

2013-12-11

Women with Guns: The Guerrilleras of the Civil War of the El Salvador 1979-1992

William Ryan Hamlet
University of Miami, wrhamlet@ymail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/oa_theses

Recommended Citation

Hamlet, William Ryan, "Women with Guns: The Guerrilleras of the Civil War of the El Salvador 1979-1992" (2013). *Open Access Theses*. 453.
https://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/oa_theses/453

This Open access is brought to you for free and open access by the Electronic Theses and Dissertations at Scholarly Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Open Access Theses by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Repository. For more information, please contact repository.library@miami.edu.

UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

WOMEN WITH GUNS:
THE GUERRILLERAS OF THE CIVIL WAR IN EL SALVADOR 1979-1991

By

William Ryan Hamlet

A THESIS

Submitted to the Faculty
of the University of Miami
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts

Coral Gables, Florida

December 2013

©2013
William Ryan Hamlet
All Rights Reserved

UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

WOMEN WITH GUNS:
THE GUERRILLERAS OF THE CIVIL WAR IN EL SALVADOR 1979-1991

William Ryan Hamlet

Approved:

John Bryan Page, Ph.D.
Professor of Anthropology

Traci Ardren, Ph.D.
Professor of Anthropology

Marten Brienens, Ph.D.
Lecturer of Political Science
Oklahoma State University

M. Brian Blake, Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School

HAMLET, WILLIAM RYAN

(M.A., Latin American Studies)

Women with Guns: The Guerrilleras of the
Civil War of the El Salvador 1979-1992

(December 2013)

Abstract of a thesis at the University of Miami.

Thesis supervised by Professor John Bryan Page.

No. of pages in text. (137)

Civil war raged in El Salvador from the 1970s through the 1980s, as guerrilla armies, united under the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN), aimed to overturn what they considered to be an oligarchic repressive regime. Of these FMLN forces, approximately thirty percent were women. Some suggest a causal relationship between women's participation as *guerrilleras* and the emergence of women's movements in the war's aftermath (Kampwirth 2004, 195). While significant research explores these post-conflict women's movements, strikingly little has been done in regard to the experience of *guerrilleras* within the context of the war. The gap in our knowledge of these women and their involvement in armed conflict has been such that political scientist Lisa Baldez (2003, 164-165) concludes that the "discussion of women in combat is almost completely absent."

Feminist ideology was not a major tenet of the FMLN nor was it a reason given by women for joining the guerrilla forces (Kampwirth 2004, 7-12). Moreover, scholars have described the aforementioned causal relationship as the result of women engaging in non-traditional gender roles by becoming combatants. In this thesis I explore why and

how women joined and were included in the guerrilla forces as combatants and their roles and responsibilities as combatants.

In addition, given the decade long duration of the conflict, I explore the evolution of recruitment practices and combatant positions of the guerrilla forces. I directly address the omission of any detailed accounts of the experiences of Salvadoran female combatants during the conflict through use of an ethnographic methodology. The information of the *guerrilleras* are presented in paraphrased personal stories derived from a series of in person interviews conducted in the field over a period of five weeks.

In conclusion, this research facilitates a deeper understanding of a previously unexplored subject of the women's participation as combatants including their experiences and roles performed. This case study provides a new perspective on and insight to discussions of gender roles in post conflict societies where women have played a significant role as combatants and the effects of women's integration into regularized armed forces.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: A Literature Review: Women with Guns	8
Chapter 3: Methodology	31
Chapter 4: Background History: A Brief Overview of the Conflict and the FMLN	36
Chapter 5: Jauna Got Her Gun: Why and How Women Became Guerrilleras	50
University Students to Urban Commandos	51
La ARS and El Grupo (1968-1972)	53
Hermina (In a Father's Footsteps)	56
Maria (Birds of a Feather)	59
Celeste (A Good Catholic Girl)	60
Dalia (A Marriage of Secrets)	64
Pilar (Raised in Rebellion and Birth by <i>El Fogueo</i>)	69
Fanning the Brushfire: Rural Uprisings and False Choices	71
Rosa (the Rural Beginnings)	71
Dolores (Singled Out)	75
Carmen (Held Back)	77
A Different Kind of Education: Raised, Indoctrinated, and Recruited from the Refugee Camps	79
Lucia (Late Bloomer Boomer)	80
Adelita (Head of the Class)	82
Chapter 6: The Roles and Responsibilities of Female Combatants	88
Early Urban Commandos (Creating Commanders)	91
Maria (Building the People's Revolutionary Army-ERP)	94
Dalia (Urban Commando to Rural Guerrilla)	99
Pilar (Urban Commandos Continue On)	103
<i>Brigadistas</i> (The Armed Angels)	105
Dolores	106
Carmen	108
<i>Radistas</i> (The Voice of the Revolution)	111
Adelita	112
<i>Explosivistas</i> (Nimble Fingers, Nerves of Steel, and a Little Luck)	116
Lucia	117
Chapter 7: War Stories	120
Family Feud	120
What Happens When the <i>Brigadista</i> Is Shot?	121
Men, If They Don't Work with You, Shoot 'Em	122
Wonder Women	124
Blessed	125
Gun in Garter, Grenade in Bra	126
Sleeping with the Enemy	127

Chapter 8: Conclusion	130
Appendix A: Interviews	132
Appendix B: Acronyms	133
Appendix C: Timeline	134
Bibliography	136

Chapter 1 Introduction

Civil war raged in El Salvador from 1979 through 1992. Guerrilla armies, eventually united under the umbrella of the *Frente Farabundo Martí para Liberación Nacional* (FMLN), aimed to topple what they considered to be an oligarchic repressive regime. Of the FMLN, we know that women made up approximately forty percent of the total, thirty percent of the combatants, and twenty percent of its leadership.¹ Considerable focus on these statistics as being comparatively high for women in combat in general and even more so occurring within what most would characterize as a *machista* or male dominated Latin American society has lead scholars to cite the FMLN as a special case. Indeed, based on this assumption that these numbers represent a high degree of female involvement, some suggest a causal relationship between women's experiences as *guerrilleras* and the emergence of feminist movements and the increased political participation by women in the war's aftermath.² While significant research and analysis explores women's organizations and the post-conflict women's movements in El Salvador, strikingly little has been done in regard to the experience of these *guerrilleras* within the context of the war. In their preoccupation on the statistics and what they may mean, scholars have given practically no description of who the women behind the statistics are or what they did in any detail. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis is to begin to fill this gap in our knowledge by exploring the

¹ Kampwirth, *Women & Guerrilla Movements*, 2.

² Kampwirth, *Feminism and the Legacy of Revolution*, 8–12. Luciak, *The Sandanista Legacy*, 3–4.

motivations and processes that led women to become combatants and most importantly the roles and experiences of female combatants during the war as active members of an armed guerrilla militia.

This is not a comparative study. I am solely interested in the female combatants during this conflict. I do not attempt to place their participation or experiences in relation to that of men in this conflict nor do I make comparisons with the experiences of women participating in previous revolutions or armed conflicts in El Salvador, other countries, regions, or time periods.³ In addition, discussions and debates concerning cultural norms, gender roles, gender equality, and feminism are beyond the scope of this thesis.⁴ That being said, the aforementioned statistics present two significant problems that need to be addressed to be able to explore the roles and experiences of the female combatants of the Salvadoran Conflict. First, what exactly does the term combatant mean? Second, where do these statistics come from and what do they actually tell us?

As the title of this thesis implies, *Women with Guns*, my use of the term combatant refers to arms-bearing fighters. By this, I mean those women who were trained and expected to engage the enemy as part of their assigned duties and responsibilities in the FMLN using any weapon that falls under the categories of small arms, artillery, and explosives. The need for this distinction is highlighted by Ilja Luciak who writes, “in the eyes of the guerrillas themselves, the category of ‘combatant’ is not

³ I will address the issue of real and perceived gendered roles only as discussed by those I have interviewed and the role it may have played in the ever evolving strategic/tactical decisions of the FMLN over the course of the war.

⁴ Jane Jaquette claims “the act of taking up a gun and entering a guerrilla band implies a new relationship of equality with men and a consequent change in patterns of role differentiation by sex.” *Women in Revolutionary Movements in Latin America*, 344. Linda Reif, Julie Denise Shayne, and Kampwirth also include discussion on what constitutes gender roles like “traditional female roles” the existence and participation in private and public spheres. Those interested in a more in depth discussion of women in war and gendered roles through out history should read works by Joshua Goldstein and Linda Grant De Pauw.

limited to the arms-bearing fighter.”⁵ Further, Karen Kampwirth adds in a footnote, “after years of traveling and working with guerrillas (work that was hardly free from danger), some women in traditionally female support roles insisted that their participation be acknowledged in the demobilization process.”⁶ I will show that even the women who entered the FMLN in non-combat positions were equally trained in using various arms and chose or were often called to become combatants in the heat of the moment.

The definition I have given for combatant allows for examination of the multitude of roles female combatants performed while preventing any confusion that may be produced by the use of terms like “support roles,” mentioned here by Kampwirth. The term “support roles” is not very useful in differentiating between combatants and noncombatants in this conflict due to the complex and fluid nature of the FMLN. According to the men and women I interviewed, it was common for combatants, in conjunction with their role as fighters, to perform tasks that are normally referred to as support roles such as logistics, communications, transportation, tending to the wounded, and cooking. As will be covered in more detail in the ensuing chapters, the FMLN comprised of many different and often overlapping structures that evolved with changes in strategy and tactics over the twelve-year course of the war. Hence, the FMLN that signed the Peace Accords in Mexico in 1992 was quite different in many ways from the coalition of diverse organizations at its inception in 1980. Thereby, one’s roles were more aptly defined by what structures a person fell under and at what point they were participating in the conflict. My definition allows for an examination of these changing roles while remaining focused only on combatants.

⁵ Luciak, *The Sandanista Legacy*, 3–4.

⁶ Kampwirth, *Women & Guerrilla Movements*, 14.

Because much of the discussion and debate on Salvadoran women during and after this conflict heavily revolves around the statistical data concerning their levels of participation, we must take a look at where the numbers come from and what they tell us. Many treat these numbers as being comparatively significant with Timothy Wickham-Crowley and Kampwirth claiming a “quantum leap occurred in women’s participation in Latin American revolutionary movements.”⁷ Many scholars would hotly debate such a claim, though Goldstein’s work on women combatants would support this as generally true in the Western modern cultures.

While the FMLN does indeed represent a special case in terms of statistical data, it is not the numbers themselves that are special but the fact that we have them. In general, statistics coming out of conflicts are often speculative because there is usually incidental and/or intentional destruction of records or simply a lack of good record keeping altogether as record keeping is usually not a priority when fighting a war. As Luciak and Kampwirth both point out, what makes El Salvador different from revolutions in Nicaragua and Cuba is that neither side was able to achieve absolute victory through military action, thus resulting in a negotiated settlement overseen by the UN as a supposedly neutral third party.⁸ Therefore, we can be fairly confident in these statistics because they are based on collected data, whereas in other similar conflicts in the region statistics are estimates at best.

I have found that sharing the statistical figure of thirty percent female combatants and the title of this thesis, *Women with Guns*, in conversations here in the US has had an unintentional sensationalizing effect on many. The aforementioned claim that the

⁷ Wickham-Crowley 216-217.

⁸ Luciak, *The Sandanista Legacy*, 3; Kampwirth, *Women & Guerrilla Movements*, 2.

Salvadoran case represents a “quantum leap” is a charged and arguable statement. As is Jaquette beginning her article *Women in Revolutionary Movements in Latin America*, with “[t]he image of the female revolutionary, dressed in fatigues and carrying a gun, stands in stark contrast to our North American view of the passive, ‘oppressed’ Latin American woman.”⁹ Some would argue there is nothing inherently surprising about women engaged in armed combat.¹⁰ Linda Grant De Pauw writes, “Women have always and everywhere been inextricably involved in war, [but] hidden from history.... During wars, women are ubiquitous and highly visible; when wars are over and the war songs are sung, women disappear.”¹¹ Joshua Goldstein laments in his introduction of *War and Gender*, “[u]nfortunately, several recent overviews mix well-documented cases with legends... creating a confusing mix of historical and mythical.” I mention all this not to mislead. I will address the question of gender roles only when discussed by those I interviewed but it is not the intent of this thesis to prove or disprove changes in gendered roles. While it is interesting to note, the simple purpose of identifying the percentage of women combatants serves to help us understand their relative importance in the FMLN and to underscore the size of the gap in our knowledge.

To further illuminate what is covered in this study, I have outlined the sections. Immediately following this introduction I have included a review of the relevant literature pertaining to revolution, women in El Salvador, and more specifically women’s participation as combatants in the Salvadoran Conflict and their motives for joining the

⁹ Jaquette, *Women in Revolutionary Movements in Latin America*, 344.

¹⁰ Jones, *Women Warriors*, ix–xiv. There is no shortage of examples women engaging in combat against, alongside of, and/or in charge of men at some point in nearly every culture or region world wide. Jones lists a page worth of books both broadly on the topic of women combatants or specific to their participation in different regions or eras, claiming the purpose of his book to be an up to date and more inclusive survey of the history of female combatants.

¹¹ De Pauw 1998, xiii.

FMLN. Next, I include a brief section on the methodology used to conduct my research and why, as well as how I selected my sample. Though some may already be familiar with El Salvador and this conflict in particular, I believe it is fundamental to understand how the FMLN came to be and the progression of the war in phases in order to have a richer discussion of the female combatants, their reasons for joining, and the roles they performed. I continue with a brief summary of the events leading up to the conflict and an overview of the conflict itself.

In Chapter 5, I will introduce various women who became combatants and let them explain how and why they mobilized into high-risk activism and/or roles of combatants. In this chapter, I will also highlight how these processes evolved and changed throughout different phases of the war based on the development and changes of the strategies and tactics of the FMLN. Due to the continual intense political environment and the strong feelings still evoked by the war, I have changed the names of the women I interviewed for their protection and to respect their wishes of anonymity.¹²

The sixth chapter examines the roles and responsibilities that women performed as combatants and how they changed. This chapter will also look at some of the regulations and rules concerning male/female interaction and conduct as members of the FMLN. I include personal stories to allow the reader to make their conclusions. Chapter seven will include some of my favorite war stories by some of the women that highlights interactions between men and women the of work yet to be conducted on this and related subjects.

¹² I have only changed the names, each name represents the same individual throughout the thesis. I have maintained the integrity of each individual's story and I have not combined anyone's stories.

In conclusion, the main purpose of this work is to provide a descriptive history of the FMLN female combatants in the Salvadoran conflict to serve as a departure point for much needed further scholarship in a multitude of disciplines.

Chapter 2 A Literature Review: Women with Guns

The body of literature that specifically addresses or identifies women's participation in the Salvadoran Conflict is relatively small and uneven but is growing rapidly. The existing literature has a notable emphasis on feminism and gender roles focusing on women in non-combat roles such as participation in protests and organizing at the outset of the war but more so on the broadening of women's roles in political sphere and social liberties in the years following the war to the present. Joshua Goldstein notes in his relatively recent opus War and Gender, "[t]he question of women combatants has generated substantial historical research in recent years, sparked by feminist scholarship's interest in uncovering the previously ignored roles of women in social and political history." Goldstein adds his frustration with the preceding literature that addresses women in combat claiming that it often blends well-documented history with myth and legend, like the repetitive inclusion of Homer's tribe of Amazons, making it difficult to separate fact from fiction.¹³ Eugenia Rodriguez Saenz states in the title of her prologue, women and gender in Central America are "*Una historia para hacer*", that is, "A History Waiting to Be Written."¹⁴ Political scientist Lisa Baldez in her review of Karen Kampwirth's, *Women and Guerrilla Movements: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas, Cuba*, highlights a specific gap in our knowledge pointing out that even with a photo of armed women in fatigues in rank and file on the cover of the book and the constant mention of female combatants, the "discussion of women in combat is almost completely absent."¹⁵ That being said, there is a large portion of literature examining El Salvador as a

¹³ Goldstein xii

¹⁴ Arrom 823.

¹⁵ Baldez 164-165.

case study for revolution theorists, especially analysis of the factors that cause or allow revolution to happen in modern era third world countries and how and why people engage in high risk activism. Lastly, there is a growing body of literature that falls under the category of testimonials and biographies of women mostly of lower economic status living in El Salvador during the conflict and of what many historians refer to as “great women” or those of high public visibility and stand out because they seem to be outside what would be considered the accepted gender norm.

In lieu of direct attention to woman as combatants and how they functioned within the guerrilla forces of the FMLN, the literature that exists greatly helps in framing the conflict they participated in, understanding the factors that may lead one to participate in high risk activism and revolution, and the possible outcomes of such a participation on the person and society at large. To understand the Salvadoran Conflict one needs to understand the context and causes.

The Salvadoran Conflict is first and foremost seen as a revolution. There are many competing theories as to the causes of revolutions and what makes them a success or failure. While popular support is often considered quintessential to the success of any revolution,¹⁶ the factors most important for gaining such support or why people in general and women specifically mobilize are still in debate. Some scholars argue that causal factors often cited as precursors for revolution include an aggravated sector of population reacting to structural changes like agrarian reform, widening gaps in wealth distribution or social status, extreme poverty, oppressive regimes, or regime attacks on popular organization and movements. Other scholars point to activists as rational actors, who will weigh costs and benefits of activism, choosing to take advantage of perceived

¹⁶ Wickham-Crowley 52.

opportunities for personal gain through revolution. Yet others claim that mobilization is more of an organic evolution of grassroots participation out of preexisting networks where members already feel an intense connection to a movement and its goals before it turns to revolution. Lastly, there are others that claim mobilization is forced or is a reluctant acceptance of no perceived alternatives. All of these factors seem to be present in the case of El Salvador for many decades and it can be proposed that they all play a role in the eventual mobilization of women as combatants.

Timothy Wickham-Crowley's 1992, Guerrillas and Revolutionaries in Latin America, still proves to be an important work in helping to provide background history and general theories of why some Salvadorans mobilized on a macro level. He presents an interesting comparative analysis between the Nicaraguan Sandinista revolution and Salvadoran FMLN focusing on the question "[d]o strong movements or weak regimes cause revolutions?"¹⁷ He points out the El Salvador makes for a unique case study in that Nicaragua had a broad based alliance from all classes contesting a single family dynasty. Where as in El Salvador, political power was exclusively held by a coalition consisting of an oligarchy of landed wealthy elites and the military. Wickham-Crowley suggests that under these conditions, a middle class led popular uprising of workers and peasants is likely to happen. It is true that the purported "Fourteen Families" and a rotating military junta maintained both political control and owned an ever-growing proportion of land in El Salvador since the 1930s while an even faster growing peasant population found itself in economic despair with limited options.¹⁸ It is important to note that the middle class, however, was very small and could be considered equally divided among the popular

¹⁷ Ibid 5.

¹⁸ Ibid 284.

movements and the two viable political parties that were politically center and right and promoted capitalist economic changes.

Wickham-Crowley seems to undermine his own argument when he points out that the peasants from the western highlands offer almost no support to the FMLN guerrillas. This is the region where the peasant revolt of 1932 led by the FMLN's namesake, Augustin Farabundo Marti Rodriguez, was violently quashed and its participants publically executed by the military. He states that the lingering memory of the *matanza* and fear of military retaliation or repression was enough to prevent peasants from risking organizing in unions or joining social movements.¹⁹ This can be somewhat reconciled by the consideration that the Salvadoran National Army initially and throughout the majority of the war did not make much effort to distinguish the difference between guerrillas and peasants. This possibly accounts for the consolidation of peasant support and the ability of the guerrillas to mobilize many peasants into combat in certain regions of the country, especially in the north and east. To be fair, Wickham-Crowley does believe that it is necessary for other factors to be present in conjunction with peasant popular support for a rural guerrilla movement to be successful.²⁰ Wickham-Crowley provides a useful context and plausible theories that explain mobilization of popular support that can be possibly applied to women becoming combatants in the FMLN.

Wickham-Crowley directly acknowledges an increase in participation of female combatants in both cases of Nicaragua and El Salvador. He goes as far as claiming "a quantum leap occurred in women's participation in revolutionary movements, roughly between 1965 and 1975." He claims that women who led guerrilla movements in Latin

¹⁹ Ibid 219.

²⁰ Ibid 51.

