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The long road to **justice**

Survivors of the Dos Erres massacre tell their story

louisa reynolds

The long road to justice

Text: Louisa Reynolds
Photography: Sandra Sebastián

**“Dos Erres: the long road to justice” is a work of narrative journalism that is based on extensive interviews with survivors of the Dos Erres massacre, perpetrated by the Guatemalan army in 1982, the human rights activists who have supported them in their fight for justice, psychologists, historians and military experts who testified during the two trials that have taken place in connection with this case, as well as documentary evidence such as de-classified US government documents made public by the National Security Archive (NAS). The dialogs in this text are accurately reproduced as they were narrated by the survivors who ere interviewed.*

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I

In 1979, Juan Pablo Arévalo dug a well in his land, unaware of the fact that he was digging his own grave. His son, Saúl Arévalo, 54, takes off his black rimmed spectacles, pushes them back to the nape of his neck and points to the place where the Arévalo well was located. Much to the community's disappointment, water was never found there. In 1994, Fifteen years after the well was built, an Argentinean forensic anthropology team extracted one by one, from that same well, the remains of 162 inhabitants of Dos Erres, including Juan Pablo Arévalo and two of his sons.

Today, Dos Erres, a village in the municipality of Las Cruces, in Petén, Guatemala's Northernmost department, where one of the civil war's most brutal massacres occurred, is a vast grassland bordered by barbed wire, where cattle graze peacefully. The corn, bean, pineapple and peanut plantations have disappeared and at the spot where the path leading to the village used to be, there is now a white metallic gate that bears the words "Finca Los Conacastes. Private Property".

The well where the bodies of Juan Pablo Arévalo, his family members, friends and neighbors were thrown into by Kaibil soldiers no longer exists. In its place, there are two tiny white crosses, placed discreetly in order to avoid being noticed and removed by the Mendoza family, which now owns these lands and is known as one of Guatemala's most powerful drug clans.

But despite the changes that Dos Erres has undergone over the years, Saúl remembers well the geography of the village

and he points to the exact location where the churches – one Catholic and one Protestant – the school, his home and the homes of his neighbors, once stood.

If today this is a remote place that can only be reached after an almost three hour bus ride from Flores, the departmental capital of Petén, to Las Cruces, plus a bumpy one hour ride in a pickup truck through the unpaved dirt road connecting Las Cruces with Dos Erres, in the early 1970s this village was the back of beyond, or to cite a typically Guatemalan phrase, it was “el lugar donde el Diablo dejó tirado el caite” or “the place where the Devil dropped his sandal”, a dense and fiercely hot tropical jungle that the first settlers had to battle against armed with little more than a machete.

In November 2011, Las Cruces became Guatemala’s 334th municipality, but back in those days it was part of the municipality of La Libertad, which is divided by two major highways that run from central Petén to the Western border with Mexico. New populations would usually spring up on either side of the road but Dos Erres, located in the heart of the jungle and miles away from the nearest highway, was the exception.

The name of the village, which means “The Two R’s” originates from the surnames of Federico Aquino Ruano and his cousin, Marco Reyes. Juan Pablo Arévalo and Federico Aquino Ruano or *Don Lico* as he was known by his neighbors, knew each other from the years when they lived in the village of La Máquina, in Retalhuleu. *Don Lico* was the founding patriarch of the promised land that he and his countrymen believed they had found in Dos Erres. In 1966, a government agency called Fomento y Desarrollo de Petén (FYDEP), had begun to colonize this area by bringing in immigrants

from the country's eastern and southern departments. Thus, by establishing villages and peasant cooperatives, the government aimed to conquer Petén, which was, and remains to this day, Guatemala's last frontier.

But parallel to this planned colonization process, news of the vast extensions of arable land that could be found in Petén had reached many impoverished peasants, who arrived, like the cowboys of Western movies, and put a stake in the ground to claim that land as their property.

This is how Federico Aquino Ruano and Marco Reyes arrived at Dos Erres and were given the task of dividing the land among the new settlers on behalf of FYDEP. In order to do this, the two community leaders divided the land, numbered the plots- which were never properly measured - and drew lots so that no one could claim that the distribution had been unfair.

When Juan Pablo Arévalo heard about the new community of Dos Erres, he didn't think twice about packing his belongings and taking his family to Las Cruces, which in those days was a village with barely 20 houses, a small school with walls made of guano and a football pitch. This was where he left his wife and children while he undertook the arduous task of clearing his new plot of land in Dos Erres, which took him five years.

That's what most peasants did: their families initially stayed in Las Cruces and would gradually migrate to newly created villages and hamlets such as Josefinos, Palestina and Dos Erres, once they had managed to build a small shack there.

“In Dos Erres, you could obtain a plot that measured between 90 and 135 hectares and up to four families could live there

whereas in Retalhuleu we didn't even have a tiny piece of land", explains Saúl.

Clearing the jungle without chainsaws or vehicles was a huge feat. With no more than a machete, peasants cut through the dense vegetation in sweltering heat, shaking off mosquitoes that often carried tropical diseases such as dengue fever, malaria or yellow fever.

At first they had to sleep out in the open, using a few empty sacks as a makeshift mattress, and gradually they began to build shacks with a soil ground, a palm roof and walls made from sugar canes tied together with wooden sticks. The walls inside were lined with cardboard or plastic in order to make the shack waterproof. A flat earthenware pan used to bake corn tortillas, known in Spanish as *comal*, was placed in the outer patio.

Those who survived the Dos Erres massacre remember Federico Aquino Ruano as a slim and short man who enjoyed smoking cigarettes. He had a deep voice that conveyed a sense of authority but he endeavored to solve problems in a peaceful manner.

By the early 1980s, peasant families had arrived from Santa Rosa, Jutiapa, Retalhuleu and other departments in Eastern Guatemala and the Southern coast. Dos Erres had a total of 745 inhabitants and where there used to be jungle, there was now an abundance of corn, bean, pineapple and peanut plantations, as well as extensions of land where cows, pigs and chickens were reared. The harvest was long – lasting from September to June – and Saúl remembers that his father managed to harvest up to 69 tons of corn per year, which he transported in a cart to Las Cruces, the local trade hub, where he sold it to the merchants who arrived every week with huge trucks.

A sign of the village's growing prosperity was the fact that some peasants had started to hire farm hands that came from Las Cruces and worked from Monday to Friday on the corn harvest and other agricultural chores.

Dos Erres had no electricity, sewage system or health clinic, and at first, it had no water supply either, which meant that the settlers were forced to walk for ten kilometers, all the way to Las Cruces, in order to fill as many containers as they could carry and then begin an arduous journey back to their village. This changed, however, in 1978, when Federico built the Ruano well, which soon became a popular meeting point for the villagers, who arrived early in the morning and lined up to fill their buckets.

A year later, with the hope of finding a second water source, Saúl's father had started to dig a 21 meter well, but his efforts were unsuccessful.

II

Lesbia Tesucún looked so frightened and tired after her long journey from Flores, that she seemed more like a terrified little girl who had lost her way in the mountains rather than the first school teacher sent by the Ministry of Education to the new village of Dos Erres.

She arrived in June 1980, on the back of a tractor that belonged to Gamaliel, the only farmer in the village who owned a vehicle, nervously clutching a small suitcase in which she carried a hammock, a few items of clothing and books. She was accompanied by her anxious mother, who worried

about the fate that could befall her 18 year-old daughter, who had just obtained her teaching diploma and had left home for the first time, in such a far flung place.

During the journey, she was seized by panic and tears rolled down her plump face as she grabbed onto the seat for dear life, terrified by the thought of falling to the ground every time that the tractor fell into a huge pothole.

“*Don Lalo*, here’s the teacher”, announced Gamaliel when he arrived at the preacher’s house. “I’m glad you came. I thought they would never send us a teacher”, replied Estanislao Galicia, known in the village as *Don Lalo*, who took the girl’s suitcase and led her to a spare room in his house that his wife, *Doña Fina*, had prepared for her.

Dos Erres now had a teacher but no school, a problem that wasn’t too hard to solve. The following day, *Don Lalo* summoned his neighbors and began to divide them into small groups. While some chopped wood, others went to fetch the aluminum sheets for the roof and in less than five days they had built a rudimentary hall with a soil floor and logs for the pupils to sit on. The following Monday, thirty children of different ages eagerly arrived at seven o’clock in the morning to receive their first lesson.

These children had never sat in a classroom, some had to walk for an hour to get there and there was a single teacher for all of them, despite their different ages. But they were hard-working and by end of the year, most of them had learnt to read and write.

It didn't take long for Lesbia to feel at home in a community that had welcomed her with open arms and in her free time she spent many happy moments playing with *Don Lalo* and *Doña Fina's* children.

On special days, such as Independence Day or Mother's Day, she would take photographs of her pupils, a series of portraits that can be found today in the office of the Association of Family Members of the Detained and Disappeared in Guatemala (Famdegua), a poignant reminder of a new generation that embodied the future of Dos Erres. A generation that was bludgeoned to death and plunged into a dark well.

III

Although Dos Erres was a quiet and almost idyllic village, life was overshadowed by war, which always hovered close by like a harbinger of doom. When the inhabitants of Dos Erres went to Las Cruces to sell their products and buy basic supplies, the soldiers, in every checkpoint, demanded to see their ID and anyone who was caught without his or her documents could be disappeared.

If someone pulled more than one bucket of water out of the well, the soldiers would ask why that person needed so much water and who they intended to give it to, implying that the people of Dos Erres were supplying water to guerrilla groups. The soldiers went as far as searching the bundles of corn tortillas that women from Dos Erres carried to Las Cruces to sell on market days.

Every male over fifteen years of age was forced to walk for three hours to Las Cruces where he would reluctantly pick up a rifle

and join the local Civil Defense Patrol or PAC, a paramilitary structure created in 1982 under the Ríos Montt dictatorship, in order to boost the army's efforts to combat insurgents.

The men hated these patrols because they were seemingly unnecessary, as no one had ever seen a guerrilla combatant in Las Cruces, let alone in Dos Erres, and the grueling 12 hour shifts (from six o'clock in the morning to six o'clock in the afternoon), forced them to leave their homes unprotected. But even elderly men who were half deaf and could no longer walk upright were forced to comply. Everyone, without exception, had to take part, even if they were lying in bed with fever, as anyone who dared to disobey orders could be accused of being a communist sympathizer. And that was the worst possible thing that could happen to someone. It meant being intercepted along the road by an invisible hand and disappearing without a trace.

In that atmosphere of fear and paranoia, a common way of settling the score with a neighbor with whom one had an ongoing feud was to whisper in the ear of sub-lieutenant Carlos Antonio Carías, head of the military detachment in Las Cruces, that he or she was a communist. Without bothering to investigate the matter or check out the facts, that person would simply disappear and would never be seen again.

Ricardo Martínez González was one of the men who was forced to patrol the vicinity and was well aware of the fact that orders issued by the army could not be disobeyed. One day, on his way to Las Cruces, he was stopped by a group of soldiers, one of whom walked barefoot. They demanded that he should run to the village and bring back a pair of size forty boots, or else his family would suffer the consequences.

The young man ran to the market, arrived breathless at the shoemaker's stall, and explained what had happened. As he had no money, he had to plead with the shoemaker and promised to pay for the boots as soon as possible, fearing that some terrible fate could befall his wife and children if he did not comply immediately. After asking around, he managed to find the barefoot soldier and handed him the boots. Seemingly unimpressed, the soldier never thanked him or reimbursed him for the expense.

Ricardo had lived in Dos Erres for ten years when he was forced to hastily pack his most indispensable belongings and leave his land. Early one morning, in November 1982, he was pulling a bucket of water out of the well when he saw a group of soldiers emerge from the bushes.

They were approximately twenty. One of them, who had covered his face with a black handkerchief momentarily left the group. He grabbed Ricardo by the shoulders and warned said: "The Martínez family must leave at once because all of these people are going to be killed". Ricardo had to leave at once with his wife and children and was not to say a word to anyone, unless he wanted to share the fate of his unfortunate neighbors. Ricardo recognized the voice as that of Faustino Castillo, a soldier that had asked his parents for a loan. He was clearly grateful and this was his way of repaying the favor.

Ricardo could not leave without warning his best friend Félix about the impending catastrophe. But his efforts were to no avail and Félix refused to leave. Like his neighbors, he had heard that in April that year the army had sown terror in the village of Josefinos, a few kilometers away from Las Cruces, setting shacks on fire and bludgeoning 57 innocent people to death. Nevertheless, Félix and his neighbors were convinced

that there was no possible reason why their lives could be in danger as they were hardworking, honest peasants with no ties to subversive groups. They mistakenly believed that those who have nothing to hide have nothing to fear.

