had high temperatures (90s) and humidity. We decided to no longer concentrate on the place we had worked on the day before. After a night of very painful sharp leg cramps, I decided I would not join the exploration group that day. Vielka and I decided to stay home so as to not slow down our friends. The war statement by Benito indicated that they lifted the body in a sack and brought it up to the command post in El Potrero, waiting for a coffin to be built to proceed to bury the body. According to Leopoldo, his first reaction then was to climb up to the highest altitude of the Montaña hill and bury him there. After reconsidering the situation, Leopoldo and his comrades reconsidered the initial idea and decided that it was better not to climb as high as it would be a risky proposition while carrying the box. On their way, they chose an alternative area. That was then the place they were looking for on this day.

Back in El Jicaró, Vielka and I decided to wait for the heat of the sun to come down a bit to walk toward the little center of town. As we walked, we stopped at a small grocery store where we met a young woman from New York who was doing Peace Corps service there. We told her what our purpose in Chalatenango was and she listened without emotion nor surprise. The lady who was taking care of us,

possibly the store owner, immediately replied that she too had lost her husband in the war. A similar story we had heard before from our host at home, our dear friend Orbelina.

The previous day, Rogelio Ortega had told us how he buried nine neighbors, women killed by the army and who still remain in place in his land. He still remembers the names of all of them. We thought it was time to take those names down and write them and erect a plaque in their burial place that would transcend the years. This, perhaps, would ensure that their names will not disappear when our comrade Rogelio can no longer remember.



(Berne, Rogelio Ortega and Leo at El Potrero)

That night, the report of the day was that the explorers were able to walk around the hill from where we had been the day before and approach the place where Leopoldo remembered burying our friend Sergio Mancilla. Further exploration work was left pending to be done the day after.

FOURTH DAY

Tuesday, March 24. Berne and I left El Jicaro early to go to Chalatenango and buy more provisions, including bottled water. Some of the new provisions also would be used to cook lunch to be shared with our friend Rogelio at El Potrero. Berne thought it would give them a chance to socialize with Rogelio and get more information about the area. Again, we had very high temperatures and humidity that day. One very important purchase we were set to do was spray paint to mark the places already inspected so as to not repeat the same place again. When we returned home from the market, we realized we forgot to get the paint; an unforgivable mistake. Vielka and I decided again to stay back home to allow them full mobility. I was more than concerned about my out of control high glucose levels, which had reached levels beyond the maximum tolerated by my glucometer.

The objective set by Berne, Pedro and Leopoldo was to go deeper in the designated burial area. Unfortunately, they discovered that both visibility and mobility within that area were extremely difficult. The little wild bushes that Leopoldo found in 1981, had now 34 years of growth and were thick and taller than anyone of us. This is what our friends described in detail when they returned at night and we captured the full report on video. The possibility that we might have to weed out the area described by Berne as 2 hectares was becoming evident. After doing that, Leopoldo could then again put his memory to work to attempt to find the exact burial location. Naturally, that was something we could not do within the period of time we had available.



(Berne pointing to the high density of weed in the area were Sergio Mancilla is buried)

FIFTH DAY

Wednesday, March 25. Our last day of exploration in the area, which was also a sort of temporary farewell to the remains of our friend Sergio Mancilla still buried in those hills. This time we all decided to march up the hill. For Vielka and I this was the first time we would set foot where our friend was buried. We decided to walk as early as possible to avoid the brunt of the heat. Since we were familiar with a portion of the road, the ascent was less painful, although this time we had to walk a longer distance.

We went deeper and deeper into an area of trees and bushes, following on paths obviously walked by workers and local people before. As we went in, we could see the low rising rock walls that were engraved in Leopoldo's memory. Later on talking about this path, Berne remembered that it was called "Cuesta del Calambre," or Cramps Hill, since people usually cramped up when they reached this point.