America went from “zero to 20 percent” in the 1960s to between a quarter and a third of the combatants in Nicaragua and El Salvador.²¹ However, he gives very little speculation for this “quantum leap” and Karen Kampwirth takes serious issue with his statement [the] “main explanation for the relative underrepresentation of women within guerrilla coalitions is that ‘men, on average, are more aggressive than women’ and that some research suggests that this has a ‘biological basis’.”²²

A more recent and probably the most comprehensive book to date on understanding popular support in the Salvadoran Conflict is Elisabeth Jean Wood’s *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador*. Wood takes a comprehensive and multidisciplinary approach to understanding how and why so many *campesinos* supported the guerrillas or “insurgency” over such a long period of time. She asks the important question that echoes Wickham-Crowley’s note about the peasants of the western highlands, “[w]hat accounts for the emergence of a powerful insurgent movement in an area where acquiescence had long been the response of the rural poor to social injustice? Why did so many poor people run extraordinary high risks to support the insurgency? Why did others decline to do so?”²³ These last two questions highlight the most important divergence and addition to traditional revolutionary theory where analysis of causal factors at macro level leads to assumptions of a homogenous group of actors making the same choices under similar circumstances. Wood argues adeptly that class struggle, solidarity among the lower class, membership in pre-existing networks, state

²¹ Ibid 21, 216-217.

²² Ibid 23. Kampwirth 2002, 4. Research by Goldstein would, in general, support the existence of biological differences having an effect on percentages favoring males engaging in combat over women but that alone hardly addresses the fact that the statistics tend to show a considerable increase in female participation in Central American guerrilla movements.

²³ Wood 2.

repression, and pure rational self-interest traditionally used to explain popular mobilization in revolutions simply come up short when considering the extremes of that participation and duration of the collective action by insurgents and supporters. She instead argues that most supporters or participants in “high risk activism” freely chose to help the insurgent guerrillas mainly for moral and affective benefits they received through participation, not what they perceived they would receive if they picked the right side.

It would be hard not to be impressed by the exhaustive and dangerous lengths at which Wood initiated her research, interviewing a large portion of her subjects during the latter years of the conflict. In addition to interviews of over two hundred people, she has done an excellent job synthesizing and analyzing the existing revolution theories as they apply to El Salvador. She also provides an important critique and explanation of the pros and cons of her methodology, especially on the subject of memory and interviews that I will discuss in more detail in my own chapter on methodology. In her study, she focused on mostly *campesinos* from five communities that proved to be accessible and safe for both her and her subjects. Her subjects did not participate as combatants.

From her research both in the field and of the literature, Wood finds five patterns of insurgent activism. The first, stated above, was that participation or support was given voluntarily by those that remained in areas “freed” from the military and landlords for that matter. She claims that instances of providing material support to the guerrillas were beyond and at a higher risk than what was often given to either side in hopes of self-preservation and fear of retaliation. The second pattern she claims is widespread support being larger than in other case studies but does not give much statistical data to support

the claim. The third pattern points out, as I do throughout this paper, the evolving strategies and tactics of the FMLN and its counterparts but she makes too many connections between groups that remained more independent or autonomous than she implies. The fourth pattern is that the participation of *campesinos* fluctuated over time with changes in personal and political issues and the changes in strategy and tactics by the FMLN and its affiliates. The last and maybe most interesting pattern, Wood argues that insurgent collective action mirrors the creation of a “new political identity and culture among insurgent supporters, reflecting the fact that once-quiescent *campesinos* had for over a decade contested the authoritarian practices of landlords and the state and asserted unprecedented claims to citizenship.”²⁴ Wood delves into many other interesting relationships and theories of participation but finds that having a family member or close relative killed at the hands of the military was one of the most reliable indicators of someone supporting the insurgency. I do not doubt that the converse is equally true. While Wood’s book does not directly address women nor combatants it does add a great deal to our understanding of how high risk collective action functions during the Salvadoran Conflict. It also gives many indirect insights to how the FMLN functioned and evolved as well as provides important context to the experiences discussed later in this thesis. For those interested in doing similar research, her use and analysis of various models and methodologies is worthwhile to read, especially her conversation of the reliance of anecdotal information from interviews.

Karen Kampwirth has written two companion books more narrowly focused on female participation in recent Latin American conflicts titled *Women & Guerrilla Movements: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas, Cuba* (2002) and *Feminism and the*

²⁴ Wood 13, 235.

Legacy of Revolution: Nicaragua, EL Salvador, Chiapas (2004). She is straightforward in her criticism of revolutionary theorists' works of the likes of but not limited to Wickham-Crowley or Theda Skopkol arguing that "our understanding of revolutionary movements is inevitably poorer if we try to understand those movements in gender-free terms; revolutions in the real world has never been gender free."²⁵ Both works begin and expand upon Wickham-Crowley's discovery of a "quantum leap" in female participation in these Central American guerrilla revolutions of the 1970s and 1980s. She provides more detailed and research supported data claiming women made up "[a]pproximately 40 percent of the FMLN membership, 30 percent of the combatants, and 20 percent of the military leadership."²⁶ She also highlights that the accuracy of these numbers are debatable but more reliable in the case of El Salvador than in the other conflicts as discussed in my introduction.

As her book titles certainly suggest and as she states clearly from the start, Kampwirth uses "a feminist approach, a method in which gender is a central category of analysis." She outlines what she considers to be "three shortcomings of the literature on revolutions: (1) its relative inattention to the role of women in revolutions and the impacts of gender relations on revolutionary movements; (2) its tendency to end analysis at the moment when the old regime is overthrown; and (3) its overemphasis on states and structures, impeding analysis of the impact of revolutionary movements on their participants and on the culture and politics of the societies in which they occur." She argues these shortcomings are not due to any lack of research on revolution theory nor

²⁵ Kampwirth 2002, 1. The term gender and sex are used somewhat interchangeably through Kampwirth's books while Goldstein makes an important distinction between these two as to eliminate confusion sex being the physical biological difference between someone being a male or female, whereas gender is a social/cultural construction that may vary greatly.

²⁶ Ibid 2.

the role of gender in revolutionary politics but simply a failure to integrate these beyond level of footnotes.²⁷ She justly points out that “theorists (of revolutions) sometimes assume that a guerrilla movement wins the support of 100 percent of male peasants is supported by ‘the peasantry,’ but that is faulty math.” She argues that the problem of the class actors being homogenous, that the “apparently simple questions regarding class-did the peasantry support the guerrillas?-are complicated, illuminated, by the feminist approach” and that there needs to be a combination of macro and micro level factors to explain or understand the mobilization of individuals.

Kampwirth’s main premise of both books is that post conflict feminist movements and the augmentation of women’s participation in the political sphere have their seeds of origin within guerrilla movements, that is, feminist movements and changes in gender roles were unintended consequences of women’s participation in guerrilla movements. She begins by expanding on traditional theories of revolution proposing that profound structural changes occurred in Central America in the 1960s and 1970s that affected gender relations and created opportunities for women to mobilize. Kampwirth focuses on circumstances that changed in women’s lives during the last quarter of the twentieth century, creating a helpful paradigm of factors that led to mobilization of women falling into four main categories of shared characteristics. The first being structural changes of land concentration by the wealthy leading to: male migrations in search of work, a rise in the number of single –female –headed households, and female migration to cities; claiming all of which broke traditional ties and gendered norms. She identifies ideological and organizational changes as the second, including the rise of liberation

²⁷ Kampwirth 2004, 2-3. Kampwirth relies heavily on the findings of Ilja Luciak again it is important to note that Kampwirth uses the term gender in a confusing manner, at times this means the biological “sex” and other times the social “gender” roles assigned to sex within the context of a society or culture.

theology and changes in guerrilla practices of recruitment as well as their political and military strategies. Thirdly, she points to political factors such as state responses in the form of repression to popular organizing of any kind pushing women into more radical activism as perceived forms of self-defense. Lastly, Kampwirth looks to personal factors being family traditions of resistance, membership in preexisting social movements like student groups, church groups, or labor unions, and generational cohort.²⁸

She takes this paradigm one step further in her second volume by cross referencing her chosen characteristics and assigns what she calls different levels of prestige. These levels of prestige show what one may already assume about the ability for a woman to obtain certain positions of rank or jobs within a potentially chauvinistic social structure. For example, a woman from middle or upper class family, with a high school or some college education, and experience or preexisting membership in an organization is considered “high prestige.” She concludes that high prestige women would be more likely to achieve high ranks such as *commandante* or be in charge of a group of men within the guerrilla organization. In contrast, a woman from a lower class rural family with a third grade or lower education would be considered “low prestige” and would be more likely to be in charge of cooking or what would be considered support roles within the guerrilla organization.²⁹

Kampwirth does make valid criticisms to the lack of consideration of women in revolutionary theory and helps draw the focus to why and how women are mobilized into guerrilla movements. By using her categories, she also seems to fall into the same faults that she pointed out about revolution theorists, making oversimplified connections or

²⁸ Kampwirth 2002, 14.

²⁹ Kampwirth 2004, 9-12.

generalizations. On the one hand, her research does create some interesting comparison between middle/upper class women having less barriers and more factors to mobilize compared to lower classes but such an argument is really no different than her complaint about the use by revolution theorists of the term peasantry assuming women and men of that class act the same.³⁰ It is just as easily argued that not all middle class nor lower class women have or make the same choices under the same circumstances. Lastly, for her apparent dissatisfaction with traditional revolution theory, she ends up mirroring some of the same conclusion when examining the subject through her feminist lens. Wickham-Crowley also argued that political, religious, and family networks were critical for mobilizing Latin Americans into leftist guerrilla movements.

Though Kampwirth's research supports her conclusions and her sample is much larger (over two hundred interviews), I find from my own research that her portrait of these women can be a bit misleading or rather her sample appears to be more representative of the female combatants that came from major city centers and predominantly the middle and upper classes. I believe this explains one of her more surprising finds that female combatants were on average more educated than their male combatant counterparts or women in El Salvador in general.³¹ She is one of the few scholars that gives direct attention to women participating in the FMLN but unfortunately she only contributes one small chapter in each of her books specifically on El Salvador, giving exponentially more attention to her other case studies. Also disappointing as stated

³⁰ Kampwirth 2002, 3.

³¹ Kampwirth 2002, 39. Her focus starts with women who, after the conflict ended, were involved the political sphere and feminist or women's rights organizations and she made her categories finding similarities amongst the women she interviewed. The women I interviewed in currently living and working in San Salvador fit her categories almost perfectly while the women I interviewed that came from and are still living in rural communities show a very different picture though share some of her characteristics.

above, the frequent use of the term combatant and the cover photos seem to promise explicit discussion of the issue, but she seems only to be interested in how and why women mobilized and how that led to feminist movements and changes in gender roles after the fighting stopped. She mentions practically nothing about what the women did once they joined the guerrilla forces.

In the same vein as Kampwirth's feminist studies of Salvadoran women during the conflict and the movements afterward, there is a myriad of journal articles focusing on the women involved in noncombat mobilizations and protests and the interaction of gendered roles and participation. While it is not the intent of this thesis to analyze gendered roles, two are worth mentioning here as they do provide some interesting framework to the experiences of the women combatants in the FMLN and possibly inform various strategic and tactical decisions made by the guerrillas throughout the conflict.

The first is one that Kampwirth largely expanded upon, Linda L. Reif's *Women in Latin American Guerrilla Movements: A Comparative Perspective*. This article starts from the similar feminist premise that "Latin American revolutionary movements have until recently been regarded as an exclusively male domain of political behavior" and that "North American analysts have tended to consider Latin American women's political behavior... (with) both ethnocentricity and gender bias." She seeks to understand how gender relations inform limits to participation and into what roles women are able to mobilize. This is something of a crash course in machismo and how it applies during Latin American revolutions. She directly seeks to answer three questions: "[W]hat factors constrain Latin American women's participation as compared to men's? Second,

within gender, which classes face the least barriers to participation? Finally, what roles do *guerrilleras* most likely perform?”³² To which Reif answers mirroring revolution theory when exploring three patterns including structural in the form of sexual division of labor, ideological being patriarchal attitudes, and organizational through platform and recruitment. She makes compelling arguments by describing the women through a discussion of differences between being public and private and the sexual division of labor creating barriers. She outlines the roles and activities related to the domestic sphere and how “feminine” tasks are noncompetitive with men highlighting that these private domestic roles limit time, energy, and freedom to engage in outside public tasks. In addition, Reif interestingly argues that women have a stake in maintaining a *machista* patriarchal society, sometimes referred to as *marionismo*, because women are acknowledged as experts in the domestic sphere and thus the benefit is relative autonomy and control of aspects in that sphere. Though she makes a weak argument about women’s lack of involvement in the public sphere, she rightly claims that women have constantly influenced politics through kinship networks, emotional coercion, and their political socialization of their children.

Concerning barriers as result of class, she initiates the same argument that Kampwirth more comprehensively explains, that middle and upper class women have less barriers. She argues a middle class woman does not have same responsibility to fulfill domestic responsibilities and gives the example that a middle class woman can join the guerrilla movement while a maid takes care of her children and home. Her most applicable argument to this thesis is that traditionally feminine roles on the one hand are filtering down a *machista* mentality, but on the other hand they create an advantage to the

³² Reif 147.

strategic and tactical use of women because women are not expected to participate and are inherently less suspicious. Unfortunately she does not elaborate on this argument but luckily Julia Denise Shayne does.

From a sociology perspective, Shayne introduces an important concept in her article *Gendered Revolutionary Bridges: Women in the Salvadoran Resistance Movement (1979-1992)*. Women's participation in the Salvadoran guerrilla movement still primarily focuses on noncombatants. As stated in the title, Shayne argues "armed and unarmed revolutionaries were able to bridge gaps between guerrillas and the unincorporated Salvadoran civilians, thus expanding the revolutionary base." She even raises the question "[i]f women had been fully encouraged revolutionary actors, could there have been a military triumph for guerrillas in El Salvador?"³³ Shayne picks up where Reif only scratches the surface. But, like Kampwirth, Shayne mainly focuses on women's role in noncombat roles and movements, as well as the higher profile women that started with higher status and economic footing. That being said, her theoretical arguments are compelling and have merit. Most interestingly, she suggests that because of preexisting gendered roles, not in spite of, women could perform roles of utility "individually and together (that) could not be replicated by men."³⁴ She examines roles of women as liaisons to various sectors of Salvadoran society and the international community. She suggests that women served as role models for men and other women thus helping recruitment of support. Further, women's performance within the guerrilla leadership and combat forces "helped pave the way for a re-conceptualization of the role and status

³³ Shayne 85.

³⁴ Ibid 87.

of women” within the guerrilla organizations and in the Salvadoran society.³⁵ She suggests that because of preexisting notions, gendered roles allowed women the ability to transport secret messages and material supplies with greater ease than that of men.

First Shayne points to prewar labor movements and protests like that of ANDES, a teachers union seeking wage increases and education reform in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In these teacher protests, “women played crucial roles as leaders, organizers, and supporters of militant resistance... ..building political cultures of opposition that inevitably became foundations for the revolutionary movement.” She points out that popular organizing was inherently more dangerous in that participants were unarmed or unable to defend themselves.³⁶ From the start, the government began using various forms of severe repression including using force to dislodge occupations of offices, capturing and torturing the organizers, and others simply “disappeared.” The simple threat of losing your job was a serious deterrent considering the percentage of female-headed households was nearing 25 percent in the late 1970s and the number of single mothers exponentially grew as protest turned to armed rebellion. Shayne says that “women workers are not expected to resist so forcefully, and in doing so en masse the women of ANDES not only shattered stereotypes but acted as gendered revolutionary bridges by providing a model for the other disenchanting sectors of society.” She goes on to say that “the women of ANDES working through the BPR to build what eventually became multiclass coalitions in support of the revolution” establishing a precedent and demonstrating their potential to their male counterparts. More importantly, she suggests “that women demonstrating in the city streets put human faces on what the media and

³⁵ Ibid 94.

³⁶ Ibid 88.

governments termed ‘Cuban-backed terrorists’” and that “it was important for men and women to see that some members of the opposition were not only unarmed but women.”³⁷ This is where Kampwirth’s “generational cohort” comes into play, consider the effect of these teacher protests on students who will be in their late teens and early twenties during the armed conflict.

These early protests combined with the severe government repression and the outbreak of armed conflict encouraged new groups to emerge like CO-MADRES, who “confronted the tortured, raped, and maimed bodies of their own and others’ loved ones found on train tracks and in clandestine cemeteries. The actions of women in these groups “drew international attention to human rights violations in EL Salvador and forced those at various levels of leadership to acknowledge aware of and were resisting the atrocities.” “Because of its members’ innocent demeanor as a group of mothers, grandmothers, sisters, and wives, CO-MADRES not only served as a bridge to legitimate the popular movement in the eyes of the unorganized but also provided a small amount of security.”³⁸

Though Shayne focuses mainly on noncombatants, she is one of the few that at least gives us a couple of examples of women combatants, including some detail of what they did. She mainly is interested in gender relations, how they perceived sexism within the ranks, and how their participation led to further participation and broader roles as the war evolved over time. Most importantly, she points out some of the women actually being combatants and not just in support roles. Specifically, she shares her interview of Maria Morales, who joined at age 11 and through her impressive performance was in

³⁷ Ibid 89-90.

³⁸ Ibid 90-91.

charge of a platoon of older men by age 15. Morales explains that initially the women combatants performed secondary roles during combat but would be sent to the front lines which “had a great impact upon the populace as well as men in the fighting force.”³⁹

Shayne importantly points out that changes of women’s participation in combat were due to their combat performance and not from a feminist dialogue or assertion on behalf of the women. In Shayne’s interviews with Nidia Diaz, one of the three women in the high command of the FMLN, Diaz asserts that women were limited in some ways in the decision making but “[d]uring combat you didn’t notice differences.” This suggests that machismo attitudes affected structures and some actions within the guerrilla movement but the heat of the battle temporarily erased those attitudes and fighting was in some ways was an equalizer. Shayne furthers the idea of changing roles through performance in battle by including her interview with Ileana, a combatant who started off in support roles but gained ever widening responsibilities through proving her skills. She was put in charge of an all women squadron, and later according to Ileana, “[m]y leadership experience plus valid complaints that the women were being stationed only to cover and hold our combat positions led to the command’s decision to form an all-woman platoon.”⁴⁰

Shayne goes on to describe an evolution of discourse on machismo and feminism within the ranks and an incorporation of preexisting communist tenets of ideology into statutes of the organization. *Companera* Eugenia discusses her assignment to train *cadre* stressing the importance for men to end machismo and “take on domestic responsibilities and to treat women as equals.” Eugenia also claims “the statutes of the organization

³⁹ Ibid 94. Maria Morales as quoted by Shayne.

⁴⁰ Ibid 96. Ileana as quoted by Shayne.

prohibit discrimination against women.”⁴¹ While Shayne gives us a glimpse of female combatants, albeit important, it is only a glimpse with only surface details and more focused on perceptions of gender roles and how they may have changed.

By far the most comprehensive and relevant scholarly work to date in both directly addressing how and why women mobilized into guerrilla movement during the Salvadoran Conflict is Jocelyn S. Viterna’s *Pulled, Pushed, and Persuaded: Explaining Women’s Mobilization into the Salvadoran Guerrilla Army*. Viterna highlights the major problem of the literature. It seems to be lacking when it comes to discerning what factors cause women to engage in high risk activism and mobilize into the guerrilla forces. Simply put, every woman is an individual and overarching premises may be helpful but distort the picture as you begin to examine it more closely. While she does not disagree with the work done before her, she points out,

“Yet, of the many individuals experiencing structural changes, of the many individuals in position to benefit from revolutionary activism, of the many individuals embedded in identity-molding mobilizing networks, and of the many individuals caught in coercive situations, only a few actually participate in revolutionary movements. Here lies the dilemma: if the characteristics that explain activism are shared by the activists and non-activists, then how can these characteristics be the critical causal factors behind popular mobilization? If they are not, what additional factors explain why some, but not all, members of a group or network take part in high-risk revolutionary activism?”

Viterna points out “[q]uestions about causes of revolutionary mobilization remain unresolved because mobilization scholars generally seek the one causal factor or a set of factors that ‘typically’ leads individuals to activism.” Searching for a main causal factor leads to presuming that actors are in a homogenous group but the reality is male and

⁴¹ Ibid 97-98 Eugenia as quoted by Shayne.

female peasants are heterogeneous that “follow strikingly different paths to same mobilization outcome.”⁴²

Viterna, similarly, analyzes and supports many of the general conclusions of preceding revolution and feminist scholars. She claims a new approach to analyzing her research and interview data that actually parallels in many ways the work of Kampwirth, Wood, and Shayne but does dig deeper and users a more diverse sample that includes all levels of class, roles in participation, and combatants and noncombatants.

Viterna has created her own categories for cross referencing her sample that reflects her title. She does not discount that networks and barriers mentioned in her predecessors’ works are central to mobilization but says rather they “interact with individual women and within a particular situational context.”⁴³

She ironically comes up with three overarching patterns in her analysis and calls them: politicized guerrillas, reluctant guerrillas, and recruited guerrillas. She organizes women into these groupings based on a cluster of objective factors and then analyzes them with the narratives from the interviews qualitatively. Her “politicized guerrillas” follow most closely to the typical mobilization scenario explained in the established literature. These women were “pulled” into the guerrillas by strongly held beliefs, involvement in politicized organizations, and “followed recruiters to the FMLN camps.”⁴⁴ She claims these women entered during the early stage of the conflict being targeted by guerrilla recruiters because of their preexisting participation in movements and ideals and not because of state repression.