IV

The wretched man that had been forced to lead the Kaibil troop to Dos Erres, walked along reluctantly with his hands tied, and was pushed and shoved along the way by the soldiers who followed him. Their aim was to exterminate every living being that they found in the “red village”, an operation that Lieutenant Roberto Aníbal Rivera Martínez had called “La Chapeadora”, which means “he or she who clears the land with a machete”.

In the lead, as always, marched the “assault group”, also known as “los rematadores” or “those in charge of finishing off the job”, the fiercest and most violent men, whom Rivera Martínez trusted above all others.

The nineteen soldiers of the Special Kaibil Troop, plus forty other Kaibiles who had been sent in as a backup, had been ordered to enter Dos Erres under enemy fire. They had been told that the people in that village had refused to take part in the mandatory patrols and that carts loaded with sacks marked with the letters FAR had been intercepted at the checkpoints. FAR stood for *Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes* (Rebel Armed Forces), a guerrilla group that had stolen 21 army rifles in an ambush in the nearby village of San Diego. Something the soldiers probably didn't know was that the acronym also stood for Federico Aquino Ruano, the owner of the sacks. For the army, such evidence could only mean one thing: these people were communists and were undoubtedly hiding the stolen weapons.

But the soldiers never came under enemy fire as they entered Dos Erres. Not a single shot was ever fired. It was three o'clock in the morning and only the chirp of nocturnal insects pierced the silence of the night until the soldiers kicked the villagers' doors down and pulled the terrified peasants out of their homes.

They turned the beds over and emptied the contents of drawers and wardrobes but the rifles they had been ordered to search for were nowhere to be seen. An hour later, the Kaibiles had searched every single shack and the men had been taken to the village school to be interrogated while the women had been led to the Asamblea de Dios evangelical church.

Then, Lieutenant Rivera Martínez ordered Obdulio Sandoval, Kaibil instructor Alfonso Vicente Bulux, the cook, Fabio Pinzón, and two other soldiers, among them one that had a mole on his left cheek, to check out all the shacks once again and make sure that no one had been left behind.

V

María Juliana Hernández Morán felt deeply uneasy as she prepared breakfast for her family. The day before, her sons, Salomé Armando, 11, and Ramiro, 23, had gone to Las Cruces, riding a mule, to buy medicine and other supplies, but they had not returned. A few days earlier, María Juliana had heard gunshots in the distance.

She was absorbed in these thoughts when the front door came crashing down. Olive green uniforms, black boots, a Galil rifle pointed at her head. "Sons of bitches, we're going to blow your brains out!", yelled the soldiers at the terrified family. They were wearing military badges and red

handkerchiefs on their arms, in a crude attempt to disguise themselves as guerrilla combatants. The idea was that if the villagers agreed to feed them, they would obtain irrefutable proof of the fact that they were communists and that they therefore ought to be exterminated.

Pinzón, the cook, stood guard by the door while the other four entered the house. When one of María Juliana's daughters in law began to scream, one of the soldiers stuck his rifle in her mouth to force her to remain silent. They threw the milk, cream and tortillas to the ground; they ransacked wardrobes and yelled at the family to hand over the hidden weapons immediately. "You're the ones that feed the guerrillas that are up in the mountains!", they insisted. Beating her with his rifle, a soldier forced María Juliana to step out into the yard and stuck her head in a bucket of water until she was about to drown.

Before leaving, the soldiers devoured the food that they hadn't soiled, like a pack of hungry wolves, and asked María Juliana for water to wash their faces. "Thank you ma'am", one of them said with a malignant smile. "We're coming back to deal with you later".

Sandra Otilia, María Juliana's youngest daughter, looked at the soldier with the mole on his left cheek and pleaded: "Please, if you happen to see my brother...His name's Ramiro...", and her voice trailed off into a faint whisper.

Despite the ordeal that they had just suffered, Sandra Otilia had not understood that the soldiers were there to kill them. Her father, Emeritón Gómez, had raised her to respect the olive green military uniform and to feel proud of the army that was there to defend all Guatemalans.

VI

Convinced that sooner or later they would speak, the Kaibiles dragged the men out of the school, one by one, and beat them, demanding to know where they had hidden the rifles. But it was to no avail. Even though they tortured them by placing a rope around their necks until they almost strangled them, the men insisted that they were not hiding any weapons.

César Franco Ibáñez had been told to stand guard by the church door to make sure that no one could escape and from there he saw Lieutenant Adán Rosales Batres, who was known for his habit of raping women after a village had been raided, walking towards him.

Women of all ages were crying and begging for mercy but the soldiers, nonchalantly, dragged them out the church, pulling their hair, and into the shrubs, where they fell upon them like wild beasts, tearing clothing, destroying the tiny uteruses of infant girls, injecting every woman and child with a sperm that was filled with hatred.

At around ten o'clock in the morning, after the brutal rape, the women were forced to prepare a chicken stew and beans for the soldiers. At midday, as they ate their meal, César Franco Ibáñez heard some of the soldiers talk about "vaccinating" people, which he found extremely strange as they were not part of a civilian affairs patrol.

Once they had eaten, the mystery was dispelled and he understood what "vaccinating" meant in the lexicon of those beings who were no longer men but killing machines churned out from *El Infierno* (Hell) and *La Pólvora* (Gunpowder), the two training camps where the slogan "if

I advance follow me, if I stop urge me on, if I turn back, kill me” had been drilled into their brains.

During their grueling training sessions they had been forced to swim across a crocodile infested river, eat anything that moved, whether it be ants or the puppy they had raised as a pet, and they had watched those who were weak and did not pass the tests, die. Those who never made it out of Hell.

“Vaccinating” for the Kaibil soldiers meant that a group of instructors would be in charge of rounding up a small group of people, tearing a piece of every man, woman and child’s garments, blindfolding them and handing them over to another group of soldiers, who stood by the well. These soldiers would lift a heavy sledgehammer that they had found among the water buckets, scattered around the well, and smash their skulls. The bodies would then be thrown into the well and the groans that were still heard from the depths and darkness of the well would be silenced with a hail of bullets and the explosion of a hand grenade.

Next to the well stood Lieutenant Rivera Martínez together with most of the Kaibil instructors, among them Reyes Collin Gualip, Manuel Pop Sun, Daniel Martínez Hernández, nicknamed “el Burro” (the Donkey) and one who had a mole on his left cheek.

VII

Hidden among the roots of a tree, 11-year-old Salomé Armando could not stop thinking about his brother Ramiro. He held his breath when he heard the soldiers’ footsteps. As they drew closer, he realized that one of them was riding Ramiro’s mule and was wearing his hat. “We’re done with all of these sons of bitches!” one of them yelled and at that moment he realized that he would never see his brother again.

After buying the medicines and foodstuffs that the family needed in Las Cruces, Ramiro and Salomé Armando had bumped into Ramiro Aldana on their way back to Dos Erres. Ramiro Aldana frequently bought vegetables and poultry from their father and on this occasion he had asked them to go to their uncle Félix's house and ask him for two turkeys.

The two boys embarked on the ten kilometer walk back to Dos Erres without a care on their minds, without suspecting that they would find their uncle Félix distraught while the soldiers searched his home, smashing his belongings and throwing the contents of drawers and wardrobes on the floor.

The soldiers forced them to dismount and led them to the school, where Salomé Armando had sat next to Ramiro on one of the logs used as makeshift desks. But a soldier had grabbed him, yelling that they didn't want any kids there, and he had been dragged to the church where the women had been locked in with their small children.

He found his aunt Evangelina, who sat on one of the benches and was crying. Many terrified women had knelt by the altar praying to God to spare their lives. Then, a soldier who wore a red handkerchief around his neck and had a mole on his left cheek burst into the church, climbed onto the altar and started to jeer at them. "Come on, sing! Sing!", he yelled.

The soldiers beat them, pulled them out of the church in small groups and dragged them towards the shrubs. They cried and refused to leave the church. "If you're going to kill us, do it right here because we won't be killed in a shrub as if we were dogs!" they pleaded.

Salomé Armando had been pulled out of the church with a group of women and he walked close behind the soldier

who was leading them. When a woman refused to walk any further, the soldier turned around and grabbed her hair, in a quick movement that barely lasted a few seconds, enough for the boy to run for his life and hide beneath the tree.

Several hours went by before he was able to leave his hiding place. When he finally came out he fell asleep in a field and then began to walk home. As he approached his family's land, he heard heavy footsteps and knew right away that the soldiers had just left the house. Had his parents been killed? The young boy decided that if that were the case, he would turn himself over to the soldiers so that they would kill him, too.

The boy entered the house with a lost expression on his face, bloodshot eyes and limbs covered in huge mosquito bites. His mother collapsed when he told her that Ramiro had been killed. Convinced that the soldiers would return to kill them too, they ran out of the house and fled into through the jungle, with nothing more than the clothes they were wearing on that day.

VIII

In a corner of the same church that Salomé Armando had escaped from, four small children were huddled together, crying. The eldest, Ramiro Cristales, was five years old. The sun had not risen yet when the soldiers had busted in the front door of his house, and had dragged his parents and six siblings out of their beds. His father and brothers had been tied together by the neck with ropes, as if they were animals. Behind them, walked Ramiro's mother, carrying his nine-month old sister.

While Ramiro's father and brothers had been led towards to

the school, he and his mother had been taken to the church, where a soldier had suddenly burst in and yelled: “You better pray because no one is going to save you this time!”

The soldiers gathered small groups of women, taking the youngest ones first, and dragged them out of the church. When it was his mother’s turn to go, Ramiro clutched her leg but a huge black boot sent him flying across the church.

The door was slammed shut and he never saw her again. The boy hid under a bench and cried himself to sleep. When he woke up, the church was empty.

IX

By six o’clock in the evening the massacre had ended and Juan Pablo Arévalo and his neighbors lay inside the well that they had built with their own hands, covered by a layer of fresh soil.

When there was no longer any space in the well for more bodies, the peasants who arrived at the village were rounded up and shot in two small lagoons known as La Aguada and Los Salzares, where animals drank from and where the villagers often washed their clothes. The soldiers had been instructed not to allow anyone to leave Dos Erres, although César Franco Ibáñez heard that a little boy had escaped.

The next day, the Kaibil soldiers left the village, taking two teenage girls, and two boys aged 3 and 5, who remained silent when they were asked what their names were. They had not been chosen at random to escape the horrors that befell Dos Erres on December 7, 1982. These children had been born to peasant families from eastern Guatemala, where the population is predominantly light skinned, and that, in

a profoundly racist country that despises the copper colored skin of the Indian, was their ticket to salvation. They were also too young to remember their parents, whose bodies lay at the bottom of the well, and could be easily accepted by the families of the two lieutenants that intended to adopt them.

That night, in the military camp, the girls were repeatedly raped by the troop. Early in the morning, the soldier who wore the red handkerchief tied around his neck and had a mole on his left cheek, grabbed one of the girls and shot her in front of his fellow soldiers. “That’s how you kill someone”, he said, as if he was showing off a great exploit. The other young girl was also shot and their bodies were dumped in the shrubs.

A few days later, Lieutenant Ramírez Ramos pointed at the guide in a scornful manner and said that he fancied eating meat. Two soldiers grabbed the wretched man while a third soldier unsheathed his knife and sunk it into his ribs. A spine-chilling scream that barely seemed human echoed through the jungle. Undeterred, the soldier tore out one of the man’s ribs, with the same ease as a butcher cutting up a pig.

When the soldier gave Ramírez Ramos the bloody mass of flesh, the lieutenant burst into peals of laughter and said that it was a joke. With a puzzled look on his face, the soldier pointed at the man, who was lying unconscious in a pool of blood, and enquired what he was supposed to do with him. “Kill him”, replied Ramírez Ramos, as if he had been asked something blatantly obvious.

X

She heard gunfire and then saw a blood stained body lying on the ground. As she approached the corpse, she realized

that its shins had been blown away by the explosion. With that gruesome image, Petronila López Méndez awoke from a terrible nightmare on December 4, 1982.

Three days later, her husband, Marcelino Granados Juárez, left his home in Las Cruces, as he did every week, to work as a farm hand in Dos Erres, accompanied by his sons, Cecilio, 14, and Abel, 5. He had not slept for the past twenty four hours, as he had just completed his compulsory patrol shift, and a granular feeling persisted in his eyes.

Although she had watched him leave week after week, that day, in particular, Petronila felt uneasy, maybe because the memory of that mutilated body lying on the ground remained vivid and poignant in her mind.