Once we arrived to the burial place, we all reaffirmed our friends' conclusion that there was no alternative but to weed out that plot of land if we hoped to find the burial place. We then took on the

precise coordinates in two points that covered the beginning and end of the plot of interest: 14 6' 48" N, 88 54' 37" W is the first point. The second is, 14 6' 53" N, 88 54' 38" W.



(Farewell from the natural cemetery where our Sergio Mancilla is buried. Vielka, Sergio, Leopoldo)

Finally, we video recorded our last reflections on location before leaving the area. We initiated our walk back but we stopped to say good bye to our friend Rogelio. At the same time, we asked if he knew who the owners of that plot were. Rogelio informed us that the plot is owned by a Cooperative and that one of his grandsons was in contact with them. Berne will follow up on the task of weeding out the plot.

Back at home, after dinner, it was time to have live music at Orbelina's house and we sung. A good neighbor lent us a beautiful guitar, which I played with pleasure. The revolutionary songs of Latin America competed with the songs and noises of the animals of El Jicaro at night in the land of Chalatenango. Our Tia Orbelina treated us to some songs, and so did Berne and Vielka who knew much of the material presented that night.

I don't remember if the singing session was before or after we attended a service at the El Jicaro Church, which had a whole evening of vigils and activities commemorating the martyrdom by assassination of Monsignor Oscar Romero. Vielka, Leopoldo and I sat in the church with the faithful that still cry from the assassination of their pastor and saint. That day at least, a couple of atheists were with them, in solidarity with their pain. The parish priest in civilian clothing noted our presence and thanked the "visitors" who came to accompany them. I thought that there were perhaps other more distinguished visitors present and looked around. But, no, it was us.



(Our dear guides, comrades, friends and brothers, Berne and Pedro)

SIXTH DAY

Thursday, March 26. In our trips for many towns in Chalatenango Leopoldo met with many of his past comrades at arms who welcomed him back with true love. This part of the narrative will have to be his own story eventually. We do, however, preserve the memories of their conversations and have picture testimonies of those precious meetings. For instance, we met with one his comrades who had lost an arm in the war. Also met with another friend who survived the war in one piece after having the honor of downing an army war plane with a hand held missile launcher. This feat gave him the surname of "Misilero" (the missile man). He proudly displayed on his living room wall a portrait of him and his missile launcher from the times of war. Other friends, also former guerrilla combatants joined us and posed for pictures with Leopoldo. Most of them didn't get to meet Horacio, our Sergio Mancilla back in 1981. However, now they know of him, of his sacrifice in the struggle. They also know that we came here so many years later from such distant places looking for him, for his remains, but more than anything as an act to honor his struggle for the poor and oppressed of El Salvador, for international socialist revolution.

Our farewell with Orbelina was sweet and as if we were family. We left her home in El Jicaro with more love than when we came. For me, this also meant leaving behind a house of misteries, with its country side artifacts that confused me greatly after so many years of urban life in the empire. Only the brutal heat and humidity didn't give us reprieve.



(Cheers at our General Headquarters in El Jicaro! Berne, Pedro, Leo, Vielka, Orbelina)

Going back to San Salvador was not exempt from taking many, many turns, not only because of the road zig-zaging around hills but also because Leopoldo got information about a woman who fought alongside in his unit and our dear Berne was determined to give Leopoldo the opportunity to talk to her. We found her home in a town whose name I cannot remember, but she was not home. That day was destined for a big event in El Salvador, the Great March for Peace. Most people with political conviction attended. Leopoldo left her a note with her neighbor. She called him back an hour later and they were able to see each other later on.

When we finally made it to our small hotel in San Salvador, my first action was to turn on the air conditioner in my room to cool down my poor body beat up by heat. Meanwhile, Leopoldo continued making contacts with old comrades who were happy to make arrangements to meet with him.

SEVENTH DAY

Friday, March 27. Even before our arrival, Berne had set up an appointment for us to meet with the Vice Minister for Foreign Relations, Carlos Castaneda. Comrade Castaneda was a young fighter during the civil war and ended up with a knee destroyed by enemy bullets. He was then transported to Cuba, where medical surgeons were able to artificially rebuild his knee. In fact, if he didn't tell the story we would have never noticed that he had such serious war injury. Then, I thought that for sure there are so

many people in El Salvador with war injuries that are invisible, but are ever present for them and still hurt.