⁴² Viterna 2.

⁴³ Ibid 19.

⁴⁴ Ibid 20.

Viterna's "reluctant guerrillas" were "pushed" by various crises that caused a perception of a lack of options. These crises usually included acts of repression and violence by the government leading to a need to flee or a sense of not having the resources to escape.⁴⁵ She explains that this group is much more diverse when considering age, preexisting or lack of ties to networks, and interaction with recruitment strategies. This group introduces us to women, or girls rather, being recruited out of Honduran refugee camps or choosing to enter a training camp instead of going to the refugee camps. This group can be seen entering as the armed conflict began through to the end.⁴⁶

The last category of Viterna is the "recruited guerrilla" described as being "persuaded." These women and girls almost exclusively came from FMLN supported or controlled refugee camps or repopulated territory. This particular group had two prevailing motivations for entrance. They were looking for adventure and/or seeking retribution. Viterna differentiates these from her politicized guerrillas because they emphasized personal reasons over ideological or political motives like justice or governmental change. She says they were also different from the reluctant guerrillas mainly because the emphasis on choosing to enter from a position of relative safety. These women entered in the middle of conflict and towards the end and were seen as a reflection in both a change in circumstances and in the strategy and tactics of the FMLN.

I find Viterna's work most useful in that it seems to match more closely with my own findings. It satisfied a frustration I was having with the general conclusions in the

⁴⁵ Ibid 24.

⁴⁶ Ibid 25-28

previous literature mentioned here. I will mesh many of my findings with Viterna's in my own chapter on how and why women mobilized into combat roles.

There is a broad selection of books containing testimonials that are useful in understanding the experiences of women in general leading up to and during the war. These provide very little, if any, descriptions of combatants nor are they explicitly aimed to uncover theories of mobilization. They do, however, help the uninitiated reader to better understand the conditions women and the populace at large had to endure during the war. They can be useful in finding details that support theories of mobilization but they equally highlight the dilemma Viterna presented, in that these books have countless women who experienced the same factors and characteristics as the guerrillas but chose not to mobilize or support the guerrillas. *From Grandmother to Granddaughter: Salvadoran Women's Stories*, as one might assume from the title is a look at three generations of women in three different families each of a different socioeconomic class researched and written by a team of psychologists. Another is Renny Golden's award winning *The Hour of the Poor, The Hour of Women*. This book is a compilation of oral histories grouped in threes to show the lives and struggles of women in Salvadoran Christian base communities, the peasant resistance, and the militants or supporters of the FMLN. The purpose of this book is to be not only descriptive but to raise awareness and sympathy if not support for the terrible situation the war brought upon its people. It does give a handful of short biographical accounts of combatants that mostly focuses on their sacrifices and struggle more than on their experiences or actions in the war.

Lastly there are a grouping of biographies that unintentionally give some insights and descriptions of female combatants as they have different focuses. These are most

helpful in understanding the war with descriptions of fighting through the eyes of participants of the FMLN that include women fighters. Two of these focus on *Radio Venceremos*, the guerrilla underground radio station that was quintessential in guerrilla communications, fomenting public support, and indirectly recruitment. Women combatants and noncombatants were integral in the operation and defense of the elusive mobile radio station that was a constant target of the National Salvadoran Army. These books are *Broadcasting the Civil War in El Salvador: A Memoir of Guerrilla Radio* by Carlos Henriquez Consalvi aka Santiago and *Las Mil y Una Historias de Radio Venceremos: Clandestinas Increibles Salvadorenas Cachimbonas Apasionadas Apasionantes* by Jose Ignacio Lopez Vigil.

The last book I found relevant to this thesis was *Strategy and Tactics of the Salvadoran FMLN Guerrillas: Last Battle of the Cold War, Blueprint for Future Conflicts* by Jose Angel Moroni Bracamonte and David E. Spencer. As the title suggests, this book aims to describe FMLN strategy and tactics in both the evolving recruitment methods and military campaigns. The book helps understand the historical context and how the war changed from a military standpoint examining the structure and design of the FMLN both militarily but also politically. The major drawback and what should raise some flags for any reader is that it was written by a former Salvadoran National Army soldier and US Army Advisor. One has to question accuracy and understanding of operations inside the FMLN as observed by the enemy. Though the bias is palpable at times, it is the most comprehensive description and evaluation of the FMLN's military operations, structure, mobility, support and supply networks, weapons, and recruitment methods. Alas, there is no direct acknowledgement of women combatants except the

inclusion of a photo of a female combatant. Frustratingly, the caption under the photo, “Note the continual improvement of weapons, clothing, and equipment” highlights its inclusion as incidental.⁴⁷ This book is also particularly helpful in conjunction with the work of Viterna and Wood to understand that the slow, disjointed, and combative/competitive formation of FMLN often ignored or oversimplified its unity and cooperation among its many branches.

In conclusion there is no shortage of literature discussing in varying degrees of how and why women mobilized and joined the revolution in different ways. All have their place in adding to the discussion of women as guerrillas and even combatants, while leaving a gaping hole when it comes to any consistent or comprehensive description of what women combatants did once they were part of the fighting forces of the FMLN and its affiliates. The purpose of this thesis is to begin to fill that void and hopes to serve as a launching point or impetus for others continue the much-needed work in this area. I also feel this work is timely and potentially useful in the US as at the time of writing this, Pentagon Officials are changing current policies in the US Armed Forces to allow women to engage the enemy in combat and participate on the “front lines”.

⁴⁷ Bracamonte 54.

Chapter 3 Methodology

In doing the initial research for this thesis, the scarcity of literature discussing the participation of Salvadoran women as combatants in any detail quickly became apparent. Considering the war ended only sixteen years prior and the ages of the majority of female combatants during the war ranged from twelve to twenty-five years old, it was very likely that a large percentage of the women who survived the fighting were still alive. I decided the most appropriate way to learn about the experiences of *guerrilleras* would be to ask them directly. I knew this was feasible because I had recently lived in former guerrilla controlled territory in the department of Morazán, El Salvador for nearly four years as a Peace Corps Volunteer. I was already very familiar with local customs and dialect in addition to having many personal contacts who were former combatants. These contacts included two former *comandantes* of the FMLN, one of whom is the curator of the *Museo de la Revolucion*, or Museum of the Revolution in Perquin. I returned to El Salvador to conduct interviews and research for seven weeks from late June to mid-August of 2006.

Though this is primarily a history project, I felt that the research methods of Cultural Anthropology, in particular those pertaining to Ethnography, were best suited to achieve my goals. To do this, I treated the female combatants as a group and chose to use qualitative open-ended interviews.

The choice to use qualitative open-ended interviews, as opposed to structured interviews or surveys, was made based on the potential to gain more detailed accounts and was largely influenced on my previous experiences working and conducting research in El Salvador and Nicaragua. I found the latter options to be either too limiting or culturally inappropriate. The information gained through personal interviews depends

heavily on the relationship and level of trust between the interviewer and interviewee. This helps understand the advantages of using qualitative open-ended interviews, especially in light of my four-year residence in former guerrilla communities and personal contacts. Surveys are generally not suited for the type of information I was in search of. Learned from my previous experience, Salvadorans are not accustomed to taking surveys and rating their opinions on a five point Likert scale typically required for research. Structured interviews can be very limiting and inconsistent due to wording of the questions.

Even though the war has been over for more than fifteen years, latent tensions still exist but have been shifted over to the political arena. The more than twelve years of repression and violence during the war still causes many Salvadorans to be reluctant to discuss the war openly, especially about their personal participation. In addition, a “gringo” asking pointed questions on the war could also cause many to be suspicious and less forthcoming as a result of the heavy participation of US military advisers in support of the National Army and decades of relatively low levels of white foreign tourists. Because the interview resembles a conversation the interviewee grows more comfortable and open as the interview continues. Hence, the main advantage to qualitative interviewing is that it allows the interviewee to speak freely based off of some generalized questions. This often resulted in accounts much richer in detail and interviewee answered questions the interviewer wanted to know but could not ask directly for reasons of sensitivity or appropriateness.

Before starting an interview, I first discussed the project briefly and developed a rapport with the interviewee. This also served as a vetting process in the selection of my

sample. After the subject gave informed consent, I would initiate the interview asking the subject to begin with the situation or circumstances that lead to their joining the FMLN and told the subject to continue by describing their roles and responsibilities throughout their entire participation. I would allow the subject to speak uninterrupted. If the subject were to pause I would ask another question from a prepared interview guide or an improvised question based on something the subject said and needed clarification. The interview ended at the discretion of the subject, with most interviews lasting a little more than one hour each, though they ranged between thirty minutes to over four hours and some were interviewed on multiple occasions. In addition to these recorded interviews, I also had many impromptu conversations with men and women in stores, restaurants, or on a bus while in transit which I recorded in a journal after the fact.

Because I lived and worked in a former FMLN controlled territory for nearly four years, finding my sample was relatively easy. I used a method Karen Kampwirth refers to as snowballing, in which I began with contacts I already had, including two former *comandantes*, and asked them if they could suggest or introduce me to other female combatants.⁴⁸ I continued this process with each person I interviewed. As mentioned in the introduction, the term combatant was problematic at times, but not as Kampwirth suggested. She highlights that some non-combatants insisted on being considered a combatant, where as I encountered many women that were humble about or downplayed their role as combatants, perhaps, suspicious of me or reluctant to discuss or revisit unpleasant memories. In total, I conducted sixteen recorded interviews amounting to over twenty-five hours of testimonial.

⁴⁸ Kampwirth

When selecting my sample, I attempted to gain a variety of different experiences by choosing women of different ages when joining, entered during different phases of the war, that had different levels of education, and those that held different levels of responsibility or rank. Though such a method helps give broader insight into the experience of Salvadoran female combatants in general, I am hesitant to claim that a sample of this size can be considered representative for all female combatants in FMLN. But, the results from my sample did create redundancies that strongly reinforced or complemented the information I was able to find in the literature. As discussed in more depth in the section on the background history of the conflict, that the FMLN was a coalition comprised of five distinct revolutionary guerrilla groups: PCS, FPL, ERP, RN, and FAL. The majority of the women in my sample were members of the ERP and a few were members of the FPL. Though theoretically all five groups were supposed to be equal, the FPL and the ERP were by far the most powerful because they were the largest and most experienced organizations. The ERP had the strongest influence on the central leadership entity and the primary military branch. Members of the FPL and ERP also made up the bulk of the combatants and placed an emphasis on military action whereas the other groups focused on other aspects such as organizing, international public relations, logistics, and the local nonviolent mass protests. Therefore, the existence of female combatants in groups other than the ERP and FPL are in much smaller numbers and their experience is unlikely to be extremely different.

While the methods I chose provided the potential to obtain a larger quantity of richer data, they also strongly rely on the subjects' memory and ability to recall the information accurately and honestly. This does not suggest that any of the subjects were

deliberately misleading, though it is possible. Elisabeth Jean Wood gives an excellent discussion on this stating, “responses to my questions were shaped by three factors: the accuracy and intensity of the respondents’ initial memories, the subsequent shaping of those memories through social and cultural processes, and the respondents’ objectives in the ethnographic setting of the interview itself.”⁴⁹ In the case of my sample, the amount of time passed from the individual events to the retelling of them in the interviews ranged from sixteen to upwards of thirty years. These factors mostly affect the interpretation of data and can be somewhat reconciled by cross-referencing many interviews. While I draw my own interpretations and conclusions, I provide the majority the women’s accounts using their words and phrases as much as possible though translated. I have only reorganized the interviews to provide a more coherent history.

⁴⁹ Wood 33.

Chapter 4

Background History: A Brief Overview of the Conflict and the FMLN

How and why women became combatants and the roles they performed were directly affected by at what point during the war a woman joined the FMLN forces. Therefore, to be able to discuss these female combatants, it is fundamental to have an understanding of the formation of FMLN and how both the FMLN and its strategy and tactics changed during the twelve-year course of the conflict.

Bracamonte and Spencer's division of the war into four phases defined by the evolution of the FMLN and its changes in strategy and tactics provides the best way to understand the female combatants. This breakdown seems to be generally accepted by others like Kampwirth, Viterna, and Wood, in their analysis of the mobilization of women into the guerrilla movement. Bracamonte and Spencer identified the four phases as: Organization and Development from 1970 to 1980, Effort to Liberate Territory from 1980 to 1984, War of Attrition from 1985 to 1989, and Peace Negotiations from 1990 to 1992. It is at the end of the first phase that the FMLN is actually formed but its parts still maintain varying degrees of autonomy, rivalry, and distrust of one another.

There were many longstanding factors that contributed to the formation of the FMLN and the conflict that ensued. Since the end of the 1800s, the political and economic control of the country, including the majority of land ownership, had been kept in the hands of a small group of elites referred to as the Fourteen Families.⁵⁰ The agricultural export economy of coffee, sugar, cotton, and indigo was based on the hacienda system that relied on a large peasant labor force that became migratory as a result of changes in land use. This combined with the fact that El Salvador has the

⁵⁰ In reality this group consisted of probably thirty or more families but people still speak of the fourteen families as if it were fact.

smallest land area on the continental Americas while also having one of the highest population densities in the Western Hemisphere created a very real problem of land scarcity.

The story of FMLN begins in 1932 when its namesake and Communist organizer, Agustín Farabundo Martí, led an uprising of Indians and peasants of western El Salvador. General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez, who had taken power via a coup d'état in 1930, used the military to swiftly and brutally crush the revolt in a matter of days. This event earned the name *La Matanza*, or The Massacre, for the speed, efficiency and ruthlessness of the counter-revolt with the public hanging of the leaders, including Farabundo Martí, and the heavily disputed death toll ranging from less than ten thousand to thirty thousand. In reaction to this challenge to its authority and policies, the government banned all forms of public protest.

While many factors already existed that contributed to the eventual formation of the FMLN, it is the events of 1969 and after that exaggerated certain dynamics and served as a catalyst for the decision to enter armed combat. In 1969, El Salvador and Honduras clashed in a “hundred hour war” over the abuse of the approximately 300,000 Salvadoran immigrants squatting in Honduras. This is often called *la Guerra de Fútbol*, or the Soccer War, because of the coinciding series of World Cup elimination games between the two countries’ national teams. The second game, played in San Salvador, is usually cited as the spark that ignited already growing tensions into armed conflict. The growing tensions were fueled primarily by economic imbalances between the two countries. El Salvador had limited land availability, a larger growing population, and was more industrialized compared to Honduras’ much larger land area, a smaller population

and less developed economy. It did not help that both countries' regimes were experiencing a lull in local popular support as a result of faltering economies and thus began to blame the other and welcomed the international tensions as a distraction. Though Honduras nearly destroyed the Salvadoran Air Force, El Salvador solidly defeated the forces on the ground. Bracamonte and Spencer wrote that "the price of military victory for El Salvador was a simultaneous diplomatic, economic, and social crisis of vast proportions" as the Organization of American States imposed sanctions, the Central American Common Market that strongly favored El Salvador prematurely collapsed, and the country was forced to absorb over 130,000 returning homeless and jobless refugees. These dynamics amongst others foreshadowed the eruption of a revolution in the Land of Volcanoes.

As the title Organization and Development suggests, the decade following the Soccer War saw many grassroots organizations forming in response to the growing social and economic national crisis and the increasing repression and violence by the government and the economic elites through the use of the *Guardia Nacional*, or National Guard. The fraudulent election of 1972, in which the apparent victory of the Christian Democratic Party candidate, Jose Napoleon Duarte, was overturned giving Colonel Arturo Molina the presidency and Duarte was physically beaten then exiled. This marked a point of no return as it served to give credence to opposition groups that believed that political change was not possible without an armed struggle. Bitter and, at times, bloody disputes surrounding the appropriate strategy ensued within and amongst the opposition groups initially causing many schisms but eventually the groups were forced to realize that their only chance to seriously challenge the government was in a united front.

The resulting FMLN was a coalition essentially comprised of five main groups: the Salvadoran Communist Party (PCS), the Popular Liberation Front (FPL), the Popular Revolutionary Army (ERP), the National Resistance (RN), and the Armed Forces of Liberation (FAL). Each group, except for the FAL, formed in a cascade of schisms from the preceding group in the list and they all passionately disagreed with each other. The FAL was another splinter from the PCS, joining the FMLN just before the outbreak of total revolution. The more famous examples of this intense rivalry within the ranks were the assassinations of Roque Dalton and Melida Anaya Montes, both were slain by members of their respective groups to quell differences of strategic direction. By 1980, the formation of the FMLN was more or less forced by the need for foreign aid.

In the wake of the US pullout from Vietnam and the *Sandinista* victory in Nicaragua, El Salvador began to gain international attention that fell into an East-West paradigm, leading many to see it as the last battle of the Cold War. While the Soviet Union, Cuba, and Nicaragua showed to be eager to support the revolution, they were only willing to back a single unified group with a strategy akin to what proved successful for the Sandanistas. Therefore, the five groups reluctantly agreed to form the umbrella political-military organization the FMLN in 1980 to be led by a five person Unified Revolutionary Directorate (DRU) consisting of one representative from each group. The DRU was later changed to the General Command (CG) reflecting the emphasis on military action. During this first period there were many small local organizations and militias forming in cities and rural communities beyond the five major groups, many of which were absorbed into the FMLN eventually while others chose to remain outside and operate independently.

While international Communist countries and groups had a strong influence via foreign aid and supplying weapons, this was very much an internal Salvadoran conflict with ideology playing a very small role on personal level for most of the combatants with the exception of some of the initial organizers and intellectual leaders. Ideological assertions by the FMLN depended largely on their context and were usually motivated by the upkeep of public relations with those providing funding. The motivations seem clear without ideology. The oligarchy of the military and economic elites sought to maintain control of the country and protect their economic investments while the primary goal of the FMLN was to bring an end to economic strife, poverty, and the escalating brutality of government supported repression and violence against any form of opposition.

Ironically, the US was by far the largest source of funding for both sides. The US government provided the Salvadoran Government and Armed Forces with money, military advisors, training, and weapons which after 1982 through to the end of the war US assistance amounted to a billion dollars a day. US based human rights organizations, religious activist groups, and sympathetic supporters gave funding to the FMLN and managed large international campaigns to pressure the US Congress and UN and promote international awareness by publicizing the rampant human rights abuses committed by the government.

The overall strategy of the FMLN developed in similar fashion as its inception and can be generally characterized as “Prolonged Popular War” derived loosely from Ho Chi Minh and Asian revolutionary thought. But this strategy changed and evolved throughout the war. In theory the five groups were equal on the DRU, but the FPL and

the ERP were clearly the most powerful being the largest, better organized, and most experienced. Therefore, they had the most influence over strategy. Initially, the ERP became the primary liaison to foreign allies and essentially the head of the FMLN for its emphasis on military action and its control over the infrastructure and routes to receive supplies from Cuba and Nicaragua. Also, the ERP was in charge of the area farthest from the San Salvador, the closest to the refugee camps forming in Honduras, and the hardest terrain for the National Army to successfully and consistently infiltrate and control. Eventually the Army will designate this territory as “Free Fire Zone” where they would provide warnings for any remaining residents to leave the area and then they would carry-out intermittent bombing raids.

The FMLN strategy that informed the actions in the second phase were primarily developed out of the distinct perspectives of three groups the ERP, RN, and FPL. The ERP saw the government as weak and the population ready to revolt. They believed a show of strong nationwide headline-grabbing military action would invigorate the populace leading to total insurrection, placing little importance on the need to politically organize the masses. They saw utility of mass demonstrations mainly to distract from or mask the military movements and action while helping to recruit more people in the euphoria of participation and potential for change derived from their military victories. The ERP also understood the implications of the potential US involvement and therefore believed that they must achieve a swift military victory while the seemingly benign Carter Administration was still in power. They were betting that a new administration would have to accept their victory as a fait accompli, an irreversible situation that the US would be forced to acknowledge.

The RN as a splinter off the ERP was diametrically opposed to the ERP strategy placing primary importance on mass acts of civil disobedience and protest through organizing labor and trade associations and creating networks of new emerging groups. They also believed the government to be weak but that it would collapse in the face of continuous mass protest action being unable to govern. The RN saw military action as secondary serving to enhance the propaganda value of marches and as a means to protect the unarmed protestors from the military or police using violence to disperse the masses. The RN was probably authentically Salvadoran group being the least influenced by foreign political thought.