At six o'clock, she saw two children walking past in the street and said she would give them a coin if they went to look for *Don Ventura*, her husband's employer, to see if he had arrived yet. A few hours later, the children returned without the words that Petronila was longing to hear. "*Don Ventura* says that there's no one there, that someone did something bad in the village", they told her.

After a sleepless night, Petronila left her home early in the morning and went to the military detachment to look for Sub-Lieutenant Carías. But the soldier at the entrance said that he was still sleeping.

Petronila waited for several hours until Carías finally appeared. "You know what's going on in Dos Erres", she said, stating a fact rather than asking a question.

- "Why do you say that?" he replied.

-“Because you’re so calm”, said Petronila.

-“Haven’t you heard that there are guerrillas out there?” he asked.

-“If that were true you wouldn’t be so calm”, insisted Petronila, holding onto the certainty that sooner or later Carías would tell her the truth.

Carías remained silent, searching for something he could say in order to distract her attention but before his words could come out, Petronila looked him in the eye and asked: “What shall I do if my husband and sons don’t come back?”

-“Be patient. Come back in the afternoon and I’ll try to find out what’s going on”, he said, thinking that at least he would be able to get rid of her for a few hours.

Petronila returned in the afternoon and waited for hours under a scorching sun until she saw a jeep approaching in the distance. Carías got out of the vehicle, followed by two men in military uniform who wore red berets.

Petronila walked up to Carías and said: “I need to know the truth. Be a man and tell me the truth”. The intricate web of lies that he had spun in an attempt to confuse her came crashing down and in a moment of weakness his eyes swelled with tears as he placed his hand on her shoulder. “You’ve pierced my heart”, he said. “What happened in Dos Erres was the work of a cursed troop that came from *La Pólvara*”, he said.

-“I want to find my children even if they’re dead”, said Petronila. But Carías remained silent.

A few hours later, Salomé Armando Gómez, an 11 year-old boy who used to play with Cecilio, known affectionately as *Chilito*, knocked on her door and said: “They killed *Chilito*”. The boy’s face was covered in scratches and insect bites.

XI

“Doña Esperanza, have you heard what’s going on in Dos Erres? The army went into the village and started to kill people”. María Esperanza Arreaga found it hard to believe what her neighbor had just said.

Her brothers, Estanislao and Josefino, lived in Dos Erres and had invited her daughters, Elida, 5, and Ana, 6, to spend the night with them and celebrate their cousin’s birthday on Sunday, December 6th.

But by Monday night, María Esperanza felt deeply anxious after the girls failed to return home.

Her husband, Catalino González, tried to calm her down, telling her that it was nothing more than some absurd rumor, but she was unable to shake off the terrible certainty that something awful had happened to her daughters.

On Tuesday, she took her nine-year-old son Joaquín, and walked to Dos Erres. When she reached the entrance to the village she saw a group of people who were crying because they didn’t know what had happened to their family members. Some said that they had heard stories about how the army had forced people out of their homes while others said that the guerrillas had attacked the village.

A helicopter was flying low over the area, making a noise that reminded María Esperanza of a boiling pot full of *tamales*, a

traditional Latin American dish made of corn based dough which is steamed in a leaf wrapper. Among the people who had gathered there, she spotted her brother Felipe, whose seven children were in Dos Erres.

Felipe stopped her and said that he would go in and find out what had happened. “Let me go. If God wants me to return, I’ll return. You go back home”, he told her.

“I’ll go with you”, said René Salazar, a young man, no more than twenty years old. Felipe shook his head. “No René. This is a man’s business”. But the youngster was determined to follow him. “No *Don Lipe*. I’m coming with you”, he said resolutely.

Felipe, his friend Juan Falla and René Salazar set off. María Esperanza would have preferred to stay there and wait for them to return but as Joaquín had started to cry, she had no choice but to return to Las Cruces.

As she walked home, a couple suddenly walked out from the shrubs. Their clothes were caked with mud and torn by nettles. “Don’t say anything to the sub-lieutenant because if the detachment hears that you’ve got family members in Dos Erres, you’ll get killed”, they warned her.

But sub-lieutenant Carías had always insisted that they should ask for his help should any problems arise. And who else could she turn to, anyway? María Esperanza returned to Las Cruces and headed to the detachment.

-“Do you know what’s going on in Dos Erres? People say that the village was attacked by guerrillas”, she asked Carías.

-“Do you have family members in Dos Erres? said the sub-lieutenant.

-“Yes, my two young daughters, my brothers and their entire families”, she replied.

Although Carías was only twenty three, young enough to be her son, he placed his hand on her back in a condescending gesture, as if he was talking to a small child. “Look my girl”, he said. “Don’t come and talk to me about guerrillas because if there were guerrillas here, I wouldn’t be standing here doing nothing, would I? This is a clean-up operation. Those who are clean will leave the village and those who are not, won’t leave. If your brothers are clean they’ll come home. Come back tomorrow. I’ll see what I can find out”.

María Esperanza mulled over the words she had just heard and replied that no one in her family had ever broken the law but that she was very worried about her daughters as they probably hadn’t eaten during the past few days. “Don’t worry. The soldiers are giving the children water and honey”, said Carías. María Esperanza had no other choice but to believe him.

Carías probably thought that he had managed to shake her off, but the following day, there she was. “What do you want? He’s busy,” said the soldier who stood guard at the door, impatiently. But María Esperanza was certain that something terrible had happened and she was determined not to leave without speaking to the sub-lieutenant.

“I don’t know what those damn guerrillas did with the villagers, if they took them to the mountains or what they did”, said Carías, pretending to sound indignant. He was now trying to blame the guerrillas when the day before he had

categorically denied that could be possible. María Esperanza went home and told the family what had happened. Her father in law listened to her stern-faced, went outside and sat under a mango tree without saying a word.

On Thursday morning, María Esperanza returned to Dos Erres, accompanied by her husband Catalino, determined to learn the truth, once and for all. On her way, she met a group of people who were also searching for their family members and were following the sub-lieutenant.

After much insistence, Carías had agreed to enter the village in order to establish what had happened.

Dos Erres was deserted and the only sound that could be heard was the barking of a few stray dogs that wandered around the empty houses. María Esperanza entered her brother's house and found clothes and other items strewn across the floor. She knelt down and looked under the bed in a vain hope of finding the two little girls huddled together in the darkness but all she found was two tiny pairs of shoes with the children's socks stuffed inside. She pulled out the shoes, hugged them, and burst into tears.

Catalino walked over to his brother's house. On the wall, next to the door, someone had written "I've gone to the mountains to work" with mud. His personal documents had been torn up and strewn across the yard.

Meanwhile, Carías and his men loaded as many carts as they could with any items they could lay their hands on: bicycles, pigs, pots of honey, the guitars from the church. The sub-lieutenant told Catalino to take anything he wanted from his brother's home before he set fire to the village, but Catalino replied that he had gone to Dos Erres to search for

his daughters and brothers, not to ransack their homes. A few days later, he spotted his brother's horse in the military detachment in Las Cruces.

XII

Saúl Arévalo was one of the men who entered the village. He found Federico Aquino Ruano hanging from a tree close to his house, with his face covered by a swarm of flies. A few meters away, he found his father's boots.

When Saúl reached the well he realized that it had been covered with soil and he noticed a number of torn and bloodied female garments strewn around the edge. In order to ascertain whether the soil was indeed fresh, he cut a branch from a guarumo tree and pushed it into the well. It sunk in with surprising ease. Then he knelt by the well and wept in silence, refraining the impulse to yell "Murderers!" and remove the soil with his bare hands until he could find his father's body.

A few weeks later, while the Gómez Hernández family slept in an open field after they had to flee the village, they felt a gust of wind stirring the branches and saw a helicopter land suddenly. They held their breath, fearing they were soldiers but they turned out to be tall, blond men who spoke a foreign language.

Catalino González also bumped into them and when they asked him what had happened in Dos Erres, he told them in a voice choked with sorrow that his two little daughters had gone to a birthday party and had never returned. All that was left of them was two tiny pairs of shoes and socks.

He could never fathom how Carías managed to find out that he had spoken to those foreign men. Maybe it was that watchful eye that appeared to see everything from above or

that fine ear that appeared to be hiding behind every tree, ready to betray anyone who dared to speak. The fact was that Carías found out and warned him that if he dared to say another word about what had happened in Dos Erres, he would disappear from the face of the earth, just as his daughters had disappeared. With tears in his eyes, Catalino burnt the photographs of his daughters and brothers.

Petronila López Méndez, the woman who had seen a dismembered body in her dreams three days before the massacre, was left widowed and had to find a way of supporting her one-and-half year old son David, and her sixteen-year-old daughter Alicia, who was pregnant with the child of a young man who had also gone to Dos Erres and had never returned.

Petronila had no choice but to do farm work, like the menfolk, and while she planted corn seeds in La Cuarta Agarrada, a farm located nine kilometers away from Las Cruces, she could feel the presence of the same watchful eye that had spied on Catalino while he talked to the foreigners who had landed in a helicopter. For many years, she never dared to repeat what Carías had confessed.

For many years, the survivors of Dos Erres and their family members were eaten alive by a vulture of silence, as Guatemalan poet Otto René Castillo wrote in the 1960s. They learnt that silence was the key to survival.

XIII

“Memory. Truth. Justice”. These are the words that can be read on a wide placard carried by a group of men and women depicted on a light blue background, in a mural that frames the front door of the Association of Family Members of the

Detained and Disappeared in Guatemala (FAMDEGUA), located in Guatemala City's zone 2.

According to Those who survived the Dos Erres massacre, without the help they received from Aura Elena Farfán, director of FAMDEGUA, they never would have achieved justice. While I wait in a small lounge for her to arrive, I glance at the black and white portraits hanging on the wall. Under each photograph one can read the person's name and the date on which he or she disappeared. Most cases are dated between 1981 and 1984.

There's only one date that doesn't fit in with the rest: the disappearance of 25-year-old Tzulma Vásquez, on May 16, 2006. On that day, her boyfriend, José David Mejía, a used car salesman, picked her up from her home in Mixco, an urban municipality located about ten kilometers away from Guatemala City. When their car was stopped by the police, Tzulma called her father, Carlos Vásquez. He didn't answer the telephone but the moment in which the police demanded to see the car's title deed and José, who was being investigated by the Police for his alleged involvement in a car theft gang, pleaded with them not to beat his girlfriend, was recorded on his voicemail. Seven months later, their bodies appeared in a sugar plantation in the eastern department of Escuintla.

The UN-funded International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), set up in 2006 to root out corruption and eradicate clandestine groups operating within the state, is currently investigating the case as there is strong evidence to suggest that they were murdered by police agents.

This occurred only six years ago, under the Óscar Berger administration, during which the Guatemalan media uncovered the existence of clandestine organizations within

the Interior Ministry in charge of carrying out extrajudicial executions, known in Guatemala as *limpieza social* or “social cleansing” operations, purportedly necessary to rid the country of undesirables such as suspected gang members, prostitutes and transvestites.

Tzulma’s photograph is a poignant reminder of the fact that state-sponsored terror in Guatemala did not end when the Peace Accords were signed.

Aura Elena arrived after ten minutes, a woman with short hair, dark skin and deep set wrinkles, who nods when I ask her if Rubén Amílcar Farfán, a young man whose portrait is also included in this seemingly endless gallery of missing people, was her brother.

Rubén Amílcar Farfán was a final year Literature student at the public and left-leaning University of San Carlos (USAC) and was also a member of the Workers’ Party, at a time when being a *sancarlista*, as USAC’s students as known in Guatemala, and a sympathizer of a socialist party was reason enough for a young man to leave home at six o’clock in the morning on May 15, 1984, and never return home.

Aura Elena worked as a nurse in Guatemala City’s Roosevelt Hospital when at ten o’clock in the morning sirens were heard in the street. “It seems like there’s trouble at the university”, said a doctor who was listening to the radio. That night, four strangers knocked on her door and told her that her brother had been abducted from the university campus and bundled into a vehicle.

Her family searched for him in every single morgue in the city, where they saw hundreds of mutilated bodies that had been found in garbage dumps, ravines or simply dumped by the roadside.

During her many trips to the Attorneys General's Office to file motions of habeas corpus in a desperate attempt to locate her brother, Aura Elena began to recognize the faces of many other women who arrived day after day, just like her, to demand their right to know what had happened to their loved ones.

Among them was Emilia García, the mother of labor unionist Fernando García, who disappeared in February 1984, Catalina Ferrer, who was searching for her husband, law student Hugo de León Palacios, and Raquel Linares, the mother of student leader Sergio Linares.