With the Vice Minister, we had an open and honest conversation about the Chilean and Salvadoran political processes. In particular, we talked about the similarities in both countries where former socialist revolutionaries ended up being administrators of the new capitalist state. I thought about the Peace Agreement that ended the war in El Salvador. There was a signed agreement, for sure, but peace still eludes the country. I thought how central to this was that the agreements signed could negotiate many things but expressly said that the economic system in place, that is, capitalism, was non-negotiable. I also thought, in parallel, about the certificates of good conduct signed in Chile under the dictatorship. Pinochet left a legacy of society and a constitution where the capitalist system was untouchable.

The Vice Minister met with us for about 45 minutes. Our meeting had to be ended as the President Salvador Sanchez Ceren himself was demanding his presence. During those days congress elections in El Salvador had given the right-wing opposition to the FMLN the majority. Castaneda, however, wanted to continue this conversation and promised to visit us that evening at our hotel, which he did. Before leaving his office he gave each one of us two books as presents, "From Madness to Hope, the 12-year War in El Salvador", a report by the Comission for Truth in El Salvador; and "El Salvador, from Civil War to Negotiated Peace", a collection of essays which included one by President Sanchez Ceren.



(Vice Minister for Foreign Relations, Carlos Castaneda, Leopoldo, Vielka)

The rest of the day was filled with meetings Leopoldo held with his former comrades in the struggle. Their many names, just like the many names for the many hills in El Salvador, I cannot remember. But, I am sure that for our Leopoldo, this visit to El Salvador was an incredible opportunity to relive moments

from his youth, and that he went back to his home in the Chilean mountains, at the Cajon del Maipo, recharged with the affection given him by his Salvadoran comrades.

That night we also said simply “see you soon” to our dear friend and comrade Pedro Cafe, for whom it was also time to go back home to his family after literally giving us a week of his life, just like Berne did too.

EIGHTH DAY

Saturday, March 21. Early in the morning we departed towards the airport as Leopoldo and Vielka had flights on COPA to Panama, where Vielka would stay, while Leopoldo continued his trip to Chile. Again we were processed under the comfort of diplomacy. To our surprise, the Vice Minister himself came to say good bye to us, while he prepared to travel to Canada. Our farewell with Leopoldo and Vielka, was not intended to be final. We know we still have work to do together. One thing is for sure, in those 7 days we shared more than half a century of experiences, going back to the childhood of Sergio, Horacio, until his death, and then the many more years that elapsed since.



(Going back home. Leopoldo and Vielka)

Berne and I had extra time to share, since my flight was not due until midday. A friend and political comrade from my home town Punta Arenas in Chile, Magda, had asked me to give a follow up call to a former ERP (Revolutionary People’s Army) inquiring about her companion and father of her daughter. I did, only to find out that the former “comandante” had no new information. Magda’s companion, “Patricio”, Uruguayan, also died in combat in El Salvador. Even though Magda has been searching for many years, his remains still cannot be located. Our dear Berne, with blessed solidarity, also promised to help in this search using his many contacts. I told Berne that he carries on his shoulders so many ghosts from a war that still doesn’t end. We talked about hope, and the current political situation where there

is no hope. We talked about grassroots people's power, which I thought is possible and him not so much. I believe we can build this power in spite of the primacy of capitalism in our societies. I concluded that all the work we did together in search of the remains and the memory of Horacio was the result of people's power. We might have never accomplished what we did if we left in the hands of authority. We did it ourselves with the support of many people as an expression of revolutionary love.

Thanks to all who have supported and participated in this project, from any location on our Earth.

(And, thank you, one more time, Vielka and Berne for reviewing and correcting this report.)

Watertown, Massachusetts, April 6, 2015.