The FPL took most of its lessons from Vietnam believing the US would not stand by and allow the Salvadoran government fall without intervening directly. Therefore, they envisioned an invasion by US troops and a prolonged guerrilla resistance in the hills and mountains in the departments of Chaletenango and Morazán. They believed that if the war lasted long enough the internal pressure in the US would force them to withdraw and the guerrillas could pick up the pieces and take control. These ideas shaped the two priorities of their strategy, to establish an infrastructure of resistance in remote areas of El Salvador and to establish an international support network that would use propaganda to pressure the US to stay out of or get out of El Salvador. The first meant the development of guerrilla and militia units, establishment of base camps, fortified regions and shadow government structures of civilians for support. They co-opted entire villages often under the guise of religious programs headed by radical priests, to provide logistical support and recruits for the guerrilla operations.

The three main key strengths of the FMLN were the massive amounts foreign aid and training, operational flexibility in organization and strategy, and its continual recruiting efforts to expand its base. While the exact numbers are difficult to come by, many speculate that FMLN received nearly as much foreign aid as the well documented one billion received by the Salvadoran military over the twelve years. Bracamonte and Spencer claim that “[t]he guerrilla effort in El Salvador was without comparison the best-funded, best-organized, and best-supported guerrilla war effort ever fought on the American continent.” They point out that literally every faction in Latin America, except the Shining Path in Peru, as well as the PLO and the Basque ETA amongst other worldwide terrorist organizations provided funds, arms, and/or advice to the FMLN. This ensured the survival of the FMLN through the twelve years by making it impossible to interdict or completely shut down the pipeline that could be re-channeled if any particular source or route was challenged.

Since the FMLN was comprised of many groups with different perspectives and strategies it remained flexible and dynamic. This prevented insistence on failed tactics due ideological strategy and allowed it to reorganize in the face of changing scenarios like the increased funding and support of the National Army by the US.

The second phase referred to as The Effort to Liberate Territory, 1980-1984, was characterized by a dominance of the military strategy of the ERP based of warfare of regularized forces and an attempt for a swift and decisive victory. While differences among the factions of the FMLN resurfaced the Cubans urged them to follow the plans of Nicaragua that even though the first Sandinista offensive was easily defeated each successive offensive gained more support and quickly toppled the Somoza regime before

international reinforcement could arrive and provide assistance. The resulting compromise amongst the factions created a three prong strategy that consisted of a nationwide military offensive, a national strike that coincided with the military operations, and a supposed rebellion within the ranks of the armed forces that would bring men and arms to the guerrillas coordinated and sparked by the infiltration of guerrillas in the barracks.

Due to the dominance of the ERP priority was placed on the rapid development of a large force that they calculated the need for fifteen thousand men to be able to face the national army over the other two prongs of the plan. A major problem in this effort called *Plan Puente*, or Bridge Plan, was the utter lack of weapons and trained soldiers. It is conservatively estimated that over two thousand men and women guerrillas were sent to Cuba and Nicaragua to be trained in practically every aspect of regularized warfare during 1980. These course included company, platoon, and squad leadership, the manufacture of homemade weapons, use of mortars, light artillery, and heavy machine guns, special forces operation and maneuvers, communications, first aid, regular infantry, even combat swimming. It is truly amazing how they managed to disguise the movement of these masses in small groups through indirect routes to be trained in Cuba and Nicaragua without raising suspicion or getting caught.

The ERP was mainly in charge of the infiltration of the army and though they academically calculated estimates of the size of defection they did not expect enormous numbers. Rather they were counting on gaining control of strategic barracks. The main purpose of this though was create a devastating blow to the army's morale and create doubt and distrust amongst its leaders by not knowing who to trust.

During this period the FMLN reached its operational peak using large battalion forces to engage the army head to head to create decisive battles. Through these operations they established footholds of territory in northern regions of Morazán and Chalatenango setting up bases of operations and training centers.

The general strike was meant to force the military to divide its forces by preoccupying it and by blocking its movements at critical points of infrastructure. The plan was to set up roadblocks and barricades, sabotage bridges and industries, and sack stores that would force the government to disperse its forces to regain control. Also they would setup large protest surrounding military barracks in hopes to keep units in their installations. All off these measures were based on the idea that military would have to use massive military force nothing short of massacres while leaving forces isolated to be picked off by the guerrillas large standing force.

Obviously the 1981 Final Offensive was a disaster, the military action did happen but the attacks were not simultaneous failing to liberate a single town or take or a single military garrison. Only one commander and his company defected in Santa but the rest of the soldiers in the post remained loyal and forced a withdrawal. The FPL blamed the better-equipped ERP for failing to achieve its objectives while the RN, who never agreed with the plan from the start, did not make any attacks. Only twenty thousand civilians came out in support of the guerrillas mostly in concentrated isolated pockets in or around major cities. In fact, many shut their doors to the guerrillas preventing them from blending in with the general populace taking away one of their major advantages. These protests and blockades were easily bypassed representing little obstruction or threat to the army's operation.

In light of these failures the Salvadoran armed forces took a gamble to try and wipe out the guerrilla forces to prevent any resurgence. Using the hammer and anvil maneuvers the armed forces made brutal sweeps through areas that had FMLN strong holds in Guazapa, Chalatenango, Morazán, and San Vicente making little to no distinction between guerrillas and peasants. These were very destructive but also exhausted the military's resources that had barely recovered from the Soccer War ten years earlier. Hesitancy in the US Congress led to a trickling of aid that would take time to show effectiveness on the battlefield, giving the guerrillas some time to regroup and evaluate their strategies. It is the flexibility of the FMLN that allowed its resurgence. They realized that it was not their strategy that failed but a failure in its tactical execution largely due to the failure of the factions to work as a united group. Because of the military's exhaustion the FMLN actually experienced more freedom of mobility than before allowing them to bring in large amounts of arms and trained soldiers. They refused to believe that the people were not in support of them rather their failure to achieve significant military blows enabled the government to repress the populace through force and fear.

The reinvigorated FMLN reconfigured itself with each faction creating large battalion sized forces. The main objective of the new modified strategy was to use military offensives to drive the government and military from the eastern part of the country and claim it to be liberated territory with the expectation of formal recognition by international entities. In addition to already having strong support in this region, the main supply routes to Nicaragua for the FMLN were located there, one over land the other through the Gulf of Fonseca. A major change was the idea of using the large

military units to conduct very concentrated and directed operations while using others to defensively hold territory.

They had many successes in this period up until 1984 as the army had placed platoon sized garrisons in most of the major towns in the region but these became easy targets for the concentrated guerrilla battalions and brigades forcing the government army to remove most of the posts in the lesser accessible areas of Chalatenango and Morazán to be able to conserve and concentrate its own forces. But the FMLN was never able to hold territory to the point of preventing the military from entering especially as aid from the US began to finally come to fruition.

The second phase saw both sides reach their operational peaks. The idea for the FMLN was to liberate territory through large regular forces meeting in decisive battles and gain international recognition as a separate state. Though the national army suffered some humiliating tactical defeats they proved to be flexible and resilient and with the aid of the US it managed to neutralize the battalion and brigade forces of the FMLN especially with the use of helicopters and Immediate Reaction Battalions like Atlacatl, Belloso, Atonal, Arce, and the Bracamonte along with parachute battalions and special operations groups. Frustrated the FMLN plans for maneuver warfare. Both sides suffered heavy losses forcing the FMLN to change their strategy and tactics.

The third phase, War of Attrition 1985-1989, saw a major change in the FMLN plans. Realizing that with the increased advantage of mobility of helicopters, the FMLN knew they couldn't continue engaging in large forces that were easier to find and isolate. They gave more credence to the prolonged popular war strategy of the FPL. They adopted what they called "strategic dispersion", abandoning the battalions for platoon-

sized groups that were further subdivided into smaller operational groups and began use of a tactic of concentration and deconcentration. In this tactic, the platoons would remain constantly mobile and converge on a specific target for a quick attack and then immediately disperse in different directions, making it particularly difficult to launch any kind of counteroffensive. If they chase one group it would potentially make any concentrated Armed Forces group vulnerable to becoming isolated and ambushed. There was a major increase in the use of mines and homemade explosives causing a multiplier effect. They concentrated more attacks on the economic sector and infrastructure. The Urban Commandos focused on targets within major cities while the guerrilla platoons took out major bridges and electrical substations. The FMLN also acquired two powerful anti-aircraft weapons, the SA-7 and SA-14 missiles, forcing the military to curb its use of the Air Force cutting into their advantage of air mobility of troops. This period ended with the *Hasta El Tope*, or Until the Top offensive, in which the FMLN gathered all its strength for a last attempt for a decisive military victory focusing the effort on the capital San Salvador. The army managed to hold off the offensive though the fighting was particularly brutal.

The last period of the war was the Peace Negotiations from 1990-1992. Both sides were struggling to maintain resources and troop levels. Popular support was waning both locally and internationally for both sides. The international political environment was changing rapidly with fall of the Berlin Wall and the weakening of the Soviet Union. These factors lead both sides to entertain a negotiated end to the fighting. The FMLN's strategy of a long drawn out struggle was showing glimmers of hope as the political will and the physical capabilities to continue fighting were in decline. Though they had

entertained peace talks in the last phase, some in the government saw these as distractions used to enable the guerrillas to recover and rebuild its units. Fighting remained intense.

In 1989, the five Central American presidents met to call for peace in the region. Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega proposed a negotiated cease-fire with reforms to be overseen by international observers but the El Salvador's Cristiani administration rejected it. In 1990, the FMLN insisted that United Nations mediate further talks. The FMLN created a special delegation from leadership of the five branches to fairly represent the wishes of the guerrillas. There was a hope the FMLN would be able to participate in the scheduled 1991 presidential elections. In Caracas in May of 1990, a meeting was held to set the agenda for peace talks that outlined constitutional, economic, and social reforms to be negotiated.

Discussions began to head in a positive direction. The two sides met in Mexico City for three weeks to find some compromises over constitutional reforms and the establishment of human rights commission. They met in September of 1991 to sign the preliminary Peace Accord. Land was to be awarded to the guerrillas and peasants and they created COPAZ, the National Commission for the Consolidation of Peace, to oversee the transition and political inclusion of the FMLN. That December they met at the United Nations in New York to finalize any outstanding issues. The final Peace Accords were signed January 16, 1992 in Mexico City.

Chapter 5
Jauna Got Her Gun:
Why and How Women Became *Guerrilleras*

In 1968, the first clandestine cell to take up arms against the oppressive state regime was comprised of men and women.⁵¹ We know that from there, women eventually made up 30 percent of the FMLN combatants in the conflict until its end through the signing of the Peace Accords in 1992.⁵² Timothy Wickham-Crowley claimed this represented a sizeable increase women's participation in Latin American revolutions leading to a handful of scholars' attempts to explain the proposed phenomenon. The most relevant works of Jocelyn Viterna and Karen Kampwirth provides us with identification and excellent analysis of a wide variety causal factors and conditions that lead to the mobilization of women into many levels of participation and support of the Salvadoran guerrilla movement. Some of these factors include the limiting of political access, desperation from economic hardship and inequality, direct experience with or witnessing of government sponsored violence and repression, and access or membership to preexisting politicized groups or networks. Viterna and Kampwirth provide only minimal excerpts from the women's stories and almost no explanation of the actual process of mobilization that the women experienced, though they had large sample sizes and obviously obtained rich data from their research. To be fair, the intent of their work was to provide a rubric of factors that led to mobilization to participate in various levels of activism or would lead to participation in feminist movements after the war ended respectively. I found that the analysis of my own data coincides closely with much but not all their conclusions. The intent of this chapter is to go beyond the analysis and

⁵¹ Hermina Interview

⁵² Kampwirth, Luciak

numbers and explore in more detail how women became combatants through their experiences and stories.

Before I begin, it is important to remember that the guerrilla forces and the conflict itself both evolved from a series of processes over period of more than two decades. Accordingly, the factors affecting women and the way they mobilized also changed throughout the course of the war. Therefore, I have organized the stories of the women I interviewed chronologically within the settings of urban and rural spheres to provide a narrative of how the factors and processes affected women differently at various stages of the war. Also, I will show how the FMLN created and adapted its recruiting strategies as it evolved with escalation and conditions of the conflict.

By the mid 1960s, Salvadoran women were no strangers to nonviolent mass demonstrations and protest marches. There were plenty of examples and networks to foster the involvement of women of all social classes. In late 1960s and early 1970s groups based on political parties, labor unions, liberation theology, and student organizations were forming protest movements in major cities and in rural communities. Women already involved in these movements became cofounders of the armed guerrilla insurgency that sprang from grassroots groups of politicized university students in San Salvador in 1968.

University Students to Urban Commandos

Women were part of the armed insurgency from its very inceptions. Politicized university students in San Salvador seem to be the first groups to initiate armed acts of rebellion. The National University of El Salvador (UES) in the capital was the apparent crossroads of ideas and people that served as ground zero for the armed guerrillas and a

catalyst to the eventual involvement of many. Five of the women I interviewed joined in these earliest stages and share many characteristics or factors that led to their mobilization to take up arms.

In general, these women were of middle class backgrounds, of the same generational cohort within five years of age, not married nor had any children, involved in some kind of preexisting social network, and most had a friend or family member currently involved in one of the nonviolent protest movements.⁵³ Being of middle class background, not married, nor having any children suggests that they possessed a certain amount of freedom from any economic or cultural barriers that gave them the luxury of choice to mobilize. This also implies they had the means to obtain a higher level of education in an open environment with exposure to a broader range of ideological discourse and access to preexisting student organization structures. The importance of the generational cohort is mainly that these women had a shared experience of major public events at a similar age and presupposes a similar impact from those events even if the women were not physically together or knew each other at the time of the events.

Viterna stresses that these shared traits do not always lead to mobilization. Many Salvadoran women shared one or any combination of these characteristics but chose to only participate in mass demonstrations while others opted to not participate at all.⁵⁴ Some of the women I interviewed that entered at these early stages emphasized the difficulty of knowing what exactly it was that caused them to go fully into armed insurgency. As well, most of the women I interviewed that entered at various times throughout the war used very similar phrasings and terms like “social injustice” which

⁵³ Kampwirth

⁵⁴ Viterna

may suggest certain amount of ideological indoctrination or repeated use of a specific discourse from liberation theology and communist political thought.

La ARS and El Grupo (1968-1972)

The story of the *Erjecito Revolucionaria del Pueblo* (ERP), or the Peoples Revolutionary Army, begins in 1968 with a university student who was the top of his class in Electrical Engineering. As a part of the El Salvador's ongoing efforts to improve its economy in accordance with initiatives set forth by the Central American Common Market, students excelling in industrial fields were given governmental scholarships to study at leading universities in the United States and European countries. This particular student was given a scholarship to study in West Germany for the year. 1968 was a particularly inauspicious year to be sending students to Europe for an education to support the growth and development of a capitalist economy. It is terribly ironic that the Salvadoran government inadvertently provided for the ideological development of one its most effective detractors.

The student arrived in West Germany amidst a rising tide of student revolutionaries. He became fascinated with the ongoing student debates over Maoist and Stalinist Communism as well as the German students' anger towards their parent's generation for their complicity with the Nazi regime. Within a couple of months, student riots broke out and practically paralyzed regimes in Paris, Warsaw, and Rome. Many of the student organizers from these events turned up in Berlin seeking refuge from persecution. He found himself involved in long conversations with some of those who lead the protests in France and they had a huge impact on the young Salvadoran. Inspired, he stopped his studies and decided to return home to San Salvador.

Upon his return, the student reunited with his girlfriend and former classmates still attending the university and shared his new perspective and ideas he had learned. He believed in taking a more proactive approach to change the government and received a hesitantly receptive audience amongst their peers. His intent was clear and these students started devising plans that would force the government to listen since it was not listening to the protest movements in the streets. Under the name *Accion Revolucionaria Salvadorena (la ARS)*, or the Salvadoran Revolutionary Action, they attempted to sabotage government buildings with homemade explosives. Being haphazardly organized and new to this, some of them were caught in the act, captured and eventually killed by the National Guard. Being on the run and in hiding, they temporarily disbanded.

They regrouped and became more cautious about who they included in their conversations and kept to a close-knit circle. This group included members Lil Rosagro Ramírez, Carlos Menjivar Martínez, Eduardo Sancho, and Edgar Alejandro Rivas Mira taking the lead. They were better organized this time and formed the first nucleus or cell dubbing themselves *El Grupo*, The Group. They settled on their first operation. As they had already experienced, the Salvadoran government had no problem using violent acts of kidnapping, torture, and murder to actively intimidate political opponents and protest organizers, especially those they suspected to be leaders. The Group decided they would fight fire with fire and kidnap a prominent business owner to gain an audience for their own demands.

The Group inconspicuously bought some common weapons in the market and borrowed or stole them from their families. They had picked their target, Ernesto Regalado Dueñas, a prominent business owner commonly associated with the oligarchic

“Fourteen Families”. They studied his routines, and made a plan to capture him after work. The whole group, men and women, were involved in planning and carrying out the operation. Something went wrong in the operation after they had captured Dueñas and for some unexplained reason they ended up assassinating him. They managed to get away without being caught or identified, but this gained them immediate national attention and signaled the true beginnings of an organized armed insurgency.

The Group again disbanded and laid low due to fears of police persecution, unsure if they had done anything to give themselves away. After a couple of months, they felt assured they had not been identified. Some realized they were not willing to go down that road again, so The Group reduced to only the four people already mentioned including Lil Rosagro Ramirez, a woman still enrolled at the National University studying law at the point of graduation.

They regrouped at the university in 1969/1970 and began to cautiously promote the idea of armed resistance in student discussions and began to recruit amongst their relationships, friends, and families. Another group of students from the same class at the university formed including Rafael Arce Zablah, Ana Guadalupe Martínez, Joaquín Villalobos, Ana Sonia Medina, Janeth Hasbun Samour.⁵⁵

Hermina and Maria assert that the initial inclusion of women was not for some idea of equality or ideology but simply their spontaneous participation as classmates and girlfriends organically part of the group as it was forming. The first women shared with their male counterparts the same level of education, political leaning, and attitudes towards the need for more aggressive action against the government. They also shared the characteristics of being of an age without many commitments to either their parents or

⁵⁵ I interviewed two of these women from whom this story of beginnings is comprised.

spouses. In general there was the belief that if you were in, you needed to be all the way in and involved in every aspect from the decision making to the operations. Hermina clarified that this was not because of the need for equality between the sexes but out of necessity to function being such a small group. There was always more work to do than there were people and they needed everyone to work together to be able to pull off the operations. As well, this unintentionally maintained a certain sense of security that all were committed. She emphasized there was no gendered division of labor in the beginning, that all were involved in every discussion, decision, and operation. Each member recruited, male or female, was brought all the way in and had to learn everything that the members of the group knew, including handling and firing the pistols and guns they had accrued.

At first, there was a mindset to recruit their closest friends and especially their relationships and their families whenever possible. Hermina explained the rationale was simply based on the need and ability to function well underground. It was very difficult and sometimes impossible for some members to be able to complete their assignments and tasks if they were constantly trying to hide their actions from their boyfriend or girlfriend, spouse, brother or sister, parents, or roommates depending on the situation of each person. She does assert the participation of women in these early stages inadvertently established a precedent or a base of equality that would undoubtedly have some effect on the later development of the rural guerrilla groups.

Hermina (In a Father's Footsteps)

Hermina joined her friends to form an armed cell in 1970 as a student at the National University, but said she had been influenced by many factors and events before

she arrived at the university. To begin, Ana Guadalupe's father had a history of rebellion that probably planted the first seeds of revolutionary ideas in her. He had been in the National Army long since before she was born. In 1944 he was a junior officer of the Strategic First Infantry that led his barracks along with intellectuals, business owners and other disloyal sectors of military in a coup attempt to oust the current president and head of the military junta, General Hernández Martínez.⁵⁶ The attempt was unsuccessful and her father managed to resign without consequence, while many other officers were put on public trail and executed. Hearing stories of this at home that contradicted what was taught in school established skepticism towards the government at an early age. Her father returned to military through a network of his friends that had stayed in. He restarted as a low ranking teacher in the military academies but rose through the ranks to be on Presidential security forces and had joined the National Police when he and Hermina's mom had separated by the time Hermina was entering high school. Ironically, it was her father's military cohort that was now amongst the highest ranks of the military backed government. She did not elaborate on their relationship once she had joined.