The latter was identified, in December 2011, among the bodies found in a clandestine cemetery in the former military detachment of San Juan Comalapa, in the department of Chimaltenango. In October 2010, the two policemen who captured Fernando García had been given a forty year prison sentence. However, Rubén Amílcar Farfán's body has never been found and Aura Elena's ninety-five-year-old mother still clings to the hope that one day he might walk through the door.

Aura Elena and the other women who were seeking justice for their loved ones realized that together they could exert pressure on the military government and fight for their right to know the truth. This is how a series of human rights organizations such as the Mutual Support Group and Famdegua, were created.

On April 4, 1985, the mutilated bodies of Rosario Cuevas, one of the founding members of GAM, her three-year-old son Augusto Rafael, and her brother, Maynor René, were found by the road leading from the peripheral municipality of Boca del Monte to Villa Canales.

They all showed signs of having been savagely tortured, including the little boy, whose fingernails had been ripped off. That was the price that Rosario was forced to pay for demanding to know what had happened to her husband, student Carlos Rafael Cuevas Molinas, who had disappeared in May 1984.

After Rosario's murder, Aura Elena was forced to leave her three children and seek exile in Los Angeles, California. However, she decided to return to Guatemala after only five months despite the grave danger that she faced.

Behind her soft voice and mild manners there's an incredibly tenacious and determined woman.

During her 28-year-long pursuit of justice for the disappeared, Aura Elena has never given up even though she has received countless threats.

XIV

The Catholic Church in La Libertad was the only place where the survivors of the Dos Erres massacre believed they could voice the pain that had choked them since the day when their lives had been shattered in a thousand pieces with the savage blows of a sledgehammer, explains Aura Elena.

Two priests listened to their story and in 1994, twelve years after the massacre, they decided to go to Dos Erres.

When they found the shallow graves in La Aguada and Los Salazares, they immediately knew that what the peasants had told them was the truth and not a village rumor.

They told the Human Rights Office of the Archdiocese of Guatemala (ODHAG), which had published the “Guatemala Never Again!” report on human rights violations committed during the armed conflict, in 1998, what they had seen. But even though ODHAG was sympathetic to the survivors’ plight, it was not carrying out exhumations at the time, so they turned to Famdegua, which decided to take on the case and requested support from the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation (FAFG), which had been set up two years before by a group of young archaeologists from the University of San Carlos.

But in those days, the foundation was desperately starved of resources and had so many exhumations on its hands that it was unable to help out. Famdegua then decided to turn to the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team.

In mid-1994, Argentinean anthropologists Patricia Bernardi, Silvana Turner and Darío Olmo went to Dos Erres accompanied by Aura Elena, a representative from the Attorney General’s Office and local justice of the peace, who needed to witness the exhumation in order to legally validate the findings.

It wasn’t hard to find the well as the guarumo branch that Saúl Arévalo had sunk into the well when he sat by the edge and silently wept for his father, had grown into a large, leafy tree that fed on the remains of the men, women and children who had been thrown into the well.

When the team reached a depth of two meters without finding anything, the representative from the Attorney General’s Office began to grow impatient and said that all they would ever find there would be dog bones. In the end, he left but the justice of the peace decided to stay and at midday a boy’s shirt containing a small skeleton, was unearthed.

When they reached eight meters they found eight male skeletons but they were forced to halt their work as the soil was too saturated with rainwater, and the sides of the well could collapse any minute, burying the anthropologists and the peasants who were assisting them. They had to wait until the rainy season was over and continue the exhumation the following year. By June, a total of 162 bodies had been found.

Patricia Bernardi had a vast experience in the exhumation of massacre sites and graves thought to contain the remains of missing people. She had exhumed the remains of the disappeared during Argentina's Dirty War and the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile, as well as the 900 victims of the El Mozote massacre committed by the Salvadoran army in 1981. However, she says that the Dos Erres case shocked her above all others due to the huge number of infants that were found in the well.

A total of 162 skeletons were found: 64 men, 24 women, and 74 children, as well as the tiny skeletons of two unborn fetuses that were slain in their mothers' wombs before they were even born. They embodied the future of Dos Erres, stifled forever in the depths of the Arévalo well.

The roots of the guarumo tree had to be painstakingly extricated from the heap of bones, some bones crumbled as they had been eaten away by *jejenes*, a variety of tiny mosquitoes, and the children's remains were fragile by nature, "like eggshells", says Bernardi, as their bones were not yet fully developed. All of this made the task of disentangling the mass of femurs, skulls, shinbones and tiny bone fragments extremely hard and painstaking work.

The approximate age of the victims was established based on their dental structure, whereas clothing was the best clue to

establish the victims' sex. Twenty skeletons had bullet marks and twenty two shells were found in the well, together with crockery, toys, spectacles, hats and a pocket calendar from 1982: the year when life in Dos Erres ground to a halt under the blows of a sledgehammer, an item that was also found among the remains.

More bodies were found in La Aguada and Los Salazares, totalling 201 victims. Each skeleton, with its items of clothing, was taken to the town hall in Las Cruces, but no one dared to come forward and claim the bodies. However, during the following days, candles and floral tributes that had been left by family members who arrived under the cloak of darkness, fearing they could be intercepted by the watchful eye that is always ready to betray those who dare to speak, began to appear next to each body.

XV

As it was difficult to break down the wall of silence and encourage survivors to talk about the massacre, Aura Elena had to find other ways of piecing together the truth. A few days after the exhumation, when someone told her that a former soldier who lived a few hours away from Las Cruces was willing to talk, she found her first lead.

Some members of the UN Verification Mission in Guatemala (MINUGUA), which oversaw the signing of the Peace Accords and remained in the country until 2004, followed her from a distance due to the dangers involved in investigating the case.

This is how Aura Elena found a former Kaibil soldier who told her in full detail what had happened in Dos Erres on December 7, 1982. Every time that the man watched

his children playing in the yard, he was tormented by the memories of children of similar ages that he had thrown into the well, and he found that telling his story had a cathartic effect.

Several former soldiers came forward to tell their stories, and three of them were willing to testify in court against their fellow soldiers: Kaibil instructor César Franco Ibáñez, César García Tobar and the cook, Fabio Pinzón Jerez.

The latter was a “Kaibil asimilado”, a soldier who had failed to pass the grueling sixty-day training course during which his mind and body had been subjected to extreme conditions, and had earned his red beret by allowing his instructors and fellow soldiers to treat him in the most degrading manner possible. He had thus managed to earn himself a place in the Kaibil troop as a cook, the lowest possible level in the hierarchy, but was constantly humiliated by other soldiers.

Whether his desire to speak out was motivated by the resentment he harbored against the Kaibil troop, known in the Guatemalan army as “destazadores” or “professional butchers” or by the fact that *El Infierno* never managed to fully destroy his sense of humanity, the truth is that without the testimonies of the three Kaibil soldiers, it is very likely that the case would never have been brought to trial.

The former Kaibiles testified in advance, naming every soldier in the troop, joined the Attorney General’s Office’s “protected witness” scheme and were forced to pack their belongings and begin a new life in an undisclosed location in Mexico City, where they live and work to this day.

Based on their testimonies, a local court in the municipality of Poptún, in Petén, issued seventeen arrest warrants against

members of the Kaibil troop, which were never carried out. Famdegua then demanded that the Attorney General's Office should transfer the case from La Libertad to its special Human Rights Section in Guatemala City, which the authorities eventually complied with. However, the accused soldiers' defense attorney, Francisco Palomo, who is currently defending former dictator Efraín Ríos Montt, on trial for genocide, lodged no less than forty appeals, demanding that the Kaibil soldiers be granted amnesty under the provisions of a law that was approved in 1986 under the Óscar Mejía Víctores dictatorship.

Members of the Guatemalan armed forces accused of human rights violations – including Ríos Montt – have sought amnesty on many occasions, but their appeals have been repeatedly rejected as the 1996 National Reconciliation Act states that those accused of torture, genocide or forced disappearances have no right to seek amnesty.

In September 1996, ODHAG, Famdegua and the Center for Justice and International Law (CEJIL), took the Dos Erres case to the Interamerican Court of Human Rights (IACHR) and in April 2000, an amicable solution was reached when the Guatemalan State promised to compensate the victims and prosecute those responsible for the massacre.

In 2001, President Alfonso Portillo apologized for the massacre on behalf of the State and 176 people who had lost family members in Dos Erres were given a total of US\$1.8 million. However, those who had lost children during the massacre were left empty handed and no progress was made in terms of bringing the case to trial. For this reason, in 2006, the organizations acting on behalf of the victims decided to withdraw from the agreement and returned to the IACHR. "The State thought that the compensation scheme would

buy off the victims so that they would forget about seeking justice”, says FAMDEGUA’s lawyer, Édgar Pérez Archila.

Two years later, President Álvaro Colom asked for Attorney General Juan Luis Florido’s resignation, under strong pressure from CICIG and civil society organizations that accused him of obstructing investigations.

Florido was replaced by Amílcar Velásquez de Zárate, who ordered that prosecutors should prioritize human rights violations committed during the armed conflict, including the genocide case against Ríos Montt, the Dos Erres massacre and the Plan de Sánchez massacre, committed in the department of Baja Verapaz in 1982.

Under his administration, the Attorney General’s Office also signed an agreement with FAMDEGUA, which took on the task of providing forensic evidence for all the trials involving wartime human rights violations.

Pérez Archila explains that although Florido’s resignation was important in terms of achieving justice, there was also a whole series of changes within the Guatemalan judiciary that made it possible for the Dos Erres case to be brought to trial.

“With the arrival of Velásquez Zárate, the Attorney General’s Office became far more receptive to human rights cases and gave more support to the prosecutors in charge of investigating the case, but that was just part of the story. Many factors came together at that time, such as the election of a new Supreme Court, in 2009, which promoted respect for human rights and guaranteed that Guatemala could meet its international obligations with regards to human rights treaties. The Penal Chamber of the new Supreme

Court pushed forward reforms that made it possible for the Attorney General's Office to use cooperating witnesses, and for witness testimonies' to be used as evidence in trial", says Pérez.

In November 2009, the IACHR decreed that the State should compensate the victims again for a total of US\$3.2 million, including those who had lost children in the massacre, and that the investigation should continue.

Claudia Paz y Paz, who took over as Attorney General in December 2010, reorganized the Human Rights Section and created a new section to investigate human rights violations committed during the armed conflict. Finally, the huge rusty wheel of justice slowly began to turn, and several arrests were made in connection with the Dos Erres massacre.

XVI

Jorge Vinicio Orantes Sosa thought he had found a safe hiding place in the home of some family members in southern Lethbridge, a small city in the province of Alberta, Canada, when the name Dos Erres came back to haunt him after 29 years.

In May 2010, he had left his home in Riverside, California, where he worked as a martial arts instructor, and had fled to Mexico, from where he boarded a flight to Vancouver. From there he travelled to Lethbridge, where he thought he could go unnoticed if he managed to keep a low profile.

But the agents from ICE's Human Rights Violators and War Crimes Unit, who knocked on his door on January 18, 2011, put an end to almost 30 years on the run and took him back to the remote Guatemalan village where death had arrived loaded with hand grenades and assault rifles.

Two days later, with chains around his hands and feet and escorted by three security guards, he appeared in an extradition hearing in Calgary. Orantes Sosa had obtained American and Canadian citizenship and currently faces charges in the US for having lied to obtain his citizenship permit when he ticked “no” next to the questions asking whether he had ever been accused of human rights violations in his country of origin and whether he had served in the armed forces.

Two other Kaibil instructors: Gilberto Jordán and Pedro Pimentel Ríos, were arrested on the same day. Jordán, who had worked as a cook in California since 1990 was found guilty by a Florida court of lying in order to obtain his US citizenship and is currently serving a ten year prison sentence.

Pimentel Ríos had been living illegally in the US for almost 20 years and worked in a garment factory in Santa Ana, California.

The Guatemalan government has requested the extradition of the three Kaibil soldiers but before they can return to their country of origin, Orantes Sosa will be tried for breaking American immigration laws and Jordán will have to finish his sentence in the Miami jail where he is currently held.

XVII

Petronila López Méndez looked intently at the man that 29 years ago had confessed that her husband and two children had been killed by “a cursed troop that came from La Pólvara”. He was no longer the cocky 23-year-old that had deliberately tried to confuse the women of Las Cruces, telling them different versions of what had happened in Dos Erres.

He was a short 52-year-old man who was handcuffed and walked towards the door, followed by the guard in charge of taking him to the restroom during the recess.