Hermina said the ANDES teacher strikes of 1968 played a major role in developing her activism. It was hard not to notice something big was going on when you arrive at school and there were no teachers. They had gone on strike for days and she watched them on the news. When the teachers and students returned to school, the student's curiosity opened a dialogue that introduced her to a whole new world of social and labor issues. She and students asked where the teachers were, they responded, "on

⁵⁶ General Hernandez had come to power through a coup himself and was the President who ordered the Matanza of 1932. The revolt and coup attempt of 1944 was ignited by: land reforms and a raise in export taxes that frustrated the business owners, failure to pay the Army officers' salaries in full, and he openly violated the constitution and declared he would serve a third term without holding elections.

strike to obtain our rights.” The students asked, “what is a strike and what rights?” The teachers explained the whole set of issues from demanding for social security to scaled pay based on responsibilities and credentials and an eight hour work day. They also talked about need for easier access to education and the education gap between the urban and the rural areas of the country.

Hermina entered the university to study medicine amidst the grand theoretical and ideological debates over open access to education and social barriers to advancement. She emphasizes that the debate remained on a pacifist level with aims at improving democracy. They questioned the restrictive access to education that seemed to be manipulated too much by the government and outside influences. Hermina would be leaving class and groups of students from various organizations would be holding up posters and handing out flyers to meetings, events, and protest marches. There was a large pacifist movement concerning Vietnam, but she clarified that pacifism was not about antiwar but became a movement of anti-imperialism and anti-United States. In their classes on politics and history, the topics of revolutions against dictators and repressive government like in Argentina and Cuba dominated the discussion.

Since she was surrounded by this politicized environment every day and the main recreation was to participate in protests and political rallies, Hermina said she happily agreed when she was invited to participate. Once she started protesting, one of her friends approached her and invited her to a meeting. The meeting was at a friend’s house and but it was smaller than she had expected. Usually these meetings were groups of twenty or more. She recognized most of the students at this meeting some she was only mildly acquainted with. They continued with their conversation that had started before she had

arrived, and one of them asked her a question about what she thought about taking up arms. After the conversation continued for a while, they apparently felt comfortable with her and asked if she was interested in joining a clandestine group that was organizing the armed movement, she did not hesitate in saying yes. They told her it meant she would have to remove herself from her circle of friends and her family to join. The next day she dropped out of school to the dismay of her parents and friends. She accepted her first assignment to go to San Miguel and began organizing there including armed operations.

Maria (Birds of a Feather)

Maria was 18 and studying Mathematics at the National University (UES) in San Salvador when she participated in her first protest march in 1970. Growing up in the capital, Maria had a childhood of watching various groups constantly protesting the government and the government pushing back. As with Ana Guadalupe, Maria claims the 1968 ANDES teacher union strikes impacted her and influenced her thoughts about social issues before she entered the university. On her way home from school, she would have to navigate through protests of city workers marching with their unions and groups of poor rural people lead by Catholic priests asking for land reform. Maria lived everyday seeing this political and social struggle over poverty and injustice on the streets and on the news.

When she enrolled in the university in 1970 she said she was already very angered and incensed over the stories of the disappeared whom were being mysteriously kidnapped and their mutilated bodies were turning up on the railroad tracks. Ana started dating a boy she had met in her classes. They found themselves in regular group discussions with other classmates. Her boyfriend and she shared the sentiment and argued

with others that protesting was simply not enough. At first she believed the need for taking up arms was mainly to protect the unarmed protestors against the growing government violence against them. But she began to think strategic armed acts might be necessary to ignite a full revolution of the masses. Maria noted the discussion with other students at times would become heated arguments to the point of alienating the other students. After one of these discussions, her boyfriend told her he had some friends who felt the same way she did and they had already done more than talk about it. He introduced her to The Group.

Maria emphasized she had no overt passion for war and violence. She had never fired a gun at this point in her life, but living in the capital her whole life, she had lost any hope that the government would listen to the people without being forced. The government had its own secret groups searching out insurgent groups and organization leaders so The Group had become the ERP and decided to cut all their public ties and go underground for the protection of their families and friends. This provoked some the group to leave. In 1971, they developed a process to gain new recruits called *fogeo*, or fire, and began to reach out to the other independent armed groups. There had been and still was a strong debate between the different groups like the FPL which fostered a longer term strategy of developing mass support before leading an armed strike versus the ERP's insistence on quick strategically planned armed strikes to coincide and ignite larger mass demonstrations.

Celeste (A Good Catholic Girl)

Celeste joined at the latter development stages of the armed insurgency of the ERP and became one of its leading commanders before the creation of the FMLN.

Though she joined a little later her influences that lead her to mobilization started very early and in a different way than the previous two women. Celeste was born and raised in the poor rural village Izalpa in the Department of Sonsonante to a father of indigenous roots.⁵⁷ The only elementary school in the pueblo was run by Catholic missionaries and she attended it until she was fifteen. Sometimes the missionaries provided full and partial scholarships for the poorer students to continue their Catholic education. In 1964, Celeste graduated 8th grade and was given help to go to a Catholic boarding high school in Santa Tecla thirty miles west of San Salvador.

The nuns that taught her planted the seeds that would eventually lead her towards mobilization. These progressive nuns made a huge impression. They constantly emphasized the relationship between the church and the poor and instilled in her the idea of a moral obligation to social justice and social responsibility, not just locally but around the world. She still remembers some of stories the nuns had told from their time in Africa and India and how they had related them to similar situations of poverty in El Salvador. With this liberation theology based education, Celeste enrolled in the National University in San Salvador in 1968.

The environment at the university was an amplified version of her high school education, Liberation Theology topics seemed to dominate every conversation no matter what your major was. Celeste said the professors were not shy about sharing their opinions and political beliefs. Protests were a regular occurrence but she points out that all the groups marching were different and separate, each with their own reasons and causes. She paid most attention to the Catholic students notes that they had led huge

⁵⁷ This area of the country still holds onto its indigenous roots and people from here participated in the uprising of 1932 that was brutally repressed by the military, being round up and executed. She mentions her father's indigenous heritage as to imply this affected her mobilization but did not elaborate.

marches in reaction to the “Soccer War” in 1969. Things had already been dangerous in the capital but more and more people were being “disappeared” and her parents were getting very concerned about her being at the University.

Respecting her parents’ wishes Celeste left the National University in 1970. Her mindset to work with those in need led her to decide to enroll in different school in the capital to become a social worker. Due to the nature of the type of work, the mentality of the professors and the students was essentially the same as they were at the National University. The main focus centered on themes of social justice. Even though she was obviously sympathetic with the movements, Celeste was not part of any student or political organization other than being in her major.

Celeste points to the military intervention in the presidential election of 1972, as the spark that started to change the movements. More people started to radicalize, new student groups formed, and discussions of armed rebellion against the government started to circulate more openly. Strikes from all sectors increased including factory workers and unions and she started participating in the Catholic led *campesino* marches that made the juxtaposition of the rich San Salvador salaries with their rural poverty the rally cry.

Through her studies, Celeste worked with urban poor, the labor unions, and the rural communities around the periphery of San Salvador. After her first year in the School of Social Work, she began participating and promoting protests related to the groups she worked with. On July 10, 1975, everything escalated after the ambush and massacre of university students by the Army, National Guard, and National Police. Up to that point all the groups were more or less separate, rural, urban, students, and political. To her, this event created a catalyst for a massive increase in radicalization. The

government increased its repression and violence, and now people she knew and protested with were being taken in the night by the government's own clandestine death squads, the *Mano Blanca* or White Hand.

Celeste still believed in the potential of the protests and hoped that increasing numbers would force the government to change. There was another presidential election in 1977 and when it appeared to be fraudulent again she decided to join the larger protest groups to take over Plaza Libertad in the center of downtown in front of the government buildings. This time it was much more obvious the organizations were working together. They took the Plaza Libertad in protest for about a week. Different movements or organizations took different areas around the park. In the middle of the night on the opposite side of the park from where she was, the military came in and walled off the protestors to trap them and massacred them. Witnessing the shooting and the screaming first hand pushed her over the edge. She wanted to have hope but now believed that there was no possibility of peaceful change through democracy. She saw that the military was fully in control and was not going to give up power voluntarily through any rational means. She sought out the right people to become more directly involved to work towards a solution through armed revolution.

Since she had been in the university, the social work school, and involved in protests for almost a decade, it was easy to find someone to invite her in. She had been approached before. She decided she wanted to go underground and help building support for armed operations, the ERP. Though the ERP had begun a process to test out new recruits, she was already long time friends with some of the founding members and bypassed the *fogeo* and entered straight into the leadership corps.

Dalia Hueso (A Marriage of Secrets)

In 1975, Dalia was a senior year of high school in San Salvador. The school she attended was only a couple of blocks from the National University and they had grown accustomed to the occasional protest marches in the neighborhood. She was in class on July 10, when all of a sudden they heard an explosion of rapid gunshots, rumbling of tanks, and then they could hear screams. Everyone jumped and ran to the windows. They could not see but a little smoke rising between the buildings. They just held on to each other terrified at the mix of shouting over megaphones, high pitched screaming, and the popping of guns echoing down the streets. The trio of the National Guard, National Army, and National Police ambushed and surrounded the unarmed student protesters right before they had arrived at the university.

The next day in school, crying students crowded the halls recounting stories of how the National Guards not only shot at the students but chased them down with machetes. She heard that some of the university students, having nowhere to run, jumped off the bridge to escape the bullets and machetes. Her best friend's boyfriend had been killed in the massacre as well as brothers, sisters, and cousins of other classmates. Though no one realized it at the time, there was a girl in her high school that was "organized". The girl roamed the halls and passed out flyers inviting all the students to a memorial vigil march already planned for August 30. Having indirectly witnessed the massacre and actually knowing some of the students who were killed was obviously an emotional shock, and Dalia decided to go to the vigil march out of grief and to be support her grieving friends.

This would be the first protest she participated. Dalia was extremely upset about the massacre but she admits she was completely ignorant to what was going on in the country or in the government at the time. She had put no thought into politics, knew nothing of revolutionary groups, nor any initial intentions of going on more protests, but this definitely opened her eyes and she started paying attention.

The next year Dalia had decided to enroll in the school to work social services. In the introduction classes she was presented with a whole set of questions and ways of thinking that put everything in a new light. Just simple questions about the purpose or goal of social services or why there is a need for it challenged her. All her professors passionately promoted new schools of thought in theory and philosophy about societal structure and the role of government. They talked endlessly about case studies and movements in Chile, Argentina, and Brazil and then compared them to El Salvador. Dalia was shocked as her eyes were opened to the situation of the majority of people in of her own country. She had never known or really understood the overwhelming extent of poverty, especially outside of San Salvador.

In general, those who enter field of social work tended to be women with some notion or desire to help others and Dalia shared both of these traits. But, as she learned more and understood more about the current situation, she began to have serious doubts about her career choice and her abilities. At times she wondered what the point of it all was or if she would actually be able help anyone. She continued anyway carry the burden of her growing skepticism. Through her classes, Dalia befriended a third year student that had impressed her and was such a contrast to the way Dalia felt. This girl was confident and outspoken, firm in her thoughts and beliefs, and not afraid to challenge the

professors. The girl was often organizing and promoting protest demonstrations with the labor unions and the urban poor. The girl was Celeste and she was about to graduate.

Dalia felt there was question in front of her. What was the best way to bring about this change? She occasionally participated in marches. She witnessed some that fought against the military and police and thought that was dangerous and extreme. But she could not help but feel a little cynical about those that just marched and passed out flyers too. And then she would look at herself entering a career with the sole purpose to help the people who need it and wondering if it would matter. She felt a compulsion to pick something, change something, and questioned her career choice. She found a distraction from her dilemma towards the end of first year, a boyfriend.

Dalia became love struck. Though they found they were both sympathetic to what was going on around them, as only love can do, they became focused on each other more. He was very kind, considerate, laid back, and she liked that he was very straightforward. The more time they spent together, the closer they became. Their romance moved very fast and he asked her to marry her. She was so excited.

He had some money and told her they were going to get house. In passion of new beginnings, she decided to switch careers to psychology. They talked about their futures and agreed she should keep studying and they would wait until they both had careers before they would have any children. Their parents assumed she was pregnant and thought it was strange that they were so young and wanted to get married. She felt like she had to convince them that they actually wanted to get married for love! As they had discussed, they married, bought a house, and he helped her get started in her new studies at the National University.

They were a perfect happy couple. She became deeply involved in her classes and the environment on campus was full of calls for protest and revolution. She had brought home a flyer once and suggested that they go to a rally. They had talked about protests and she knew they shared the same sentiments but he made a firm stance against any participation in protests or demonstrations. She was upset and felt like they should be doing something. She also felt like she was missing out on something important. But, she respected him and she could not argue against his points that it was undoubtedly a risky and increasingly dangerous thing to be associated.

Dalia started to notice that for a relatively quiet guy, her husband had a busy social life. Every now and then he would ask if some could come over for dinner or if someone could stay the night on the couch. She did not mind too much at first because they were all good natured and friendly people, but he kept springing it on her. She would sometimes get upset about having to cook extra when she was not planning on it or she was tired from classes and did not feel like having company, but she also did not want to seem like a bad host to his friends. He always had a reasonable explanation, a good friend from high school popped into town for the night or he bumped into an old family friend.

As time went by, she also noticed he started to go out late and had many more “things to do” than she did. She tried not to let it bother her, but she began to wonder why he was busy all the time with stuff she did not know anything about. More importantly, she would ask herself what was keeping him out all night, especially when they were still recently married? She knew when she married him that he was something of a closed person and she accepted that, but he was also usually straightforward with her whenever they had personal issues.

Finally, Dalia confronted her husband. In his typical fashion, he only told her what she needed to know. She said the best adjective for him was hermetic. He explained calmly that he was a member in an underground organization and had been for a long time before they were married. He promised he did truly love her and it would be best if she did not know anything more. He told her if she was able to forgive him for his secret and would be willing to stay with him, it would be easier if she did not ask questions and it was extremely important to go on living as if she knew nothing. Dalia was dumfounded. He had been so sincere in his explanation for not participating in protests, when in reality he himself was prohibited from doing so because he was deeply involved in the underground movement as an Urban Commando. Their perfect little marriage was in part, if not entirely, his perfect cover. She was blinded by her feelings and did not really even reflect about their marriage being a cover until much later.

At the time, Dalia believed that he did love her, so she accepted her role and lived in ignorance of this new reality. She continued to go to school and he went to his job. To anyone watching, they had the quintessential normal life. They had guests coming and going for normal reasons, be it work friends for dinner or a student study group. She says she was surprisingly okay with this and did not ask unnecessary questions. Because she really cared for him, she often worried that he would get caught or be involved in something that would get him killed, but she also trusted he was good at being careful. Their cover was so good that their house soon became the de facto headquarters of the FMLN in the last years of the 1970s.

Then, Archbishop Romero was assassinated during Mass the day after demanding the government to stop attacking citizens in a radio address in March 1980. This was the

spark that changed everything for Dalia. She wanted all the way in, she was willing to do whatever job was necessary, it did not matter how mundane or dangerous. Whatever doubts she had been carrying were gone, her mind and vision were finally clear. She could no longer stand by and do nothing. Her husband did not contest her decision and she was brought in with full confidence into the upper echelons of the ERP. She had already proven herself to be trustworthy so there was no need for her to go through the regular process of initiation. As will be discussed in the next chapter, Dalia's journey from city girl to rural guerrilla in Morazán would prove to be a much harder initiation than she could have possibly imagined.

Pilar (Raised in Rebellion and Birth by *El Fuego*)

The armed conflict began while Pilar was still in elementary school in San Salvador. Her most vivid memories of her early childhood were of going out with her mom to pass out propaganda flyers in the busy street markets or being afraid of losing grip of her sister's hand in a dizzying sea of people while marching in a protest. She remembers spending a lot of time playing in the back pews of the church while her mother was participating in meetings. Though she was young she says she understood even then that her mom wasn't there just to pray.

Pilar's mom had organized into the FPL during the late 1970s through the Catholic Church. Because it was just three of them, her mom, older sister and Pilar, living together, they went everywhere with her mom. Pilar entered middle school in 1983 while her older sister joined a student group in high school and would go on protests with her friends. By the time Pilar started high school herself, protesting had become the family tradition and she followed suit.

At age fourteen, one of her friends brought her to a meeting at the National University. An older student talked to them about the injustice in the country and that they could do something to help make things right. After a couple speakers they were asked if they wanted to join the FMLN. She and many others enthusiastically agreed. They were told to stand, were sworn in and an older student tied a red bandana around her bicep. They were assigned to a university student who was their coordinator and they would come back in their smaller group to meet once a week to receive their tasks. The tasks were usually to hand out flyers and mostly just to show up to protests but they were occasionally assigned small jobs to steal things. At the time she felt very important to be doing something to help. She did not carry any weapons and was not asked to do anything violent, but she often saw some of the university students that had been at the meeting carrying guns at the fringes of the marches.

When Pilar was graduating from high school her mother was arrested by police and thrown in jail. Even though Pilar had been very active in her group and the protests she had made sure she was doing well in school and earned a scholarship to study Law at the National University. She had also managed to have a job her senior year of high school and with money left by her mom and what she earned she was able to buy a car and rent an apartment.

During the first months of Law School, Pilar was approached by the boyfriend of her best friend. He mentioned that they had noticed she had done good job in her group in high school. He asked her if she wanted to join the Urban Commandos and she accepted joining the ERP. She mentioned that by this point in the war, each branch of the FMLN claimed and recruited from different majors within the university. For example,

the ERP recruited from the Law School while the FPL had the Psychology and Engineering Schools.

Before she was fully accepted as a member they put her through a process called *fogeo*. This was a kind of test of commitment and trust for new recruits. They gave her a number of small and easy jobs to do at first like drive by National Guard posts and take notes. The jobs started to escalate to stealing things from stores or to drop off boxes without knowing what was in them. She was told they would be watching. She was eventually told to meet with other new recruits she had never met and given more dangerous and risky assignments like stealing cars or robbing people on buses. Finally she was told that she had been accepted and was now part of a cell.

Fanning the Brushfire: Rural Uprisings and False Choices

In the rural areas of the densely populated countryside poverty, lack of land, and lack of work were the norm. The influx of Liberation Theology into the region through Catholic priests, nuns and lay people sparked an awakening amongst the peasants. Christian Base Communities were established in rural towns and villages where people gathered to read the Bible with a special focus on the image of Jesus as a rebel and the message that the meek shall inherit the earth. These base communities help to embolden and inspire many to demand justice and equality from the government. Many barely eked out an existence under the benevolence of the wealthy landowners. Some of the base communities started promoting the need to take action to get justice.

Rosa (The Rural Beginnings)

Rosa was born and raised in a poor rural community called Caserio de Santanita de Jocoatique in northern mountains of Morazán. As a child her family was one of four

that worked for the local major landowner who made his money raising cattle. Rosa and her family tended the landowner's cattle and were allowed to live in a small adobe house on the far edge. They lived a little better off than the rest of community and were allowed to keep a small garden near the house for themselves. The rest of the people eked out an existence in extreme poverty without jobs nor any land to farm to feed themselves.

Everyone in the village directly or indirectly depended on the landowner for nearly everything, even their recreation. Rosa relates "He was kind enough to let them play soccer on one of his fields most days." The people made the best of a bad situation. The most cherished belongings were the three small battery operated radios in the community. The owners of them would play music at full volume from 3:00 am to 5:00 am in the early morning for everyone to listen to as they were waking up and getting ready for work. Rosa would help make tortillas before having to move the cows down the steep ravine from the pen. Everyone went to work by 5 a.m. People would chip in to buy batteries, especially those returning from seasonal work in the South. On special occasions or holidays they would listen to music and news at night or sometimes Sunday mass if a priest had not come through in a while.

A National Guard post was installed on the town side of the landowner's property in the early 1960s. They were supposedly there to be a form of police for the area but to Rosa and the people, it was obvious they were the personal police of the landowner. The National Guardsmen were from other towns or cities. They would steal clothes or personal items from the people while they were out at work. One day one of the radios went missing and the Guards unabashedly played music loudly that night. If the landowner or the Guards got mad at you for any reason, a simple accusation could get

you arrested or even killed. A girl had refused a Guard's flirtations and her father was found severely beaten and almost dead a couple days later. Sometimes the Guards beat up the local drunks out of boredom. Rosa cringed remembering the times when the price of coffee, corn, or cotton dropped and the landowners would let ripe fields go unharvested while many were literally dying of starvation for lack of a job. The guards would kill anyone caught stealing in desperation.

Around 1975, the poverty and repression lead people decided to start secretly organizing and meeting in the middle of the night out away from the villages. During the day nobody knew who was actually at the meetings because they used fake names and never acknowledged if they recognized a voice in the dark. The Guards heard about this but being unfamiliar with the area and only a handful on post at a time, they rarely ventured far at night unless they had reinforcements. Rosa's brother and uncle would sometimes leave the house after dark to check on the cattle but would not return until almost morning.