Without the olive green uniform that invested him with the power to decide the fate of the people under his command, and dressed in a black suit and yellow shirt, he seemed quite ordinary. He was just a man, like any other, who was trying to hide his fear.

Carías recognized Petronila, the woman whose intense gaze had pierced the wall of lies behind which he had barricaded, himself and who had seen him cry when he admitted that the army had murdered the inhabitants of Dos Erres. As he walked passed her he said: “Look, you know me. I had nothing to do with the massacre”, as if he were pleading for mercy.

But with the same resolve that had led her to insistently press Carías, telling him to be a man and tell her the truth, almost three decades later she did not hesitate when her turn to testify arrived, and she told the judges how the sub-lieutenant had done his best to hide the truth, had ransacked the murdered villagers’ homes and had sold their belongings.

“When I testified against Carías I remembered how much I had suffered. I had to suffer in silence”, she said after the trial, sitting in Ricardo Martínez’s garden, the man who had been warned to leave the village at once, a month before the massacre.

Based on the testimonies of women like Petronila, who had repeatedly gone to the military detachment to find out what had happened to their husbands, children, brothers and sisters, on August 2, 2011, Judge Iris Jazmín Barrios

concluded that Carías had provided his superiors with the necessary intelligence to carry out the massacre, had ordered the soldiers and patrolmen to surround the village and ensure that no one could leave Dos Erres alive, and had then attempted to destroy the evidence by setting fire to the villagers' homes.

Carías had been arrested on February 9, 2010 together with three soldiers: Daniel Martínez Hernández, Reyes Collin Gualip, and Manuel Pop Sun, who were aged, 23, 24 and 28, respectively, when they served under the Kaibil troop that committed the massacre. Collin Gualip was the only one who continued to serve in the army, although not as a Kaibil soldier, when he was arrested, earning US\$834 a month.

The three protected witnesses: César García Tobar, Fabio Pinzón Jerez, and César Franco Ibáñez, testified via videolink from Mexico City. César Franco Ibáñez said that he had seen the three soldiers next to the well, beating men, women and children, before their bodies were thrown inside as if they were sacks of garbage.

Fabio Pinzón Jerez described Manuel Pop Sun as “a very violent man” who had thrown a crying boy into the well and hours before had dragged a woman into the shrubs and raped her. The three Kaibil soldiers were given a 6,060 year prison sentence for murder and crimes against humanity, and Carías was given an extra six years for theft.

XVIII

February 2012. One year after the trial of Carlos Carías and the Kaibil soldiers Daniel Martínez Hernández, Reyes Collin Gualip, and Manuel Pop Sun.

For a few moments, Irma Valdez ceased to look at María Juliana Hernández Morán as a judge and looked at her woman to woman. Judge Valdez had just read a long and convoluted sentence full of intricate legal jargon that asked María Juliana if she was aware of the fact that she could face a prison sentence for perjury if she lied in court, but the old woman did not realize that she had to agree to this terms out loud before she could proceed with her story and had remained standing, nodding and lifting her right arm.

The judge, with a soft, caressing voice, repeated the question, using simpler words: “Doña Juliana”, she said. “In court you can’t lie because if you lie you can go to prison. Could you please say, out loud whether you understand that?”

Like a frightened schoolgirl, María Juliana answered: “Yes ma’am, I won’t lie to you ma’am, everything I’m going to tell you is true”.

Satisfied that she had understood, Judge Valdez told her that she could sit down and asked a clerk to adjust María Juliana’s headphones, which were provided because she suffers from the hearing problems that often come with old age.

María Juliana was sitting three meters away from the man with the mole on his left cheek that had burst into her home on December 7, 1982, throwing tortillas, beans and milk to the floor and demanding to know where she had hidden the stolen rifles. That soldier was Pedro Pimentel Ríos, accused of the murder of 201 people as well as crimes against humanity.

When she saw his face she relived the moment when one of the soldiers had sunk her head in a bucket of water, and the loss of her son Ramiro.

It is often thought that only eyes can weep, which is untrue. During the half hour that it took her to tell her story, María Juliana's right hand: dark skinned, with bulging veins and covered with little brown stains – the hand of an old woman – ran up and down her knee as if she were trying to rub away a deep pain. That hand was crying for the son who never returned home.

Pimentel Ríos – a short man with grey hair – looked at her, tilting his head slightly, with his hands folded on the table, and the same look on his face as someone who's watching a movie that's not particularly interesting.

María Esperanza's son, Salomé Armando, identified Pimentel Ríos as the man who had climbed onto the church pulpit and had shouted "Sing, sing!" and had laughed mockingly at the women.

"He came to murder my family", said Salomé Armando, pointing at him. Pimentel Ríos' lips curled slightly with a sarcastic smile. He then opened a bottle of Gatorade and drank, calmly.

XIX

César Franco Ibáñez testified once again via videolink. After living in Mexico City for almost two decades he spoke with a strong Mexican accent. He stated that Pimentel Ríos was part of the "tropa de asalto", the fiercest and most violent men whom Rivera Martínez trusted above all others. Although he described him as being "just another soldier", a number of key details in his testimony depict him as a particularly cruel man.

He was identified as one of the soldiers in charge of bludgeoning the peasants with the sledgehammer and throwing them into the well and also as the soldier who shot

one of the two teenage girls who were taken from the village after the massacre and raped by the entire troop, in order to demonstrate “how to kill someone”.

He added that a week later a military helicopter arrived and took him to the School of the Americas, nicknamed “The School of Assassins”, which was established in Panama in 1946 and later transferred to Fort Benning, Georgia. Its pupils included, among others, the former Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega and Roberto Eduardo Viola, who staged the 1976 military coup in Argentina, all of whom received the Kubark torture manual as a basic textbook.

When Franco Ibáñez was asked why he had decided to tell his story, he answered: “Because I’ve got children and the truth is that I’m sorry about what happened...I don’t want my children to suffer like I did...” His voice faltered, he removed his spectacles and covered his face with one hand to hide his tears.

XX

The survivors of the massacre listened attentively to Peruvian military expert Rodolfo Robles Espinoza, who testified in the trial of Byron Lima Oliva and Mario Sosa Orantes, convicted for the murder of Bishop Juan Gerardi Conedera, author of the Catholic Church’s REHMI report on wartime human rights violations, as well as the trial of sergeant Manuel de Jesús Beteta, found guilty of murdering anthropologist Myrna Mack, and many cases of massacres committed in Peru under the Alberto Fujimori regime.

Robles Espinoza explained that the Guatemalan armed conflict occurred during the Cold War when the United States had adopted the National Security Doctrine, a brand

of foreign policy that gave unrestricted support to military regimes across Latin America so that they could fight communist guerrilla groups, regardless of whether this meant razing entire villages, committing torture and disappearing innocent civilians.

Under this doctrine, anyone who tried to change the status quo was considered to be an enemy of the State, something that is clearly stated in the policies adopted under the Efraín Ríos Montt dictatorship (1982-83), a period in which the Army launched a counterinsurgency campaign to annihilate the guerrillas, as well as the communities that supported them, a strategy known as “draining the fish from the sea”.

Under the Ríos Montt regime the Victory '82 counterinsurgency campaign was launched, in a tandem with a specific campaign for the highlands named Plan Sofía, which established that any town where signs of guerrilla activity were detected – weapons caches or communist propaganda – should be considered to be “subversive” and their entire population ought to be destroyed. The villages that were abandoned after the terrified peasants fled to the mountains were razed by the army, a practice known as “tierra arrasada” or “scorched earth”.

According to the Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH), Guatemala’s truth and reconciliation commission, the army and paramilitary groups committed a total of 626 massacres during the Ríos Montt dictatorship.

Robles’ testimony demonstrated that the inhabitants of Dos Erres were murdered by the same state that had brought them there in the first place in order to colonize the remotest areas of Petén, where they had planted flourishing corn fields.

However, the survivors of the massacre still find it hard to understand how the army came to the conclusion that a peasant community with no ties to guerrilla groups was an enemy that deserved to be annihilated in such a brutal manner.

“I swear I never saw a guerrilla combatant in Dos Erres. We were all honest and hard working people. The army threw children into the well. Are children guerrillas?” says Antonio García Montepeque, one of the uncles of Ramiro Cristales, the little boy who survived the massacre, hiding under a bench in the church.

Sociologist Manolo Vela Castañeda, who also testified in the two trials, wrote a report on the Dos Erres case that describes how the massacre occurred: “The army did not engage in battle, no soldiers were killed or wounded, no guerrilla combatants were found, no weapons, no propaganda. All they ended up with were dead civilians. The enemy was invisible and could be anyone: an old man, a child, a pregnant woman. Any of those people could kill them. That’s why they had decided to kill everyone, regardless of who “everyone” included”.

Vela wrote a PhD thesis on the Dos Erres massacre during the years when the investigation had ground to a halt, in order to explain to Guatemalan society how the army managed to see in the faces of 201 civilians an enemy of the State that needed to be exterminated. After Attorney General Juan Luis Florido was replaced by Amílcar Velásquez Zárata in 2008 and the investigation finally moved forward, he received a phone call from the Attorney General’s Office asking him if his thesis could be re-written as a report that could be used in court.

Vela arrived in court in 2011, when Carías and the three Kaibil soldiers faced trial, and again this year when Pedro

Pimentel Ríos was tried, and took the stand, not to debate an academic thesis but to contribute a crucial piece of evidence in the case.

After the Pimentel Ríos trial, I asked Vela – a softly spoken man who considers his answers carefully before speaking – whether the FAR guerrillas could be blamed for leaving Dos Erres so vulnerable and exposed after the San Diego ambush, in which they had stolen the 21 rifles that the army unsuccessfully sought in the village.

But Vela explained that guerrilla warfare means attacking and then going into hiding, as insurgents are fighting against the army in an uneven playing field in terms of numbers and firepower. Precisely then, in 1982, the army was focusing on fighting the EGP guerrillas in the highlands using the “fuerzas de tarea” or taskforces, it was the perfect moment for the FAR to stage the San Diego ambush in Petén. From a strategic point of view, it made no sense for the FAR not to take advantage of that moment.

Until then, the army had selectively repressed communities but had never wiped out an entire village as it did in Dos Erres. “No army in the context of the Cold War had done what the Guatemalan army did. The guerrillas never thought that the army would do that”, says Vela.

XXI

While Pedro Pimentel Ríos faced trial for his participation in the Dos Erres massacre, in the adjacent courtroom, Judge Miguel Ángel Gálvez denied Ríos Montt the right to amnesty and concluded that his trial for genocide against the Mayan Ixil population must continue.

Maybe the fact that the two trials took place simultaneously and in adjacent courtrooms was a mere coincidence, but it was hugely symbolic.

Rodolfo Robles Espinoza analyzed the chain of command, the vertical line through which every member of the armed forces, from a foot soldier to a general, receives orders and must inform his superiors of the results achieved after every operation. Following that chain upwards, link by link, it is possible to establish who gave the orders.

According to the Kaibiles who have testified as protected witnesses, the orders to carry out the “Chapeadora” operation in Dos Erres came directly from Lieutenant Roberto Aníbal Rivera Martínez, the same man who told the soldiers to remove the informant’s ribs because he fancied eating meat. He is currently wanted by the Guatemalan police for his participation in the massacre.

But who did Rivera Martínez receive orders from? In order to answer that question, Eduardo Arévalo Lacs, the director of the Kaibil School in 1982, who later served as Defense Minister under the Alfonso Portillo administration (2000-2004), was called as a witness.

Lacs was the link that followed after Rivera Martínez and it is likely that he also would have faced prosecution had he not suffered an accident a month before the Dos Erres massacre, when the helicopter he was travelling in was shot by ORPA guerrillas. Establishing who took on Lacs’ responsibilities in his absence, and who that individual reported to until the buck stops with Ríos Montt, is the prosecution’s pending task.

XXII

During the Pimentel Ríos trial, the Gómez Hernández family told the court that a few days after the massacre they had seen a helicopter land with “white men who spoke a foreign language”. Thirty years later, they finally knew who these men were when the prosecution read out loud a series of telegrams sent by the US embassy to the CIA during the civil war.

These reports were written by the embassy after a field visit to Dos Erres on December 30 and they give details about how the village was founded as part of a state policy to colonize Petén, and the fact that it appeared to have been razed, which suggested, according to the authors, that the most likely culprit had been the army.

The US government was fully aware of what had happened in Dos Erres and never said a word. Perhaps it believed at the time that the 201 peasants who were killed on December 7, 1982 were no more than collateral damage in the war against international communism.

XXIII

Pedro Pimentel Ríos seemed tiny when he stood next to his defense lawyer, Manuel Antonio Lima, a bulky man with broad shoulders, golden fillings and a pock-marked face, who clearly appeared to have coached the former Kaibil soldier on when and how to speak.

The former Kaibil soldier looked small and lonely. Unlike Ríos Montt or his Defense Minister Héctor Mario López Fuentes, who arrived in court with a large number of

supporters, mostly members of the Guatemalan Association of Military Veterans (AVEMILGUA), only Pimentel Ríos' son, Juan Carlos, attended every single hearing, from the beginning to the end. Pimentel Ríos' sisters and uncles arrived towards the end of the trial and they hardly seemed surprised when the verdict was announced.

The sarcastic smile had been erased and he now frowned slightly and bowed his head, with the countenance of someone who is doing penance. His entire demeanor seemed to have been carefully rehearsed in order to inspire pity. Who could believe that that insignificant little man had slain a young girl in front of the entire troop to demonstrate "how to kill someone"?

Lima allowed me to interview Pimentel Ríos during one of the recesses and he began by saying that "all the army has ever done is safeguard the borders and look after the population". He added that the army is being prosecuted for war crimes in response to pressure from foreign governments and NGOs, something that Guatemala's military veterans have repeated incessantly since the Peace Accords were signed.

I asked him whether he had participated in the massacre and he replied that "no one could prove that" and that the perpetrators could have been guerrilla groups and not the army.

What about the testimonies given by the protected witnesses, former Kaibil soldiers who stated that he participated in the massacre and was part of the "tropa de asalto"? "Well, my theory is that the Attorney General's Office and human rights NGO's recruited those people. Why? I don't know", he said.

In order to defend the homeland, was it necessary to throw new born babies into a well, shower them with bullets and blow them to pieces with a hand grenade? Did defending Guatemala against international communism mean raping women? “I can only speak for myself and I never participated in such actions”, he said, furrowing his brow even more.

A few days later, he repeated exactly the same words in front of Judge Valdez, adding that “he also knew what it meant to lose a loved one” as one of his family members had died while he was living in the United States and he had not been able to attend the funeral. By that point, Judge Valdez was no longer looking him in the eyes. “You’ve already said that”, she reminded him.

XXIV

Raúl de Jesús Gómez Hernández tilted his head back and clasped his hands together as if he were praying, while he listened carefully to Judge Valdez’s final conclusions. He thought about his brother Ramiro, who had left home the day before the massacre, and had never returned, and prayed for something that most Guatemalans regard as a miracle: justice.

In the row beneath him, sat Felícita Romero, who held the black and white portrait of a 40-year-old woman with her hair tied back in a bun. It was her mother, Natividad Romero, one of the 201 victims of the massacre.

As Edgar Pérez, FAMDEGUA’s defense lawyer, said during his final speech – an oratorical marathon that went on for more than two hours – the victims had spent thirty years “chasing after justice”.

Judge Valdez was well aware of that and before delivering her verdict she said that she knew that this was a trial of huge historical significance. She read a summary of what had happened in Dos Erres, explaining how witnesses such as Manolo Vela Castañeda had clearly demonstrated how the same state that had encouraged impoverished peasants from Guatemala's southern coast to migrate to Petén had used the might and force of the army to launch a brutal counterinsurgency operation against civilian populations that were purportedly aiding guerrilla groups, during which 201 innocent men, women and children were slain in Dos Erres.

Arévalo Lacs and the two protected witnesses had confirmed that Pedro Pimentel Ríos was a member of the Kaibil troop and had quoted specific incidents that depicted him as a particularly cruel man, such as the murder of the young girl who was raped by the entire troop after the massacre.

When she finally read the sentence: 6,060 years, thirty for each of the 201 victims plus 30 for crimes against humanity – a charge that includes rape, torture and destruction of private property, among other crimes – the victims appeared to feel relief more than joy, as if they had finally been able to set aside the burden that had weighed on their shoulders for almost three decades.

Judge Valdez also ordered that the Land Fund (FONTIERRAS), a government bureau in charge of granting credit to peasant cooperatives for the purchase of land, should negotiate the purchase of the land where the village of Dos Erres once stood so that it can be distributed among the survivors. She also decreed that a documentary about the massacre made by the Presidential Commission

for Human Rights (COPREDEH) should be broadcast on all state-owned channels no less than ten times during the ensuing fortnight. The message was clear: Guatemala should never forget the name Dos Erres.

XXV

What became of the children who were taken from Dos Erres by the army after the massacre? Ramiro Cristales, the boy cried himself to sleep under the bench in the church, testified in the Pimentel Ríos trial.

Although he was only five years old when the massacre occurred, he remembers clearly what happened on that day. A soldier, whose face seemed vaguely familiar, pulled him out from underneath the bench and he was taken to the mountains with the rest of the troop and given beans and a canned *tamal* to eat.

A few days later, he watched, with a mixture of fear and curiosity, how a huge metallic, blue and white bird, landed noisily in the middle of the jungle. The boy had never seen a helicopter before.

They all boarded the strange flying object, which took him to an unknown location, where Santos López Alonso, the Kaibil soldier who had taken him from the church and fed him, began to teach him how to fish, swim and hold a rifle. That's how the soldier began to earn the boy's trust or maybe the boy, alone and homeless, simply had no one else to turn to.

Originally, Ramiro was going to be adopted by Lieutenant Rivera Martínez, but he had changed his mind and López

Alonso decided to keep the boy and take him home to his wife, whom he had told that there was a bunch of kids at the Kaibil School that had been found wandering in the mountains and were being “given away” to anyone who would claim them, as if they were stray puppies rather than children.

Ramiro still remembers his seemingly endless journey from Petén to the southern department of Retalhuleu, where López Alonso lived with his family, and how the chicken that he had been given in the Kaibil School had suffocated in its box along the way.

López Alonso’s wife never believed her husband’s story. Whereas the couple were dark skinned, Ramiro was white and had green eyes and chestnut brown hair, and this, she believed, was irrefutable proof of the fact that her husband had been unfaithful and was now trying to foist his illegitimate child on her. To make matters worse, the soldier had registered the child as his own son and had given him the name Ramiro Fernando López Alonso.

As she could not scream and swear at her husband, the scorned woman vented her anger and spite on the boy, making it clear from the beginning what his place was. Ramiro was forced to get up at dawn in order to feed the farm animals and had to work until ten o’clock at night. Some days, López Alonso’s wife would throw him a plate with a few leftovers, and on other occasions he received nothing.

López Alonso’s only daughter was a year older than Ramiro and was taught to despise him. As they grew up together he could feel her gaze, filled with hatred, boring into his skin.

Ramiro was never included in family portraits and during birthday parties he was never allowed to join in and had to hold the piñata, while the other children grabbed the sweets. Ramiro got the leftovers, the hardest chores, the taunting and humiliating remarks, so that he would never forget that he was not part of the family. As he always arrived at school exhausted, he found it hard to pay attention in class and was a shy and taciturn pupil with hardly any friends.

His adoptive father was a heavy drinker and habitually downed glass after glass of *aguardiente* or “fiery water”, a strong alcoholic beverage obtained from the fermentation and distillation of sugar sweet musts. But no matter how much he drank he would never manage to erase from his mind the terrible memories of *El Infierno* nor the grueling tests that he had to endure in order to win the red beret worn by Kaibil soldiers nor the infants that he had thrown into well and whose faces he saw every time he looked at his own daughter. Those memories would haunt him years after leaving the army.

López Alonso would return home, angry and drunk, and would lashed out against the boy with all his might when his wife complained that he had failed to do the tasks that he had been assigned. One day, when Ramiro was fourteen, he began to punch him and beat him with his rifle butt. He then grabbed a machete and cut off the tips of the fingers on his right hand.

The boy cried out in pain, ran out of the house and collapsed, unconscious. The neighbors shook their heads and said: “He finally killed the boy”. Had it not been for a neighbor who took pity on him and took him to the nearest hospital, he probably would have been left there to bleed to death.

Ramiro told the court about the machete episode, clenching his teeth, as he tried to avoid breaking down in front of the judge. He is thirty four years old and has lost any feeling in the fingers of his right hand.

For years, López Alonso had threatened to kill him if he ever tried to run away. Paradoxically, on his eighteenth birthday, Ramiro decided to enroll in the army, the same army that had butchered his parents and siblings, as he believed that to be the only place where he could be safe.

But soon after he joined the army, FAMDEGUA began to investigate the Dos Erres case, suspecting that he was one of the children who had survived the massacre. When the rumor that Ramiro was a Dos Erres survivor reached the military detachment in Zacapa, where Ramiro had enrolled, his superiors and fellow soldiers began to eye him with suspicion.

Soon afterwards, López Alonso went to look for him and warned him that he had to leave immediately because the army was planning to have him abducted and killed. The man who had beaten and humiliated him and knew no other language than violence, had now displayed a sudden sense of affection for Ramiro and had saved his life.

Ramiro fled to Guatemala City, where FAMDEGUA had him DNA tested and told him that he had grandparents, uncles and aunts on his mothers' side and cousins on his father's side. Some lived in Chiquimulilla, in the eastern department of Santa Rosa, where his parents had emigrated from, and a few others had stayed in Las Cruces.

In February 1999, they all arrived in Guatemala City to be reunited with the little boy who had survived the massacre and grown up to be a stocky young man with large green

eyes, just as the guarumo branch had blossomed into a strong, healthy tree.

Ramiro studied each of their faces trying in vain to remember them. Then, suddenly, a long, dark-skinned face took him back to the home where he had grown up until the age of five. “Uncle, uncle! Do you remember me?,” he cried, throwing his arms around the man’s neck. It was his uncle, Bernabé Cristales, who had lived with Ramiro’s parents for some time.

Bernabé Cristales says that he was overjoyed when he recognized the boy’s green eyes but at the same time he felt a deep sadness when he realized that he would never be able to embrace the sister and nephews that he had lost.

Ramiro’s joy was short-lived. A few days after being reunited with his family, he had to leave Guatemala and travel to Canada, where he was granted refugee status and still lives to this day. He arrived in a huge and impeccably clean city, where he never managed to get used to the freezing cold weather. He was finally safe from López Alonso but the price he had to pay was a bitter solitude. In that foreign city he was gripped by loneliness and three months later he became clinically depressed.

Ramiro took English lessons, managed to finish high school and currently works as a bricklayer, but he still feels like a fish out of water in the vast country where he was offered a new life.

In 2003 he briefly returned to Retalhuleu, to find a wife and marry and with the compensation money that he received from the State, he bought the farm in the municipality of San Sebastián, where he spent his unhappy childhood after López Alonso ran into debt and was forced to sell it.

It was a land that he loved as there stood the trees that he had planted as a boy and that he had eaten from when López Alonso's wife begrudged him a plate of food after a long day's work. That land was tainted with suffering and pain but despite everything, it was the only place he could call home.

XXVI

Seventy-year-old Tranquilino Castañeda has trouble walking as he suffers from arthritis in his right leg, but he does his best to maintain himself upright. By doing so he might be able to cheat Death so that it doesn't come knocking on his door before he can embrace the son that he believed to have lost.

After spending more than half a lifetime drinking himself to death, Tranquilino had to reach the twilight of his existence to find a reason to live. That reason is a three year old boy who survived the Dos Erres massacre and now lives in the United States. For security reasons, his name and whereabouts cannot be revealed.

We walk down the paved path that leads to the village of Las Cabezas, in the eastern department of El Progreso, under the scorching midday sun, past a yard where two fat pigs with bulging bellies sleep a lazy *siesta* under the shadow of a tree. We pass several brick houses with aluminum roofs and a small patios with a clothes line, an open-air stone washing place and wandering chickens, until we reach the fence that surrounds the family property.

The old man lives in a tiny house that belongs to his nephew. He walks in, takes off his hat, unbuttons his pale blue shirt and lays down on the hammock, pointing to a white plastic chair where I can sit down. It's the only piece of furniture in the house, apart from an old chest.

In the 1970s, Tranquilino lived in the village of La Máquina, on the border between the southern departments of Suchitepéquez and Retalhuleu, where all he had was two hectares of land. Like many other peasants, he emigrated to Petén when he heard that the government was selling vast plots of land to anyone who was willing to toil away in the sweltering heat of the jungle.