In 1978, the government sent larger groups of the National Guard and Army to "reprimand" the people of the rural areas all around them. Using poverty and threats as leverage, they bribed and armed poor civilians from other parts to come with them to try and root out the rural militias that had been forming. Occasionally frantic people from the surrounding areas would tell horror stories of entire villages included children and the elderly being rounded people up and shot. Rosa stared at the road blankly as she remembered, "they shot a little boy just over there, he was just walking down the road in the middle of the day... they yelled something and then they just shot him. We all got scared, we didn't know what do. Many of us started thinking it was better to hide in the

woods and not stay in our houses in case they came back. The army had guns, they were stronger.”

In 1979 spurred on by the local priests, a large group of the people from her village and other towns in their area decided they were going to go to the San Miguel and San Salvador to protest and try to get the government to listen to them about the injustice and demand jobs. They went to government buildings, they went to some churches to talk to the people. This trip opened her eyes, she had never gone to these places before and until then, Rosa had thought the situation in their area was unique. But now, she met people from all over the country experiencing the same poverty and violence. It scared her to find this out, but it also gave her some hope to know they were not alone and that others were speaking out too.

She went to a protest in the capital near the *Prensa* (newspaper offices) and says that out of nowhere the Guards, Police and the Army surrounded them and trapped them into one block of streets threw tear gas in the middle of them. She ran and managed to get block away when she heard them start shooting at the protesters. She looked back to see people she had come with lying dead in the streets and there was nothing they could do except run away. Instead of going straight home they passed through Usulután and had to weave through the cities where Urban Commandos had blocked off the highways with burning tires and piles of rocks. She and her group were not prepared for all this, they had just come to protest the injustice, this was so much more than they were expecting.

In 1980, organized people from the capital and other parts of the country started showing up in her area. They got together with those that had already started their militias and asked the rest of them to join. After what she had just experienced she felt

they had no other choice other than prepare to fight or be killed sitting and waiting. Those that chose to stay in the communities divided themselves into groups and everyone took on different responsibilities. Rosa became a coordinator of a group of people from her village and helped to line up transportation, food, health and escape plans. With the help of the incoming guerrillas, they made a network with groups in the neighboring town to look out and support each other. “We did not really think of ourselves as fighters but we expected we were going to as militias.” A week later the Army swept through the area, passing from town to town capturing people and massacring others. The Guards threw people in prisons in the towns nearby like Villa Rosario and would hang the people in the square to intimidate everyone.

“Groups joined together to attack and break the innocent people out of the jails, the man two houses over Miguel Ventura, we saved him and he is alive today. I became a combatant and learned how to make different kinds of bombs and carried a gun and fought. I did not have a choice, better be a combatant than wait for the Army to come and kill me. The government did not really consider any of it. They were not going to listen, they were not going to solve the problem. They did not listen to the protests.”

Dolores (Singled Out)

Dolores was walking down the road towards her home half a mile from the mountain town of Jocoatique, Morazán when she heard someone call out her name. She turned to see a National Guardsman from the local post waving for her to stop as he followed after her. She worked as an orderly in the town clinic and had been for three years. The National Guard had been in the town for almost fifteen years by that point mainly to protect wealthy landowners coffee plantations in the area. Though sometimes

they harassed or mistreated the people in the area, Dolores was at least amicable with a couple of them who passed by the clinic as part of their routine security checks. So, she stopped and let the Guard catch up to her and she noticed he looked concerned. She immediately wondered why he was walking this way alone since they usually did rounds in pairs. He told her she should go home get some things and go west away from town. She laughed at first, confused at what he was saying and thinking she was misunderstanding a bad joke. He told he saw her name on a list and the National Guard had orders to arrest her. He turned without further explanation and started walking back up the hill to town.

It was 1979, the National Guard was looking for her and she had no idea why. She was not part of anything illegal, she had not done anything against the law, nor ever said anything anti-government. Working for the clinic, she was working for the government. At first she did not want believe it, but she had seen what some of the Guards were capable of and knew what could happen if it was true. She decided it would be best to leave just in case and started to worry what she would do about her children.

Living in the canton away from the town she knew people some who had clashed with the Guard had already left had formed a local militia group in the woods. She also knew some people in town would secretly go out at night to meet with them in the dark. No one ever talked about it but she had some guesses on who might be out there. She told her mother and explained her situation to a neighbor she was pretty sure was involved. She left her two children with her mother and told them which trail away from town she would be heading. She walked for an hour before she stopped and rested off the trail.

She did not really have a plan was not sure if she should keep going. She heard someone coming down the trail and froze fearing it might be the Guards. To her relief it was a grandmother from a *caserio* carrying a bundle of firewood on her head. Dolores stepped out onto the trail. The old lady approached, smiled, and told her to follow. They went a little farther and took a side trail up the mountain towards Perquin. Dolores started to get nervous because the trail started to loop back towards the direction of town but then she noticed people in the clearing ahead of her. It was a small base camp the militia had set up, with about fifteen locals from the cantons, some she recognized and others she did not. They all nodded, Dolores returned the smiles and took a seat next to a childhood friend. Some more people from town showed up that night bringing some food and other supplies. She offered to help cook if she was going to stay, the next morning she learned how to shoot a pistol for the first time. Dolores had no idea that she would be part of a guerrilla army for the next decade.

Carmen (Held Back)

Carmen remembers 1980 as one of the worst years of her life, one that changed everything. She was twelve years old living with her family in the town of Osicala, Morazán. She can barely talk about that year without getting upset over the string of bad memories. In January, the locally stationed National Guard publically killed her oldest brother in the middle of the town square. Two months later in March, the Army came through Osicala and rounded up a group of men including her second oldest brother and executed them. Suffering from the loss and afraid for worst to come, the rest of the family decided it was best to leave town. They gathered some food and a change of

clothes and wrapped them up in a blanket. They locked their house up and ran into the rural areas and away from the Black Highway where the Army roamed.

During the day they kept on the move through the woods and ravines. At night, they would sometimes venture into small towns to get more food and hopefully find a safe house where they could sleep. Otherwise, they slept in the woods out in the open. They wandered for months without anywhere in particular to go where they would feel safe. One day, they were resting by the Torola River that October, when a military platoon came out of the woods and captured them where they were hiding. “Gracias A Dios they let us go for some reason.”

Not wanting to push their luck, they decided to move farther North of the Torola River into Northern Morazán where they had heard the guerrillas controlled. From October to December her mom and her little brothers and sisters continued to spend the day moving and found places to sleep at night. They could hear the troop movements around them and occasionally had to run and hide from helicopters passing overhead. In December, they ran into some guerrillas who offered to help them get away. Her mother decided they should go to the refugee camps in Honduras. When they got to the border the guerrillas split the group up. Some guerrillas took her mother and her youngest brothers and sisters to the refugee camp. Since they knew Carmen had an older brother in one of their units, the guerrillas decided that she should stay behind and join them. She had just turned thirteen and had no desire to go with them at all but they did not give her the choice.

“It was very hard for me to deal with this. They called me a *compa* and told me that each one of us had to figure out where we would fit and what we could do.” She

went into training but she was still physically little and emotionally immature. She could not stop crying so they gave her the option to stay with her older brother who was already working with the medics and brigadistas. Carmen began her medical career, standing by her brother's side learning how to give injections, how to treat a wound, and very simple things at first. They were part of a mobile hospital battalion. After she went a couple days without crying and being afraid. They gave her a FAL carbine rifle and backpack with a "uniform" and she was basically in from that moment forward.

There were many women and girls of all ages, especially around her own young age. So there were others that she could go to for advice or comfort but they were still strangers at first. She essentially began her training to become a *Brigadista*, or medic, for the ERP. She slowly began to trust others and feel like she belonged. She still went to her older brother for counsel on important things including when she had her first menstruation, which didn't happen until she was seventeen due to the stress and general poor nutrition. Carmen claims she joined because of the repression but her story tells us she really did not have a choice.

A Different Kind of Education: Raised, Indoctrinated, and Recruited from the Refugee Camps

As the war started to draw out and the FMLN evolved and became more organized, the guerrillas looked to the refugee camps as a source for new recruits. While the process of *fogeo* was being implemented in the cities to bring in new members, the refugee camps became an organized recruitment machine. In the latter years of the conflict the FMLN was struggling to fill its ranks due to heavy casualties so they became more flexible on their target age range for new members. They realized they had a whole

generation of children growing up in the camps and also started to call on some of the older adults who had been passed over before.

At first the FMLN made routine stops to recruit those children who were 16 years or older. The record shows that some were given a choice others like Carmen were basically made to join. The FMLN evolves the recruitment organization into a multistage program in the latter years, where the camps primed and helped identify the best recruits. They would then send the recruits to specialized training groups where they would learn their primary skill or role. Then they would be placed in the rank and file as new groups were being created.

Lucia (Late Bloomer Boomer)

Lucia went to Colomoncagua, Honduras in 1980 with her parents. She was only six when they fled from the Army's brutal sweeps through the area. When her family arrived, the camps were still being set up. Lucia hated the camp and remembers feeling trapped. She daydreamed constantly about returning to her home country she hardly knew. She wanted escape and go on an adventure, to be a hero like the guerrillas in the stories they listened to every night on Radio Venceremos. She got her wish within a couple of months. Some guerrillas gathered a group of girls and asked them if they wanted to do something to help the fighters. Being young and unawares, they eagerly agreed.

A group of eight girls from as young as Lucia to about fourteen were selected to go off to a work shop camp just across the border in Sabinetas. They were all excited but had no idea what they were going to do. The guerrillas built them up and they stayed excited through the long hike. They arrived in the dark and the camp seemed to appear all

of a sudden in the middle of woods. Lucia and the others were exhausted but the guerrillas greeted them warmly into the training camp. She was overjoyed when they gave them a plate of food, much more than they had been eating at the refugee camp. Little did she know, the rations would return to normal the next day but that first night's meal suspended the magic of naivety until the morning.

Later that night, fear of the new situation started to settle in. They tried to ward off bad thoughts by pretending they were with their families drinking hot cocoa, but the darkness of the tall pines swaying in the wind quickly returned the liquid in their cups back to cold water. The next morning they began to learn the rules and routines of the camp and found out they were going to go to special classes to make explosives. They started the morning with a group exercise workout. After that they were lead to a field to learn how to shoot a rifle. Being only seven and small, Lucia could barely hold the rifle straight without trying to aim at anything. When it was her turn, she nervously struggled to hold the rifle the way they showed her. The gun slipped from her sweaty hands and the round fired from the impact with the ground. Lucia and her friend immediately ran to hide, crying and terrified. It took a couple of days before the guerrillas could encourage her to try again. She spent the next five years at the training camp, learning how to make a wide variety of explosive devices like pipe bombs, land mines, mortar rounds, and grenades. She would also be trained on using radios and ciphering codes. At the age of twelve, Lucia had practically mastered all aspects of explosives making and disarming having made tens of thousands through training camp. She also had a knack for coding and decoding messages, seeing it as a kind of game or puzzle. Lucia officially became a combatant assigned to a squadron in 1986 and went straight into combat.

Adelita (Head of the Class)

Adelita is proudly from the *canton* La Guacamaya of the town Meangera in northern Morazán. She was quick to tell me that La Guacamaya was one of the first places to form a clandestine militia of guerrillas in the years 1974 to 1975. In La Guacamaya, the people lived in humble “*no digna*” shacks of sticks and mud. They lived off very small plots of land and were able to grow a little food of corn and beans but never had enough to get through the year. Adelita lived with her immediate family including her mother, father, and herself in one shack at the edge of the village.

The National Guard had recognized that militia groups were forming and reacted swiftly and strong in hopes of stopping it early. Then the Army came and searched for militias and guerrillas using hammer and sickle sweeps. They went through the rural areas investigating, but often only found women in the houses because the men had left and were training to be guerrillas in *el monte* where they had set up secret training camps.

Adelita was only seven years old when the Army came in 1980. An entire battalion arrived without warning and started setting houses on fire. The sounds of gunshots and screams awoke her family. The soldiers stood in the street and gunned downed the townspeople as they came running out to escape the smoke and flames. Adelita’s father heard the screams and the gunshots from the first houses and managed to get his family into the woods. Her father told Adelita to run and not to stop no matter what. They headed for the valleys for cover amongst the rocky hillsides and dense jungle. They wandered for most of the day and reunited with other horrified fugitives. They met local militia groups in the woods that introduced them to some guerrilla leaders.

Afterwards, guerrillas from other parts of the country had moved into the area and met with the militias from the villages. The guerrillas had decided that the people should be moved to a safe place away from the towns and villages in case the Army returned. They began organizing the women, children, and elderly and took them to Colomoncagua, Honduras where they had already started setting up a refugee camp. It was not much of a camp at first, there were no houses and everyone slept outside in the *aire libre*. Adelita remembers receiving only a piece of tortilla during the two-day hike. At the camp, children were given half a tortilla a day but the adults received nothing because they were *mas resistente*, more resistant. Their rationale was the adults could survive longer than the children without food.

Eventually international aid agencies came around 1980-1981 bringing clothes for everyone and food for the children. The aid groups worked with the guerrillas and began setting up tents for shelter, organized workshops for people to work, and set up a school for the children to attend classes. Adelita spent 1st through 6th grade in refugee camp school. In 2nd grade the teacher began explaining what was happening in El Salvador and why they were out of the country. She told them that all the youth eventually needed to go back to help their country, it was a necessity to “liberate the country from oppression and poverty so that they all could live well.” The majority in the camp had family members in the guerrillas. The old women spoke proudly of and worried constantly for their sons, husbands, brothers, and uncles.

In refugee camp school the teachers occasional talked of a secret special schools in El Salvador that trained you to be a guerrilla. They would mention the schools in passing and the children would beg them to tell them more. The teachers created a

mystique about being selected to become a trained guerrilla fighter and told them only best behaved and brightest students would be picked. To be selected was portrayed as the highest honor or achievement. Though the students did not catch on, they were usually picked when they were between twelve and fifteen years old.

The recruiting plan worked on her. She strove to be the best student in all her classes so that one day she could go and fight for justice. Intermittently guerrillas would visit the classes in uniform and announce that there were new openings. They would tell a story of bravery or give a speech and the students would be enthralled. The guerrilla would then ask who was ready and wanted to go be a guerrilla. All the students raised their hands and exploded with excited shouts of “me! Pick me!” Adelita said it was like Mickey Mouse asking the children if they wanted free candy and all the toys in the world. It was very emotional and she was heart broken each time they came and she was not picked. She said, “it was a work of convincing. They didn’t say, ‘hey you, you’re going.’ No, it was one for one. They waited until the day you were begging to join and they waited a little more, then finally they picked you.”

Adelita vividly remembers when it was her turn to go. She was in Math class and the guerrillas came into the classroom and asked who wants to join them. As usual, all wanted to go. The guerrilla said, “okay, you can all go. But, I ask you a favor, do not tell your parents. You need to be ready to leave in the morning.” She wanted so badly to tell her parents, it was both an exciting and terrible secret. After lunch, her mom asked why she was home and she said they gave them the afternoon off. She was only thirteen and going to head off to war the next morning. She and her friends wanted desperately to go back to their country, to see the war they sat they heard about everyday over Radio

Venceremos. They had courage and an urge to do something about the oppressive government that had burned their houses and killed family members. The next morning, the guerrilla came to speak with her mom to tell her that her daughter had to go. It was for the *pueblo*.

Adelita was picked with a group of ten girls were sent to El Salvador to a training camp in the Bolsona Nahuaterique north of Perquin. In three days another group of girls came. In total, they were 40 girls all to be trained as radio operators and medics.

They were trained for their jobs, learning codes, working the radios, and how to be soldiers including using rifles and weapons and discipline. I asked about rules of comportment, she didn't really elaborate beyond no fighting amongst each other, working for good grades was a big incentive to her (proud of her achievements). All worked hard and competed to be the best. She had dreams or goals of meeting commandants and in particular she wanted to know where Radio Venceremos was. They were always escaping at the last minute and making fools out of the National Army. In school and in the camp it was a rule they all had to listen to Radio Venceremos "to know what was going on with the war". But no one had to make them listen, everyone was glued to the radio living vicariously through the stories, news updates, interviews and of course the music of the revolutionary bands like the Los Torrogoces of Morazán. The radio was their only real connection to their home just over the mountains to the south that taunted them everyday in the refugee camp.

Little by little the girls in her training group were sent off to assignments in different parts of the region like Usulután, La Unión, and San Miguel. She realized the

numbers were dwindling and began to worry that she had done something wrong though she knew she was doing well. Eventually she was the only one left and the trainers kept saying “tomorrow we will have a place for you” without hinting whether it would be good or bad. They didn’t tell her anything for days until a tall man came and asked, “Are you Adelita?” “Yes” she replied and he told her to grab her backpack and come with him. She did as she was told and followed him in silence down a trail. After awhile, he stopped suddenly and put a hand on her shoulder, looking straight into her eyes, ‘it is extremely important that you understand that no one can know where we are going or where we are when we get there, no one, not friends, family, no one. You will occasionally be able to write your family but only to tell them you are okay, nothing more. Do you understand? Can I trust you?’ She said okay though now more nervous than ever. They continued on and joined a small group of guerrillas but nobody acknowledged her.

After a long hike she had no idea where she was even if she wanted to tell someone. A large area of tents covered in palm branches and couple of adobe houses were nestled under some heavy trees. They entered one of the buildings and people were crowded around tables all had headphones in front of radios intently listening and writing feverishly. They had arrived at the central intelligence for the ERP she quickly noticed there were only two other young women. One looked up, stopped what she was doing and walked over to Adelita and tells her with a warm smile, ‘mira, es bonita estar aqui pero es estricta estricta.’ ‘Look, it’s beautiful to be here but it is very strict. Nobody needs to know you are here, you never leave on your own, and it is forbidden to talk to anybody

outside of here.' She stayed two months with the intelligence unit. Her hard work had paid off and her dreams were coming true. She was scared and thrilled all at the same time.

Chapter 6 The Roles and Responsibilities of Female Combatants

Women participated in every aspect of the Salvadoran Civil War from the initial protest movements and the creation of the first armed resistance groups to the negotiated peace accords and inclusion of the FMLN as a political party in national elections. The roles and positions women performed as fighters varied and changed as the nature of the conflict evolved and the FMLN developed and adapted. An inherent difficulty in understanding roles and responsibilities of women in the Salvadoran guerrillas, is the armed forces that fought against the army were created out of a coalition of multiple groups that developed their own individual structures through long processes. As one of the commanders points out, “[m]any do not understand how complex the organization of the FMLN became, there were the five groups that did not always get along perfectly and each had so many levels and sectors. You have to remember the military branch was only one part. It was an important part but there was so much more.”⁵⁸

Because of this process of creation and development of an unconventional guerrilla army, the fighting forces do not correlate well with traditional structured militaries with clearly defined support⁵⁹ and combat roles that can be explained in a neat chart of hierarchies. Throughout the majority of the conflict the FMLN guerrilla forces predominately consisted of small platoon sized units of ten to twelve soldiers called *esquadras*, or squadrons, that operated independently. They theoretically organized into battalions called *peletons* that would converge and launch coordinated attacks and then disperse again. From 1981 to 1985, the FMLN did amass large weapons and enough

⁵⁸ Interview with Celeste

⁵⁹ Support roles are usually considered to be noncombat positions often dealing with logistical and administrative tasks like cooks, nurses, communications staff, instructors, and top tier commanders that usually operate behind the lines of battle at base camps.

recruits to organize and operate more closely to a regularized army structure using battalion-sized forces to attempt to gain and hold territory. During that time there were women as regular rank and file soldiers without specialized roles including entire female battalions. But the increase in US funding of the Air Force compelled the FMLN to abandon this structure and return to small mobile forces that were less detectable and susceptible from aerial bombings.⁶⁰

Due to the small unit structure of the guerrilla forces, women's positions and responsibilities often combined aspects of traditional support and combat roles at the same time. The most common armed combatant roles of women that I will discuss in this chapter include the Urban Commandos, radio operators, medics, and explosive experts. The Urban Commandos were those first units that began the armed insurgency and they remained as a structure of vital importance throughout the war outside the eventual guerrillas armed forces that developed. When, where, and how women mobilized often determined the type of role or position a women performed. For example, many women started out as cooks as a matter of practicality and efficiency rather than discrimination or sexism. If women joined and could cook, it made sense for them to do so, rather than waste the time and effort teaching men to cook for some any philosophical ideal of equality of gender. Eventually men would cook and women already participated at all levels from the start. However, the design or assignment of women's positions and responsibilities were also undoubtedly influenced by preexisting cultural views of gendered roles and skills of women.