In Dos Erres, Tranquilino had 19 hectares of land where he planted corn, beans and pineapple. Those were happy times. Although he says that when the massacre occurred he was visiting his in-laws in the town of La Gomera, in the eastern department of Escuintla, his neighbors in Dos Erres say that he was already a heavy drinker in those days, that he had become estranged from his wife and children, and that he habitually left home and wandered back to the southern coast where he found seasonal work as a farm laborer and spent the little money he earned on bottles of *aguardiente*.

Tranquilino was working in La Gomera in January 1983, when he began to hear rumors of a massacre in a town called “Tres Erres” but he thought that it must be a different village. He held onto that belief until he arrived in Las Cruces, in April, and everyone told him that the massacre had really happened and that no one had survived. Tranquilino’s wife and nine children were dead. It took him four years to work up the courage to enter the village, where all he found was ashes and scorched earth in the place where his home had once stood.

In 2009, when the state compensated the victims of the Dos Erres massacre, following the IACHR’s verdict, a COPREDEH employee arrived at Las Cabezas in search of Tranquilino, but he was not at home. His sister, who also lived in the village at that time, said that he had died a few years

ago and was handed a US\$40 thousand check with which she bought a car and a house in the eastern department of Zacapa. To this day, she cannot look her brother in the eye when he asks her how she could lie so brazenly in order to steal an old man's money.

Meanwhile, Tranquilino continues to live off his nephew's charity and complains that he cannot afford the US\$64 arthritis remedy that he was prescribed by the doctor.

XXVII

A few hours later, we were sitting in the main square of the town of Sansare, the local hub where buses travel to and from Las Cabezas. A few meters away from us, sat one of those *bolos*, as Guatemalans colloquially refer to the drunks that wander around rural towns at the weekend. Suddenly, the spectrally thin man got up and with comically uncoordinated movements, crossed the road, oblivious of the approaching traffic, and wandered into a restaurant, only to be unceremoniously expelled a few minutes later.

"I was a heavy drinker and I ended up in hospital because of booze", said Tranquilino, looking at the drunk. "But I never walked around the streets like that", he added, hastily, as if he felt the need to excuse himself and present extenuating circumstances.

"I had lost the will to live and there were times when I was completely unconscious", remembers the old man. During one of his worst binges, he drank 130 liters of aguardiente in one month.

He never re-married. Today, at the age of seventy, he still drinks but he swears that he now drinks for pleasure rather

than in a vain attempt to black out, if only for a few hours, the searing pain that seized him when he remembered the faces of his nine children.

XXVIII

His youngest son was only three old when Tranquilino saw him for the last time, thirty years ago. “He had a strong personality. He would put his hand on his hip and scold his older brothers”, he remembers.

He gets up from the hammock, walks towards the old chest, opens it and lifts a cushion with a Spiderman print, under which he keeps a small photo album. He opens it and shows me the photograph of a young man with a long face and blue eyes, identical to his own.

“Father, these are your four grandchildren. Take care. We love you. December 2011”. These are the words scrawled with black ink at the back of the photograph.

Tranquilino says that he has no idea how FAMDEGUA managed to find his son. Aura Elena Farfán’s version is that when the IACHR delivered its verdict in favor of the victims of the Dos Erres massacre, the story of the children who survived, huddled together in a corner of the church, was published in the media.

Initially it was claimed that Ramiro Cristales and Tranquilino’s son were brothers. When Ramiro Cristales read the story he was deeply shocked and felt he had lost one of the most fundamental things that a human being can have: the certainty of who he was. Ovidio Ramírez Ramos, the Kaibil soldier who had raised him as his own son and had died six years later, was not his father. He was one of the men who had butchered his mother and eight siblings.

But when Aura Elena saw the young man's photograph, she immediately knew who he was, even before forensic anthropologist Jessika Osorio, from FAFG, travelled to the United States to collect his DNA sample.

Whereas he had been told why the sample was necessary in order to confirm who his real father was, Aura Elena never told Tranquilino why he had been summoned to Guatemala City in mid-2010.

The old man was puzzled as to why all those people had gathered at the FAFG office. The foundation's director, Fredy Peccerelli, was there, together with ten other forensic anthropologists, as well as Aura Elena and other members of FAMDEGUA that he wasn't familiar with.

Aura Elena told him to sit down, then she sat down beside him and put her arm around his shoulders, hugging him tightly. Then, someone placed a computer on his lap where a face that had his same features suddenly appeared.

Father and son wept in silence. Tranquilino was so shocked that he fainted and he had to be revived with a glass of *aguardiente*. The FAFG anthropologists also cried and celebrated the triumph of life over death.

After that first emotionally charged encounter via Skype in which neither Tranquilino nor his son were able to utter a single word, they gradually began to get to know each other over the telephone. The young man told his father about his childhood in Zacapa, his journey to the United States at the age of 19 and his four children.

He assured his father that he had never been mistreated by his adoptive family and that he emigrated to the United

States not out of hardship but out of a desire to make his own way in life. A few months later, he was joined by his girlfriend and they got married.

Tranquilino was relieved to hear that his son hadn't suffered the same fate as Ramiro Cristales and he says that he feels no resentment towards the soldier who adopted him and his family. "Why hate those people? I'm grateful to them for allowing my son to live", he says.

As the boy was only three when the massacre occurred, he didn't remember the day when he was led to the church with the women and other children, nor the faces of his biological parents. But somewhere in the deep recesses of his unconscious, random words, images, tiny fragments of a life that he had once lived that were too small to constitute memories as such, would suddenly come to surface and led him to ask strange questions when he was a child, such as "what's *cusó*?" *Cusó* is the name given by the inhabitants of Petén to armadillo meat, a popular dish in that department.

With FAMDEGUA's help, Tranquilino managed to obtain a visa to travel to the United States and meet face to face with the son whose voice he hears over the telephone week after week. He longs to embrace him, walk in the park with his family, play with his grandchildren, and grab hold of the few remaining threads of the life that was snatched away from him on December 7, 1982. But there's one last obstacle that he must overcome: his son lives illegally in the United States and needs to apply for refugee status before Tranquilino can go out there and meet him. "I was told that by January it would all be sorted out, then they said February and I'm still waiting. I just hope to God I can make it...", he says.

XXIX

We arrive at the pier in Flores, hop into a small motorboat and make our way to the village of San Miguel, located on the opposite side of Lake Petén Itzá. During our short ten minute journey, Elvia Luz Granados Rodríguez tells me that she was fourteen years old when she found out that her parents and siblings had been killed. Next to her sits Esdras González Arreaga, the son of María Esperanza Arreaga, the woman who entered Dos Erres after the massacre and realized that she would never see her two daughters again when she found their tiny shoes and socks tucked away under the bed.

When she hears the name “Dos Erres”, a middle aged woman who sits next to me, asks Elvia if she is a survivor from the massacre and then repeats “Holy Jesus, Holy Jesus” over and over again, ask if she were trying to exorcise a demon. For that woman, the name Dos Erres evoked unspeakable horror, which is unusual, as many people in Petén, even those who live in Las Cruces, are unaware of what happened on December 7, 1982. When we arrive in San Miguel, we walk to a house overlooking the lake where Lesbia Tesucún, a middle-aged woman with a matronly figure and small almond-shaped eyes with a cheeky sparkle, meets us at the door. She smiles wistfully when she remembers the day when she arrived in Dos Erres, young and frightened, riding Gamaliel’s tractor, and began her new life as the village’s first school teacher.

The children had never sat in a classroom before, and had to walk ten kilometers all the way to Las Cruces to buy stationery, but they were studious and the young teacher rewarded their efforts by taking those who achieved top marks back home to Flores during school vacations.

In 1982, as Christmas approached, Lesbia decided that Elvia Luz Granados Rodríguez, a hard-working fourteen-year-old girl, had earned herself a vacation. At first, her parents refused to let her go as she was their eldest daughter and was needed at home to help out with domestic chores. But for Elvia, who was born in Dos Erres and had never travelled beyond Las Cruces, Flores seemed as remote as the Moon and going there would be the adventure of a lifetime. As she already got her hopes up, she pleaded and pleaded until her parents agreed to let her go.

Lesbia will never forget the day that Noé Arévalo, one of the sons of Juan Pablo Arévalo, the man who built the well where the victims' bodies were thrown into, knocked on her door and gave her the news. They had all been slain: the schoolchildren, *Don Lalo* and *Doña Fina*, the preacher and his wife, who had given her board and lodging in their home, and Elvia's family.

The young schoolteacher had to find the words to explain to a fourteen-year-old girl that her parents and seven siblings had been murdered by the army. As Elvia insisted on returning home, Lesbia took her to Las Cruces but the soldiers from the military detachment prevented them from entering Dos Erres. Elvia had no choice but to accept what everyone told her: they were all dead.

“Since they all died I've never returned because it brings back very painful memories”, says Elvia with a shaky voice. Until the age of eighteen, she continued to live with Doña Lesbia and today she works as a secretary for the Governor of Petén's office in Flores.

Elvia got married and had two children but her husband was murdered in an incident that she prefers not to talk about.

Two years ago, during a FAMDEGUA meeting in Las Cruces, Catalino González introduced her to his son, Esdras. Elvia looked intently at his tanned face and remembered a boy who had the habit of teasing her and used to hide her schoolbag in order to get her attention.

“I thought Elvia was pretty. You know, at that age you know that you like someone but you’re just a kid, so I used to tease her and hide her school bag and pencils”, says Esdras, smiling.

That reunion marked the beginning of Esdras and Elvia’s ongoing relationship.

Lesbia continues to work as a teacher and each year, on December 7, she asks a local priest to conduct a Mass in memory of the children of Dos Erres whose portraits she took all those years ago.

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José León Granados Juárez was barely older than twenty when he entered Dos Erres after the massacre and recognized his father and uncle among the mass of decomposing corpses – half eaten by vultures - that he found in La Aguada.

That gruesome image has chased him for the past three decades and today he wanders around Las Cruces like a ghost. He did not testify in neither of the two trials due to his fragile mental health.

The psychologists from the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare (MSPAS) who have counseled the victims of the Dos Erres massacre as part of the pledges made by the State after the IACHR’s ruling, work with people such as José who are

regularly seized by terrible hallucinations in which they relive the events of the past, and others who suffer from depression, mild schizophrenia, stress and anxiety. For years, survivors were forced to swallow their grief and cry for their loved ones in silence and the trauma they suffered has often led to psychosomatic illness. So far, two survivors of the massacre have suffered from depression and have subsequently died of cancer.

After the massacre, many survivors and their families returned to the towns in the southern coast that they had migrated from but more than sixty decided to stay at Las Cruces, either because they had nothing to go back to or because they felt that leaving amounted to abandoning their dead. Given the geographical dispersion of the survivors, only those who stayed in Las Cruces have received counseling.

In 2008, a young MSPAS counselor who prefers not to be identified as the confidentiality contract she signed with the Ministry of Health prevents her from speaking openly about her work. Whereas in 1982, Las Cruces was a small village where no more than twenty families lived, in November last year it became Guatemala's 334th municipality, with a total of 35 thousand inhabitants. Something that has not changed, however, is the fact that after three decades the roads remain unpaved.

Overcoming fear and getting survivors to tell their stories was not an easy task, as many of them still felt the gaze of the watchful eye boring into their skin, and feared that the army could take reprisals against them.

The counselor began to set up women's support groups, which gradually began to expand until an Association of Survivors of the Dos Erres Massacre was created. To this

day, it holds weekly meetings in Saúl Arévalo's home, the son of Juan Pablo Arévalo, the man who built the well that became his own grave.

Healing the wounds of the past was a long and difficult process. Petén remains Guatemala's most remote and ungovernable department and once the armed conflict was over, drug cartels replaced the army as an agent of terror. In May 2011, when the Zetas drug cartel decapitated twenty nine farm laborers in the Los Cocos farm in La Libertad, the municipality that Las Cruces once belonged to before it became a municipality in its own right, many Dos Erres survivors felt they were reliving the horrors of the war. After the massacre, the government decreed a "state of siege" in Petén, which imposed curfews, army roadblocks and random searches in an effort to crack down on drug related violence. A year later, there is still a strong military presence throughout Petén.

A year before, in 2010, another incident had sown terror in Las Cruces: a female corpse with genital mutilations was found in the municipal garbage dump and a few days later a list of local women who would be slain by an anonymous hand appeared in the town square.

Domestic violence is a common problem and during the same year the daughters of two Dos Erres survivors were attacked. One was raped and another was bludgeoned to death by her husband in front of her two young children after she initiated legal proceedings against him for abuse.

The counselor realized that she needed to expand her scope of action beyond treating the 64 survivors of the Dos Erres

massacre who had stayed in Las Cruces and deal with other issues such as domestic violence. However, she crashed against the wall of official bureaucracy: a gigantic and absurd machine that can only process numbers, rules and reports. The director of the local health clinic admonished her for visiting people in their homes rather than waiting for them to seek help at the clinic, as well as going beyond counseling the victims of the massacre and assisting other vulnerable groups. In May last year, she resigned and now works with an NGO in the department of Baja Verapaz that offers counseling services to the victims of the Plan de Sánchez massacre.

Two years ago, as the investigation to bring Carlos Carías, Manuel Pop Sun, Daniel Martínez and Reyes Collin Gualip to trial made progress, the Attorney General's Office began to inquire among the survivors, who would be fit to testify in court, leaving out those who were too elderly or mentally fragile.

Those who could not testify were assigned a not less important task: they would morally support the members of the group who would testify by accompanying them to Guatemala City or simply attending regular group meetings so that those who had to testify felt that they were not alone and that they were speaking on behalf of the survivor community.

In December 2010, the anniversary of the massacre was marked with a symbolic event in which three doves that embodied the three generations that were slain during the massacre: children, adolescents and adults, were set free. Watching them soar into the sky was also a symbolic way of letting the pain and sadness go.

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After a heavy downpour of rain, the paper ornaments placed by mourners on the tombs of their loved ones in the cemetery of Las Cruces were reduced to a soggy and shapeless mess. In the middle of the cemetery, surrounded by a black fence, is the monument that honors the victims of the Dos Erres massacre: a small symbolic well and a white cross with the names of those who were slain engraved on its base. For now, this is all that their family members have, as they cannot build the monument in the exact spot where the Arévalo well was located as those lands now belong to the Mendoza family, who are known as one of Guatemala's most powerful drug cartels.

However, the survivors of the Dos Erres massacre have not given up in their fight to claim back the land where the real well was located, says Sandra Juárez, the new psychologist appointed by the MSPAS to provide counseling services for war victims in the area. On December 15, last year, they handed former president Álvaro Colom a petition in which they demanded that the state should purchase the land where Dos Erres once stood and build a new U-shaped monument, where the niches containing the remains of the victims that have been found to this date can be placed on one side, with a row of empty niches with the names of those whose remains were never found can be placed on the opposite side.

The FAFG is currently racing against time in order to identify the victims whose bodies have been found by June this year. However, this is a complex and costly task – around US\$400 per victim – and sometimes the process must be repeated up to three times if the result is unsatisfactory. To this date, only two bodies have been identified.

Saúl Arévalo clutches the bars of the fence and says that last year he travelled to the northern department of Huehuetenango to represent the Dos Erres community in a meeting attended by survivors of other massacres committed during Guatemala's thirty-six-year-long civil war as well as the victims of other human rights violations that occurred in other Latin American countries such as El Salvador and Peru. "I felt that all those who were there were brothers because we had all lived through similar experiences", he says.

On December 7 last year, COPREDEH provided transportation for survivors who live in departments in the southern coast, such as Santa Rosa, Retalhuleu, Jalapa, as well as Guatemala City, so that they could travel to Las Cruces and attend a ceremony that marked the twenty ninth anniversary of the Dos Erres massacre. The event was also attended by FAMDEGUA and other human rights organizations.

However, the ceremony was overshadowed by the murder of brothers Cornelio and Edgar Humberto Citán, who manufactured and sold furniture, the day before. For many, the incident was a powerful reminder of the fact that violence is still a part of everyday life in Las Cruces. "Many people who are just trying to earn an honest living get killed around here", says Saúl.

Behind him, walks sixty three year old Pedro Antonio García Montepeque, Ramiro Cristales' great uncle. "If this hadn't happened we would have been so happy. The road to progress in Dos Erres was cut off..." he says, with his eyes fixed on the small grey well.

Epilogue

Dos Erres comes back to haunt Ríos Montt

Saúl Arévalo looked intently at the old man's face. Ríos Montt, 86, was impeccably dress in a dark blue suit and matching tie. Elvia Luz Granados Rodríguez, the fourteen year old girl who had survived the massacre after her school teacher, Lesbia Tesucún, rewarded her hard work by taking her back home to Flores to spend the Christmas holidays was also there, as well as Esdras González Arreaga, whose little sisters had been killed during the massacre, and Raúl de Jesús Gómez Hernández, whose brother, Ramiro, had left home two days before the massacre and had never returned.

Ríos Montt clasped his hands together on the table, touched his ear, rubbed his ankle, rubbed his chin, scribbled a few hasty notes in his notebook, grabbed a copy of the Penal Code, flicked through it, pointlessly, and then put back on the table, a quick sequence of movements that betrayed nervousness.

His demeanor was rather different when he appeared before the same judge, Carol Patricia Flores, on January 26. On that occasion, he faced genocide charges against the Mayan Ixil community in the highland department of Quiché, where 1,771 innocent civilians were exterminated during the bloodiest phase of the Guatemalan civil war.

Ríos Montt had turned himself in voluntarily when he found out that he was wanted for genocide charges and had arrived in court with his head high, choosing to remain standing during the entire proceedings even though the judge told him, on several occasions, that he could sit down.

However, on May 21, 2012, Ríos Montt was under house arrest in connection with the Ixil genocide case and all of the appeals lodged by his defense lawyer had been rejected. And now he faced a new trial for the murder of 201 civilians in the village of Dos Erres, who had been bludgeoned to death by the army and thrown into the well built by Saúl Arévalo's father.

The pride and stiffness had collapsed, exposing an old man with grey hair and a grey moustache, who knew that History had returned to haunt him and that it was very likely that he would spend the rest of his days in prison.

In February this year, during the trial of Kaibil soldier Pedro Pimentel Ríos for his participation in the massacre, Peruvian military expert Rodolfo Robles Espinoza explained that under Ríos Montt's de facto rule (1982-83), the army had launched a counterinsurgency campaign to wipe out guerrilla groups and the communities that purportedly supported them, a strategy that the former dictator often referred to as "draining the sea that the fish swim in."

Ríos Montt's testimony was extensively quoted during Ríos Montt's trial. The prosecution stated that although there is no evidence to suggest that the former dictator directly ordered the massacre, he was undoubtedly the architect of the State policies that led to this as well as many other human rights violations.

Robles Espinoza also analyzed the "chain of command", that is to say the vertical line through which every member of the armed forces, from a foot soldier to a general receives orders and must inform his superiors of the results achieved after every operation. This was also quoted during the Ríos Montt trial, as the prosecution argued that he had become the final link in that "chain of command" after he staged the 1982 military coup and proclaimed himself supreme commander of the armed forces.

In an overly dramatic speech in which he gestured, shouted and sweated profusely, briefly pausing now and then to wipe his brow, César Calderón, Ríos Montt's defense lawyer, tried to argue that the Dos Erres massacre was committed by a group of rogue soldiers whose actions had got out of hand and that even if Ríos Montt was the supreme commander of the armed forces, he could not be held accountable for each of his soldiers' actions.

"This man is a sacrificial lamb. He never gave direct orders. How could he have stopped the massacre? Soldiers were hardly going to send him a report saying "we raped so many women in Dos Erres," were they?" said Calderón indignantly.

The prosecution refuted this argument by showing a clip from an interview that Ríos Montt had given US film maker Pamela Yates in June 1982, which is included in her most recent documentary *Granito. How to Nail a Dictator*. "Our strength is our capacity to make command decisions. That's the most important thing. The army is ready and able to act because if I can't control the army then what am I doing here?" he said without suspecting that three decades later those words would return to haunt him.

Judge Flores ruled that there was enough evidence to hold the Ríos Montt accountable for the Dos Erres massacre but that he should be tried for genocide, not murder, which means that the ageing former dictator will continue to be held under house arrest. However, he was ordered to pay another US\$64,000 bail sum, which visibly irritated him.

FAMDEGUA's lawyer, Edgar Pérez Archila, was far from satisfied with the ruling. After the hearing, he said that trying Ríos Montt for genocide was a deliberate strategy to keep him under house arrest rather than being held in prison during the trial. He added that the Dos Erres massacre cannot be considered an act of genocide, as the inhabitants of the village were non-indigenous peasants who had migrated

from various departments from the southern coast and were therefore not an ethnically and linguistically distinct group, unlike the Ixil Mayans in Quiché.

Pérez argues that by erroneously classifying the case, Flores has opened the door for the defense team to successfully argue that Dos Erres was not an act of genocide and secure Ríos Montt's acquittal.

“According to international law, an act of genocide is the elimination of a national group, which means a distinct population within a country, such as the French speaking population of Quebec, in Canada. Guatemala has more than 20 different ethnic groups and there can be more than one act of genocide in one country but the inhabitants of Dos Erres were peasants, a group of Guatemalans who were striving to reach economic development and who were given land by the State so that they could seek better prospects. That same State then robbed them of their future. However, they cannot be considered to be a national group,” said Pérez.

He added that in the next hearing, which will take place on September 11, the prosecution will call a series of experts on genocide and war crimes, in an effort to prove that the correct charge is murder.

Saúl Arévalo walked out of the court building and stopped next to a big placard placed by survivors from the Dos Erres massacre and human rights organizations which read: “Those who gave the orders are as guilty as those who fired the shots. Those who gave the orders should be punished.” He stood there for several minutes thinking about the many obstacles that must be overcome in the long road to justice.

Guatemala City. May 21, 2012.



Saúl Arévalo stands next to the monument that honors the victims of the massacre, in the municipal cemetery in Las Cruces. The names of the victims, including that of his father, Juan Pablo Arévalo, are engraved on the monument.



The monument built in honor of the victims of the Dos Erres massacre, in the municipal cemetery, in Las Cruces. “You have condemned and murdered innocent men who were not opposing. James 5:6,” reads the biblical verse engraved on a marble plaque, placed by FAMDEGUA on the base of the monument.



These white crosses mark the spot where the well built by Juan Pablo Arévalo once stood. That was the well where the victims' bodies were found.



These white crosses mark the spot where the well built by Juan Pablo Arévalo once stood. That was the well where the victims' bodies were found.



This is the place where path leading to the village of Dos Erres used to begin. It is now the entrance to a large property called “Los Conacastes” that belongs to the Mendoza family, one of Guatemala’s largest drug trafficking clans.



A symbolic well built in the municipal cemetery in Las Cruces, next to the monument that honors the victims of the Dos Erres massacre.



Ricardo Martínez González managed to escape from Dos Erres a month before the massacre, after a soldier, who was grateful to his parents for lending him some money, warned him that he had to leave because the village was going to be razed.



María Esperanza Arreaga and her husband Catalino González. María Esperanza entered Dos Erres days after the massacre, she went to her brother's house and burst into tears when she found her two young daughters' tiny shoes tucked away under one of the beds. She realized that she would never see them again.



1982: the year when life in Dos Erres ground to a halt. This calendar was found in the well by the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team, among the victims' bodies, and was presented as evidence during the trial of kaibil soldier Pedro Pimentel Ríos.



Tranquilino Castañeda dreams of travelling to the US and meeting his 30-year-old son, who is now married and has three children but needs to apply for refugee status in order to legalize his migratory situation.



Psychologist Sandra Juárez talks to Francisca Morales Contreras, a survivor of the Dos Erres massacre. Regular counseling sessions have helped survivors and their families to heal the wounds of the past.



Judge Irma Valdez, who gave Kaibil soldier Pedro Pimentel Ríos, a 6,060 year sentence for the murder of 201 innocent civilians and crimes against humanity.



Pedro Pimentel Ríos during a recess, sits next to his son Juan Carlos (in the middle, wearing a red t-shirt), the only relative who was present throughout the entire trial.



Pedro Antonio García Montepeque, the great uncle of Ramiro Cristales, the five-year-old boy who survived the massacre by hiding under a bench in the church, testified during the trial of Kaibil soldier, Pedro Pimentel Ríos.



Forensic anthropologist Patricia Bernardi, testified from Buenos Aires, Argentina, during the trial of Pedro Pimentel Ríos. Although she has worked on the exhumation of many massacre sites in Argentina, Chile and El Salvador, she said that she found the Dos Erres case particularly shocking due to the large number of children that were found.



Ramiro Cristales, the five-year-old boy who survived the massacre, hiding under a bench in the church. During the trial of Pedro Pimentel Ríos he told the judge how he had been abused and neglected by Santos López Alonso, the Kaibil soldier who adopted him. He is currently 32 years old and lives in Canada.



This is a place known by the inhabitants of Dos Erres as La Aguada, which used to be lagoon where animals drank and people often washed their clothes. Here, and in a similar location called Los Salazares, 37 bodies were found by the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team.

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