The information I received through the interviews presented some conflicting perspectives on how much culture, gender, and ideology played into the roles that women

⁶⁰ Bracamonte, 53-59.

performed. It appears ideology did not play much of a role until very late or maybe more so for other groups but not so much for the ERP. Both men and women I interviewed explained that women did certain jobs because they were inherently better at those particular skill sets. The way it was presented from both sexes was more complimentary than a product of machismo or stereotype as some may perceive it. The following are some of the generalizations repeated in various interviews. Women were better Urban Commandos for their ability to go undetected and creativity in executing operations. Women were the best radio operators partly for the stereotype of being communicators but more importantly for their intelligence and ability to learn the complicated code systems and use them accurately under heavy fire. They were medics for their ability to learn quickly and their steady hands for surgery as well as the stereotype of a caring and nurturing nature. They were explosives experts for their ability to learn complicated technical information with an attention to detail, ability to assemble or disarm a bomb quickly, and again their gentle touch. In addition, some men bragged that many women were better shots and became sharp shooters and snipers. It was also alluded that women made excellent commanders for their intelligence and abilities as teachers or instructors.

Though I will discuss it in more detail in the rest of this chapter, there is another aspect of women's roles that I received widely conflicting information I feel I should address before moving on. I asked if women were recruited, commanded, or given tasks specifically designed to use sex or take advantage of their inherent quality of being female and the perception innocence. Some responded with an immediate no. While others haltingly responded yes, but all qualified their response with a similar explanation that seemed potentially influenced by ideological indoctrination. Those of whom had

participated through the majority of the war, were in high level positions, or entered from the rural areas all stressed gender equality in the ranks and that women were not asked or forced to specifically use sex or sexuality for tactical and strategic advantages. Many gave the explanation that a squadron would be given a mission and it was up to the members of that squadron to figure out how to achieve the goal. If women did something that used their gender or sex strategically, it was because they volunteered to do so. The similarity and repetition of this explanation from various non-related interviewees seems to imply conformity to or consensus from some level of indoctrination on that particular issue. But all with whom I spoke, male and female, easily placed a very high importance and value on the participation of women as key to the successes of the FMLN on all levels.

For the rest of this chapter I will explain each of the aforementioned positions starting with the Urban Commandos, being the first armed insurgents. I will let the women's stories highlight the responsibilities and experiences for each position. I will conclude the chapter with a couple of special stories that show how women creatively performed some duties that men could not have for simply being men.

Early Urban Commandos/Creating Commanders

As discussed in the last chapter, the involvement of women in the first armed cells appears to be organic and incidental rather than a preplanned strategy. Women were already part of the student groups who, through their discussions, jointly decided to actively pursue use of armed tactics to achieve their goals of government change both coinciding with and independent of the ongoing mass demonstrations and protest movements. As well, the initial further recruitment of women was less driven by

ideology, design, or some understanding of strategic potential, but more due to the practicality of existing relationships/friendships and shared desire to do something more than just protest.

These first cells were independent and isolated groups of students with no military experience and limited resources that made things up as they went. While some of the founders had witnessed or previously interacted with students involved in similar activities in other countries⁶¹, they could not openly seek out guidance nor had the benefit of any kind of handbook. Therefore, roles and responsibilities were created in a natural process of taking initiative to do what needed to be done and as each liked or felt capable. In the beginning, there was no ideological drive for equality amongst women and men, nor that women should do certain types of jobs and men others in the beginning. Their priorities were more focused on what the operations would be and how to do them.⁶²

There were no fixed roles at first. They designed operations and each took on a role. All had a vital part since the first groups only consisted of five to seven people. Each needed to know how to effectively handle the guns and homemade explosives they had. But, before they could attempt to sabotage a building using explosives, rob a business, or kidnap someone for ransom, they needed to gather intelligence and obtain supplies to be able to plan and execute any operation. They all seemed to benefit from being young and students, but they quickly recognized women had particular advantages over men in terms of being able to get around the city and conduct surveillance in public without raising suspicions. This led to women taking on a larger proportion of high risk jobs in the early stages.

⁶¹ Interview with Hermina

⁶² Interview with Maria

It seems that existing cultural views or established gendered roles gave an unintentional strategic advantage to women. For example, a woman could hang out on a busy corner across from a National Guard post or Police station for long periods and not draw any undue notice or suspicion that she was up to anything criminal. Women could carry bags full of regular items from the market with a small gun or an explosive device buried in the bottom and no one would think to stop and check her. This would allow a female urban commando to literally walk right up to a guard post and plant a bomb on the building or on a vehicle parked in the street.⁶³

The role of the Urban Commandos initially started with the idea of protecting the unarmed protest marches and mass demonstrations from the increasing violent acts of repression from the various government forces. Then the roles evolved to making proactive armed tactical strikes. The goals of the tactical strikes were threefold. First, they were intended to distract or draw government forces away from the protest movements, while inflicting damage to either government or the oligarchic upper class assets. Second, to obtain needed supplies like weapons, electronic equipment, and money to support their operations and further military build up to launch larger attacks in the future. Lastly, their persistent operations were strategically essential to take away the governments advantages by forcing the government to mobilize and maintain security forces to protect valuable assets like utilities, infrastructure, and wealthy civilian neighborhoods and businesses.

The women who were involved in the very first groups like *La ARS*, *El Grupo*, and the *Commandos Urbanas* would prove to be very successful. As more people joined the armed movement through their recruitment and reaction to events like the elections of

⁶³ Interview with Hermina

1972 and the student massacre of July 10, 1975, the founders became the leadership corps of commanders first taking charge of urban commando units. As the ERP became a larger more structured organization they took on roles being in charge of various specialized divisions like communications, mass demonstrations, supplies, international public relations, and military operations. To her surprise, Maria found she had knack for military strategy and planning leading her to be the commander in charge of the ERP military operations throughout the end of the war. The participation of women in these initial groups and in the highest leadership positions from the start, unintentionally influenced the participation of more women and set a precedent for inter-gender relations long before any kind of ideological indoctrination was put into place.

Maria (Building the People's Revolutionary Army-ERP)

Maria's first roles were gathering intelligence for the group. They recognized her talent and commitment and quickly allowed her to take the lead on bigger assignments. She was placed in charge of a group of 5-6 guys with another girl in second command. They planned to take over and take out a radio station. They would go out to Cojutepec, about 15 miles west of San Salvador, at night to train in empty industrial lots or in the woods. They were always very wary of being caught. This was her opportunity to prove to other and herself. She said sometimes guys would act macho and talk a big talk, or she noticed the occasional new recruit give a look of doubt when they found out she was in charge of the cell. But she said they would train and the guys would act tough but she said, "igual hay hombres que se rajaron a la hora de la sopa" there are guys who run away when it's time to do the deed.

Maria found she had a knack for designing and leading military operations. She understood the “what and how” of gathering intelligence. They decided she would be in charge of the division of intelligence gathering and strategy and tactics. At first her main job was to work with those in charge of organizing the mass demonstrations to coordinate military actions to protect the movements or run a distraction somewhere else to divide the armed forces from bringing a full group to repress the movements. After the fraudulent 1972 election she led a retaliation attack on a National Guard post in San Salvador to gain some more serious weapons and upgrade from their pistols and rifles. They successfully took the post by surprise with her in the lead. They ended up killing two guards while forcing their way in but they obtained the ERP’s first M3 rifles.

She says her education in math indirectly helped in that it taught her to think logically, be able to assess situations and coordinate the appropriate resources. She developed or established her role as the organization grew and developed. She would take part in meetings or committees to discuss how all the new divisions or branches would coordinate. As the social movements grew, she grew the military or armed guerrilla movement structuring it in tandem.

As things grew she says the events in 1980 (murder of Archbishop Romero, Catholic nuns, reporters killed, already in addition to workers, students, *campesinos* being killed in marches and/or being detained, disappeared or simply threatened by government forces (directly or assumed to be supported by government or ARENA party)). These events made a jump or made it clear they had moved from simply social/political movements and urban guerrillas to full blown war. As she had already

been in charge of urban military action specifically in leading urban guerrilla units, she “naturally” moved into the “*Dirreccion*” or leadership corps.

She had played a large role in designing and structuring the military forces to attempt “final offensive” in January 1981. She said “*me dejaron en San Salvador todo el primer año de 1981 preperando.*” They (the rest of the *direccion*) left me in San Salvador in the first year preparing and she implies by being there fighting. She says entire year of 1981 became a year of restructuring and reorganization of military forces preparing for full-blown war in 1982.

The intent of 1981 offensive was to save the situation; the movements had been hit hard resulting in many people killed or jailed including many of the early leadership. The repression that followed 1981’s offensive was so severe and was beginning to be more openly directed at the *campesinos*. The *campesinos* increasingly more dedicated and directly involved in the cause, were forced to evacuate San Salvador and started setting up and securing what would be the “fronts of the war”. The Urban Commandos realized they needed to bring a cultural change and plan to incorporate and better design the military structures to be able to inject this large new wave of people into the guerrilla movement. She said it was very hard and an awkward transition being that the leadership (herself included) “*que llego sino que tuvieron que aprender a adaptarse a la parte rural... si fue, si estuvo ...los urbanos llegamos al campo ni caminar podemos verdad?*” We had our organization and our forces concentrated and we created our *retaguardia estrategicas* or strategic military zones. One was to North in Morazán and the other in the Southeast in Usulután.

We decided to set up a small base position in San Vicente, 50 miles east of San Salvador, and on Cerro Guazapa, a volcano on the north side of San Salvador.

She stayed in Guazapa during 1981 and participated in attacks. She says they made a plan in 1982, "*El Sultan*," to test the will and durability of the social movement and different military strategies. There was a lot of disagreement and uncertainty of the best line of attack. As part of the ERP leadership, she believed that insurgency and attacks could overcome but they decided that large part of population in their zones had either emigrated to refugee camps or had joined their forces. By the end of 1982 she left to Morazán and the FMLN had assigned her to be in charge of military forces in military intelligence, working directly with units, design and preparation of operations, and coordinating attacks.

From 1982 to 1984 she was in Morazán and by the end of 1984 the FMLN had shifted strategy and developed what would be considered a regular standing army with a full organization structure and specifically defined larger units. Not that they necessarily performed or looked like an army, they were still using guerrilla tactics, but they had larger units of a hundred men and a new strategy to go with it. Units of a hundred guerrillas subdivided into smaller sections, *peletons* and then smaller *esquadras*, each with their own group leader and specific supporting weapons. They cleaned up and simplified. Gained better the organization with clearer objectives for each group. The groups were assigned to specific operations and changed the armaments to fit each group. The Army, she notes with the help of the US without ever mentioning any outside help for their side, also changed to smaller more mobile units with "*tropas sin cuartel*" policy

or “take no prisoners or troops without mercy campaign”. This caused some confusion for both sides and made fighting and planning very difficult.

In 1985 she was moved to San Miguel and was put in charge of the front there. Managing and planning were very complicated because they had grown into a heavy fighting force that needed lots of logistical support, assigning things like cooks etc. She says they had become a complex but strict and disciplined fighting force with many hierarchies of leadership and overlapping integrations of forces. This allowed them to still be very flexible but now designed to clear and hold territory that included a large component to work with and win over the people. The combination of maintaining higher ground, better knowledge and use of difficult terrain, and strong relationship with the people allowed them to have an advantage in their zones over a better trained, better equipped, and more technologically advanced National Army.

But as the National Army was changing to smaller units and specialized forces they FMLN in-turn had deregulate their forces again to match their tactics. The key was always keeping good relations with the people. They had constantly kept the goal and maintained programs of education to best work with the people.

During 1986 to 1987 she moved back in charge of military intelligence of the northern forces in Morazán. In 1987-1988 she moved to the southern front “*El Tigre*” working in the “*Tres Calles*”. She left the country in October 1988 to give birth to her daughter but she remained involved until she was “*bastante grande*.” Then, she moved into the *Direccion* of the FMLN, stationed in Managua, Nicaragua, coordinating the five military arms of the FMLN.

She came back to El Salvador in 1991 and participated in the negotiations for a ceasefire and was sent as a representative of CONSEBO in the negotiations in NY.

Dalia (Urban Commando to Rural Guerrilla)

Everything started moving really fast after the assassination of Archbishop Romero. Now that she was in, Dalia was amazed at how much had been accomplished right under her nose. She was not naïve, she knew things were building but not to the extent they had. The FMLN organization had grown and evolved into a huge network of groups that had been busy preparing for a new level of effort. They were planning a massive armed rebellion while growing popular base of the protests, and initiating potential political negotiations all at the same time. She kept going to her classes at the university, but she was now making contacts and recruiting. She began to carry messages, would go out buy supplies as part of her normal errands.

At home, Dalia and her husband worked together at night to modify the house, making secret panels in the walls, floors, and even appliances. They started printing propaganda flyers and hid them all over the house in the panels. She would drop them off in small quantities as she ran errands like buying groceries. While she was out she would also purposely drive by National Guard posts and check points to take note of how many were there and get a sense of their routines or rotations for later operations.

Just as Dalia had no idea that her husband was a clandestine urban commando, her parents were equally clueless about either one's involvement. Her father had worried about her attending the university and had asked her to not go but did not have any reason to think she was doing more than studying. In 1980 things were building up exponentially and they were starting to make plans to launch coordinated armed strikes

all over the capital tentatively scheduled for the end of December or beginning of January. The FMLN leadership decided it would be best to get out of the city and start formalizing their initiatives around the country. Dalia and her husband, being part of the ERP leadership, were to go to Morazán. So as school the school year was about to end in November for a three month break, they told their parents they were going to take a vacation to Guatemala to relax and get away from everything that was going on in the capital. They bid them a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year and gave Dalia's parents the keys to their house and asked them to water their plants while they were away. It shocked her parents and all the neighbors, especially the Sergeant of the National Police living across the street, when a unit of the National Guard raided Dalia's house a couple days after they had left. They did not leave anything behind to be found and the neighbors swore up and down that they were the sweetest most considerate folks on the block. As a true testament to how cautious anyone underground was, Dalia later found out that, aside from the police sergeant, most of the neighborhood was organized with other groups like the FPL or PC and none of them knew about the other living as neighbors for years. Neither her parents nor his ever joined any of the organizations but they were interrogated by the police and were kept under surveillance for years. Dalia was extremely relieved that nothing worst was ever done to them because of her.

Dalia and her husband actually stayed around San Salvador setting things up for what were calling and hoping would be the "Final Offensive" set for January 10, 1981. On January 2, they left for Morazán. For Dalia, the trip to Morazán and the transition to being a guerrilla in the campo over the next three months would be the toughest period of her life. It was a wake up call she had never anticipated and put her life in a new

perspective. On the one hand it was a little exciting and an adventure, but mostly it was a painful shock. She had been raised in a middle class family in the capital. She was a city girl unknowingly accustomed to a comfortable lifestyle. She had never been hiking in the jungle or the mountains. She had always had clean running water and never had to worry about carrying enough with her. They took some buses part of the way but they were going to have to hike to get to the base camps hidden in the mountains of Morazán.

Dalia laughs when she remembers herself on that day. She had no idea what she was doing and in her telling of the story it is obvious her husband nor anyone else prepared her for what she was about to do. To start, she had packed too much. Someone forgot to mention make up, jewelry, and multiple weeks worth of clothes was not on the packing list for fighting a war in the jungle. Most of which became someone else's lucky surprise as she left piles of her stuff along the trails as they hiked. They hiked for whole days not just a couple of hours and the campesino guerrilla guides were definitely getting a laugh at the city folk's expense on the hike. They had been hiking all day and they kept telling them they were almost there. She felt like a little kid asking how much farther and they would reply "it's just a short climb up a hill and a short walk down the hill." They would go up and down four more hills before she would dare ask again. She had to learn to ration her water which she began to think was some form of torture by itself. No question, men and women were considered equal, it was keep up or be left behind for everyone.

They walked down a narrow trail through a rocky ravine and turned a corner into a huge cleared out area beneath the canopy with a couple of houses made from adobe and people moving about busily or sitting together in groups. Dalia was first and foremost

ravenous and exhausted, but she almost forgot about that lost in wonder at the sheer number of people at this make shift base in the middle of nowhere. They gave her some bad coffee and a couple of tortillas, not exactly the food she was craving after the journey. Though the hike definitely was a reality check in its own right, she slowly realized how much she was in a completely new world. No more electricity or store around the corner. She was left wearing a dark colored long sleeve shirt, jeans, hat, and her most comfortable and durable pair of shoes. Her belonging had been whittled down to a small backpack with a couple of changes of underwear, a canteen, and the 9mm pistol from their house that she knew how to take apart, clean, and load but had never fired. It would take her weeks if not months to get used to sleeping on a sheet of plastic on the hard cold ground in the open air.

They were now fully incorporated into the FMLN. She took on being a radio operator while her husband worked in electrical engineer. She believes the best decision they made was to leave. It was something that once you moved forward there was no going back. If they had gone back they would have been killed. In just those first three months the world they left behind in San Salvador was another world. While they were in the whirlwind of becoming guerrillas and beginning this new chapter the old chapter kept going. The capital became more and more a brutal police state where everyday was lived in fear. Some of her friends and fellow students who had never organized were killed just for being university students. The Final Offensive of 1981 failed as well as another large coordinated plan and it became more apparent that this was not going to as quick as they hoped and planned.

Pilar (Urban Commandos Continue On)

She started handing out flyers as a child, then joined student groups participated in marches and sit ins to take over buildings, but she started carrying explosives or homemade bombs in marches when joined the Urban Commandos.

Most of her first jobs, she was mainly a driver because she had a car. She took small groups on missions like attacking guard posts and check-points. She used weapons when they gave them to her but she didn't keep them. Sometimes a revolver and once she used an Uzi. The first operation she went on was planned badly and failed. They were to take a guard post. They went at night and attacked as was the plan. They were a group of five. One of the group, who did the scouting, didn't realize and wasn't told that there was another guard post a short distance away behind the one they were to attack. They broke up and went into their positions, gave the signal, and launched the strike. Everything went as planned but as they were thinking they had been successful a counterattack came quickly. Three of their group was killed; only she and another weren't shot. They ran and she got away. But the other was shot, captured, and sent to the hospital.

They already had backup plans for when someone was injured and sent to the hospital. They had doctors that were organized working inside the hospital. If a commando was injured and sent in under arrest, they snuck the injured person out and operated on him somewhere else secretly. When the police came back to get him they would say he died in surgery and if they asked to see the body they showed them another corpse of a protestor or a different fallen commando.

Later on she mostly provided "help" through cooking and sneaking supplies, in addition to occasionally operations when needed. As students, they would do many

operations in broad daylight, which was obviously very dangerous being right in the middle of downtown. They had to be very careful and make better plans. Pilar thought that in comparison, being an urban commando was harder and more dangerous than being a rural guerrilla in the *campo*. There was nowhere to hide and there was no backup nearby if things went bad, it was sink or swim.

She said it was very secretive in the University but there was an organization structure she said each group (of the Five branches of the FMLN) had their own organization within the university and that they were often within different majors (ERP had the law school, psychology and engineering was the FPL). She said there were many women in the Urban Commandos; in turn there were many women in school as most of the men were fighting. Each branch had a coordinator in the university that commandos would meet in “safe houses” with secretly to discuss plans and receive orders.

In another operation, Pilar and her cell of five robbed an electronics store for radio equipment and money. She and two other female Urban Commandos entered the store separately each carrying bags of various stuff from the nearby market as if they were running regular errands. They each had a pistol or an Uzi hidden in their belongings and they spread out in the store. Every store with anything of value usually had armed security in the store, one by the door and the other near the register. One of them picked out something to pretend to buy at the register while the other two positioned themselves to be behind the security guards. Then the two men would enter. The guards usually watched the guys more closely which allowed the girls to draw their guns on the guards from behind. The guys would quickly take the guards’ guns and they

would tie them up and take them to the back. They grabbed the money and supplies they wanted. They hid it all in their bags, walked out the door as if nothing had just happened, and slip into the market, a bus, or a car waiting for them.⁶⁴

Brigadistas- The Armed Angels

The *brigadistas* were mostly female medical personnel that operated in a wide variety of post from aides and nurses in guerrilla base camp hospitals to armed unit medics in *esquadras*. As with any other position, the roles and responsibilities as well as the education, training, and credentials of the *brigadistas* varied widely throughout the war. Those that operated as nurses in base camp and field hospitals were not often asked to fight or engage the enemy, the women and girls that served as medics in a unit were seen as soldiers first but were responsible for the overall health of the squadron, brigade, or platoon. As the war evolved, the position and training became more structured involving routine preventative medical checks of their units and anyone wounded became their sole responsibility. The brigadistas would be treated as soldiers first when planning strategies and engaging the enemy but turned medic as soon as someone became injured. They had to do their best to immediately triage and stabilize the wounded either to continue on or to be sent to rear field hospitals if possible then return to fight. Many of the *brigadistas* started off with a very limited education but by the end of the war could perform extremely complicated medical procedures with limited resources to include removing bullets or shrapnel and amputations of limbs to inflating a collapsed lung.

⁶⁴ Interview with Pilar

Dolores

As mentioned earlier, when she joined there were only local militia groups. She started out as a cook for them. In anticipation of the intensification of the conflict, the militiamen started training everyone how to shoot during breaks from assigned duties. Whenever she was done with her cooking responsibilities someone would take Dolores to a secluded meadow to practice shooting. Being a local secret militia, they were limited to the personal guns people had. She learned to shoot a .38 caliber pistol first and she found it a little frightening but exciting.

Dolores's transition towards becoming a *brigadista* was a logical progression. She worked at the clinic in town, so she already informally knew some basic medical procedures like giving injections, suturing and dressing wounds, even how to do some diagnosis or triage. Some of this was taught to her while other things she learned through daily observation as an orderly at the clinic. Perhaps most important, she knew the inventory of the clinic, where supplies were stored, and when they restocked. She was still a trusted friend with most people in town and the clinic. She gained the confidence of her new militia peers and started making night runs to gather medical supplies a little at a time.

She officially began medical training when the ERP arrived and started organizing the independent militia groups into more formal units. Her training started with learning how to clean wounds and practicing bandaging various types of wounds from doctors and nurses that arrived with the ERP. She mentions that there was a doctor from Germany and some *brigadistas* from Nicaragua in this group.

Dolores took it upon herself to learn more and would sneak in to town when it was safe to meet with the nurse in the clinic who would teach her how to suture better and learn more knots. She learned how to find a vein and take blood on real patients. Necessity being the mother of invention, she practiced suturing on a doll and giving injections on oranges as became common practice training novice *brigadistas*.

In the beginning there was no uniform other than to wear pants, have a small backpack, and some kind of hat, all preferably dark in color. Once the ERP was involved, her militia group became an organized peloton. They practiced maneuvers as a group, learning how to move through the weeds, fields, and forests quietly and in formations. She learned how to scout and evaluate the terrain. Dolores bragged that most of the *campesinos* already could do this better than the people coming from the city but humored them during trainings out of respect. She explained the structure of the first *peleton* she was in as having 30 members divided into 3 *esquadras* each with 1 *brigadista*. In the peloton, there were always at least 5 to 8 women serving as *radiodistas*, cooks, *brigadistas*, and *politicos*.

At first when they started seeing some action, she and other women would be positioned towards the back, mainly because there were not always enough guns to go around. She said no matter how it was organized she always ended up fighting and shooting. She always had her medical pack and her .22 caliber rifle. As the ERP gained more weapons, the more the women were engaged in the fight. Eventually she was issued an AK-47, which was her favorite gun. From then on her primary job was to fight first and then tend to the wounded as soon as someone was hit or injured. But if no one went down you stuck to the plan, stayed in formation and fought.

Carmen

When Carmen was brought into the guerrillas she was told you had to specialize at something so that's what she did being around her brother was in a mobile hospital brigade. Once she had become comfortable, she was assigned to train to be a brigadista of a squadron of ten men.

She said from the beginning even as training as a brigadista you still trained for everything military. Doing lots of exercises like running, push ups, squats, practiced movements as a squadron, how to take apart and put together her FAL, and firing practice. She said the conditions were difficult at times, sometimes she felt good and liked being part of something, other times she just wanted to leave but did not have anywhere to go.

She said those early days were the toughest times, they got up early and sometimes they did not have any food. You would wear the same clothes all the time, washing underwear every once in a while. The nights during the winter sleeping out in the open would get very cold sometimes and you couldn't sleep from shivering. When with the squadron on missions you could not use each other for warmth on cold nights because everybody needed to be spread out at different posts ready for action at any moment each with their own responsibilities. They took classes of military strategy at the training camps but also while on the go the *jefe* of the squadron was in charge of teaching his or her squadron strategy and tactics.

As the brigadista, she took care of all the basic medical needs of her squadron. Her daily responsibilities would be most often to check and treat everyone's feet for fungus or sores and treat stomach parasites. She jokes about when they would have a

cold or fever saying she often be the brigadista of water, constantly telling them “drink water and take an aspirin, toughen up you can’t cure a cold!” But, she also was there to explain to them the general importance to stay hydrated and to help keep morale up. She explained that you became like a family in your squadron. You stay with your squadron throughout the majority of the war. When new people entered or joined the ERP would form a new peleton of squadrons and be trained together. If someone gets killed they would be replaced by someone of relatively the same experience as the rest of the squadron.

Carmen eventually loved the practice of medicine and quickly wanted to become a doctor. As she gained more training and proved herself in action, she moved up the ranks amongst the Brigadistas. First being only of a squadron then of a peleton, then of a section, and finally of a column. According to Carmen, when ERP became a regular army it followed what most would consider traditional military organization with the squadron as the basic unit consisting of ten men plus a couple of women in positions like radio operator, medic, politico, and possibly a cook. By that time there were many women rank and file soldiers too. Carmen described the organization as follows: a peleton consisted of three squadrons or thirty people, a section included three peletons or ninety people, and a column was made up of three sections or 270 people each with their own support positions.

For each level you went up in this structure there was a corresponding increase in rank, training or expertise, and responsibility in the positions like brigadista. In addition, at each higher level you are in charge of the brigadistas below you. So a brigadista of a peleton would have three brigadistas below her and she would be responsible in

furthering their training and keeping track of and reporting injuries, medical issues, and supply needs up the chain of command. As mentioned earlier, a squadron brigadista would be responsible for immediate first aid, temporary fixes, and something like triage. If the injury needed more severe attention they would send for the brigadista of the peleton. If at that level they needed yet more serious attention, they may send for an actual certified doctor from the column or one of the mobile hospital units.

Carmen emphasized that when you were with the squadron you fight and shoot until you are needed to tend to the wounded, then your priority is the wounded even under heavy enemy fire. Things changed a little as you moved up the ranks. At the peleton level, you stay with the *commandante* of the peleton who is coordinating the three squadrons. You then treat who gets sent to you or you may be called to the front to treat. You are still expected to fight whenever necessary as you are still more or less in the front lines of fighting only slightly behind at times.

As Carmen showed enthusiasm to learn and proved her skills while in action, she started to work and study under a doctor from Cuba who was in charge of one of the mobile hospitals. She learned how to do serious operations and became proficient at performing amputations. She could even operate on collapsed lung injuries and throat wounds like tracheotomies. These were things you had to do in the field and were priority emergency operations. Once she learned these things she would have to perform them without a doctor present when in battle. She explained sometimes she would have to improvise the cutting implements. For instance she performed a tracheotomy with a piece of shrapnel because her med kit was in an open line of fire without cover and she couldn't reach it without being injured herself.

Carmen explained to me how she would perform an amputation step by step. First, sterilize the equipment with heat and alcohol. Then find and clamp all the arteries and veins using hook like implements and a kind of pliers. Then cutting through the bone with a saw. Sometimes she said you would have to file and/or clip any jagged pieces of bone before cleaning the wound one more. Finally pulling the loose skin together, suturing, and bandaging. The sterilization seemed to be the only difference between what doctors did during the American Civil War.

Carmen was particularly proud of being a part of the BRAZ, a huge specialized battalion when the warfare changed into conventional warfare during 1984-1987. In addition to already being a highly trained and higher ranking *brigadista*, she received more training to become something akin to Special Forces combatant. From that point to the end of the war she was issued an M-16 that was nearly as tall as she was, had to carry more ammo, and more medical supplies. They would go on larger more difficult missions. She loved being in the BRAZ calling it a “beautiful experience” with a big smile. When I asked why she laughed and said “because we were famous, respected! The [National] Army couldn’t stop us, and when we showed up they would retreat. We had obtained bigger guns, big mortars, and when the army retreated or we forced them off a position we would capture some of their weapons that’s how we got our best weapons, taking them from the army!”⁶⁵

Radistas/The Voice of the Revolution

The *radistas* or radio operators were almost always women, usually younger girls in their teens. While every position is important to the success of the whole, to be able to

⁶⁵ Interview with Carmen

communicate, coordinate, and give and receive orders from the highest ranks to the lowest level units was critically important for the guerrillas to be successful. The radio operators had to be ultimately trustworthy and highly capable, even the smallest mistakes could prove disastrous and result in severe casualties and loss of whole units. As mentioned in the literature review, one of the most revered units by all for information and morale was the Radio Venceremos. It was also the most sought after target by the National Army. The radio operators at the squadron level, like the *brigadistas*, were soldiers first but had the added stress of monitoring the radio at all times and having the knowledge that they were the metaphoric umbilical cord to the rest of the FMLN.

Adelita

Adelita was recruited out of the refugee camps as a star student, was trained, and to her pleasant surprise was assigned as a radio operator in the central intelligence command of the ERP. They listened to all the National Army's radio transmissions providing the military strategists like Maria to track troop and supply movements and plan or adjust accordingly. Adelita adapted quickly to the job still eager to please. She felt honored and proud to have been assigned to such an important post so quickly. Her focus and hard work continued to pay off and it wasn't long until someone had requested that she be transferred to another *estructura*, unit. She said okay and didn't dare ask any questions, 'you go where they tell you.'

When she arrived at the next place they told her she had arrived at the *Comandancia*, "Today you will meet very important people here." She was so excited, her schoolgirl dreams were coming true, she was to meet THE *comandantes*. To work for them in her eyes was the greatest honor. Adelita was greeted by one who seemed to

know everything about her including things she had done in the refugee camp in Honduras and in training camps. That day she met all the ERP *comandantes*: Villalobos, Menendez, Marisol, Lizbeth, and Luisa and given her guerrilla code pseudonym. She was told any day she could be going out with any of them and to have *confianza* they were all like family there.

Adelita described this *commandancia estructura* to include an ever changing 60 to 80 people that seemed to be always coming and going. Of these eighty people there was always average of fifteen to twenty women that integrated into the units with the men, even in sleeping arrangements. It was very organized with daily routines and they had everything you might need, everything in its place and in order. It had to be that way because they had to be on the move between camps, nothing would change from place to place. There were personnel assigned to perimeter security, communications, logistics, internal security, medical, literacy, and political/ideological units. Though it was very organized Adelita said the camps were also like a family, one may bring food the other might bring clothes, it was a life of cooperation and solidarity.

They were organized into *equipos*, teams, while in the camps which was different from the squadron fighting units and included people from each of the different operational units. They ate meals, slept, and trained together every day in shifts so as to always have someone on the job while someone was off. Part of the routines included morning exercise since all had to be prepared physically to be ready to act at any moment. This would include pushups, sit-ups, running, stomach crawl, and squats. They also practiced shooting their weapons, Adelita was first trained and used an M-16 but by the time she was in this unit a friend had taught her to use an AK-47. It didn't matter if

you were male or female, all had to do it together. Adelita emphasized the division of labor was equal between men and women, that “many have said things that in the war the guerrilla did not respect women, that they maltreated them, raped them, this not true they always respected women, the rights of women.”

Life seemed to be a little easier in the *commandancia* unit especially since she knew how bad the fighting could get being the mediator of messages of all kinds and seeing the injured come and go from the mobile medical units. Adelita noted one advantage of being a woman was having two sets of uniforms while the men usually only had one. Even though it was generally nicer in this structure she said sleeping was still very tough. If they weren't under attack they would set up in coffee plantations with make shift tents of plastic covered with palms and leafs so not to be noticed from above. Many times there was no sleep at night because they had to move at night in the dark especially because they were such a large and important unit. Sleeping in the day was hot and restless at least most of the time they were in mountains and shade.

The job of radio operator even at this level was extremely stressful as they had to encode every outgoing message with a constantly rotating code system and decode every incoming message. Adelita said her team members would tease her and other radio operators because they would murmur code gibberish in their sleep. This only added to her stress, becoming nervous she unintentionally would say something that was classified and get in trouble.

While Adelita was trained and ready to fight she rarely confronted the enemy while in the *commandancia* unit. But being the “head” of the ERP there were attempts at infiltration and assassination of the leaders by the National Army. Five months in this

unit she received her first real scare. A lone Special Forces commando of the Army had infiltrated their post. He managed to injure one commander who survived his wounds. As they trained they immediately dispersed as teams, running then stopping, setting up, and returning fire. Adelita found the Army's radio channel and she said they began reporting they had found head command and had killed some commanders. She said it was fairly normal for both sides to give false or overstated reports over the radios either to boost their own troops' morale or to discourage and panic the enemy eaves dropping. They had a rear guard set up so she really didn't see much action or the enemy then. She spent a year and half with the *commandancia*.

After a while she was commended for her good work and was promoted to Radio Vencermos. This was the epitome of her dreams. Every FMLN supporting child wanted to be Radio Venceremos. It was not just the main radio station for information and entertainment; they were the real action heroes too. She met Santiago and Leti and spent the next two years monitoring the local and international news, mainly the BBC over the radio. She copied the news for use in their own broadcasts since the National owned stations often censored news that did not favor the government's position. She said it was exciting and scary to always be on the run.

By 1989, both sides seemed to be struggling to maintain troops or gain any kind of advantage. The call came out for a [second] Final Offensive that November, one last big concerted push to win or at least force a settlement. All the estructuras were reducing so those with training to fight were expected to fight in this last major attack. They reformed small squadrons but before setting the plan into action Adelita was given week to go see her mom in the camp in Honduras. They let the majority of the guerrillas go on

family visits before this offensive. This was almost heart breaking for Adelita since she hardly fought up to this point but knew that many were not going to return home again after this offensive. This might have been the last time she saw her mother but she had to believe in what they were doing. They were putting everything on this operation and that they were going win the war. Of all things Adelita had done to this point, she said the *radioistas* of a squadron had the most stressful jobs. As far as she was concerned nothing could compare to the intensity of trying to concentrate on hearing a static message, decode it, tell her commander, have him screaming orders at troops then dictating a message to her that she would then have to encode. All while being shot at, mortars or grenades exploding around you, injured friends screaming, returning fire in between messages, and running from covered position to covered position. Adelita said that just like Radio Venceremos, the radio operators were always an Army sniper's main targets hoping to cut off the lifeline and coordination of the guerrilla units.⁶⁶

Explosivistas/ Nimble Fingers, Nerves of Steel, and a Little Luck

The *Explosivistas* were the explosives experts for the FMLN and again were most often young girls and women. They ranged from being in camps mass-producing homemade grenades, landmines, and ordinance shells to being in the lead of a squadron sweeping for mines and disarming bombs to special ops commandos blowing up bridges and buildings. There seemed to be a commonly held notion amongst the guerrillas that girls and women had a stronger attention to details and a natural softer or more delicate sense of touch. One mistake in this position resulted in immediate loss of limbs or death.

⁶⁶ Interview with Adelita.

Lucia

After spending six years in the training camps Lucia became the *explosivista* and reserve *radioista* for a squadron in 1986. Her unit was mostly assigned to scouting, clearing guerrilla routes of land mines, and setting up security traps or mining [National] Army routes. They were part of larger organized ERP battalion of 50 to 60 people. She said they had a region they were responsible for checking but they constantly changed the order of the paths they checked as to not be predictable.

She and another *explosivista* would alternate taking the lead of their formation seeking out signs of landmines, trip wires, or pitfalls. They had a metal detector but it didn't work very well and she didn't want to use it because she thought it made people less cautious or observant. If they found something, she had to decide if she could disarm it and remove it or to figure out a way to mark it for the other guerrillas. As the *explosivista* she was responsible for keeping her squadron supplied with *bombas de contacto*, which were essentially pipe bombs or mortar rounds. They were to have at least fifty explosives ready at all times. She took pride in being able disarm and later reuse the Army's explosives against them which also cut down on wasting supplies or time making more. During this time, she would occasionally Lucia would teach making explosives in guerrilla workshops to *campesinos* who wanted to help but did not want to fully join.

Looking back now she considers herself lucky that she didn't lose any hands, legs or anything because many of the explosives experts lost hands or ended up blind. She didn't consider herself lucky then though. First she had mentioned she had a boyfriend but he was killed fairly soon after they started dating. Then, as the ERP was struggling to

keep up recruits, her squadron was sent to San Miguel to fight 1990-91 and she played double duty being *explosivista* and *radista*. It was very difficult at first because she had never been in battle before. Her previous unit was not to engage the enemy unless under a direct attack. They had nearly crossed the Army a number of times but held their position unseen until they were gone and managed to not come under fire for almost four years. Just outside of San Miguel her unit was hit with mortar rounds and killed half her squadron. She still has nightmares and can't shake the image of the upper half of one of her comrades plastered against a tree facing her with his mouth open and eyes mechanically blinking at her.

After San Miguel, her squadron was mixed with another and sent to San Francisco Gotera, the capital of Morazán and the site of the region's main military base. She set up some mines around the base, then they went to Cacuatique and then Rio Seco further north where they reunited with a larger battalion. Near Rio Seco it was her turn to go and refill canteens and bottles with water, she managed to twist her ankle and fell into a hole. As she was trying to get up still near the river she suddenly became aware of the sound of a plane. Before she really understood what was happening she was knocked back and heard the explosion. The plane dropped a bomb and killed nearly the entire battalion. She just lay there dazed. Someone found her and helped brace her foot and they marched to a guerrilla camp. She was given a week to recover and was then assigned to a new squadron and *peleton*. The squadron was hiking to another position to prepare for a new mission when another group came running down the trail shouting "*ya estuvo!*" it's over! They immediately turned on the radio to hear that war was ending and the *Dirreccion* had agreed to meet with the National Government and negotiate peace.

They didn't believe it until they reached the next group on the trail already celebrating and dancing to music playing over Radio Venceremos. Lucia said she couldn't comprehend how such a violent war just ended all of a sudden. She had barely survived a couple of years of so many horrible things, just like that it was over. She said she cried and laughed at the same time not sure how she felt other than she was glad it was finally over.

Chapter 7: War Stories

Dolores and Carmen were full of stories. Some were humorous, others heart wrenching to almost unbelievable. While not all of these give insight into the roles and responsibilities of women fighters, they are their experiences that help to understand who they are as real people. When we talked, there was always a palpable emotion that supported the cliché that for these women it truly was the best of times and the worst of times.

Family Feud

Dolores mentioned she had a cousin who was in the National Army, which prompted me to ask if she ever thought about what would happen if she ever saw him on the other side in battle. She nonchalantly quipped she didn't have to think about it, it happened.

She was passing through an area near the home of an aunt with whom she had always been very close and decided to pop in for a quick visit. Her *peleton* was in between operations so she was allowed to go visit. Her aunt luckily was home and they had not seen each other in a long time so they were both overjoyed by the opportunity. She went in and they were talking and having coffee telling stories and catching up asking who is where. It was apparent the aunt didn't really care who was on which side she just hated the war altogether. She had told Dolores she shouldn't stay long because her son was on leave as well and was around somewhere knowing it could be bad if they crossed paths. Of course, Dolores and her aunt got lost in conversation and lost track of time. All of a sudden, the cousin walked in and immediately drew his gun on Dolores.

She jumped up knocking the seat back and pointed her gun at him, the aunt sat at the table speechless, breathing heavy.

Dolores said, she couldn't bring herself to kill him, and she didn't think he was ready to kill her either, but they weren't budging. More than anything she couldn't do it out of love of her aunt and not wanting to make her suffer but Dolores wasn't going to let him just shoot her either. The cousin shouted, "drop your gun and get out of here!" She retorted, "drop you weapon and YOU go!" At this point she was getting angry and sad that it was happening. She started backing to the door and he shouted "if you come back have no doubt I WILL shoot you!" She replied, "we'll kill each other then." Having the last word he said, "we'll kill each other or I'll kill you, either way!"

He was killed later in the war and she never saw him again.

What Happens When the *Brigadista* Is Shot?

I asked if she was ever captured? Dolores chuckles, "No, I was never captured (pause) but I was shot!" "So what happens when the *brigadista* gets shot?" I asked.

"They left me." She said as if it were no big deal. "It was the middle of a heavy fire fight so they moved on, but they took my medical kit and gun, ...I guess so the enemy wouldn't get it. I was in the weeds so I dug myself a hole and crawled into it and stayed there for eight days." She tells me this without an inkling of resentment or anger as if it was perfectly logical. She goes on to say that while hanging out there the wound *gusané* or wormed meaning maggots. She says eventually she was found and brought to a mobile hospital unit. The bullet had broken her coccyx. She had one exploratory surgery and two back surgeries to get her patched up. I asked what did you do after that? "I reenlisted," she says as if I should have guessed. "But I didn't go back to the front lines, I

stayed more to the rear from then on, I wasn't as quick as I was before." She said with a big grin. "But I went right back to being a *brigadista* and I stayed close to the combatants and the front lines."

Men, If They Won't Work With You, Shoot 'Em

We were discussing how the FMLN strongly promoted the need to treat one another like brothers and I had asked if men treated women differently or respected them accordingly? Dolores thought for a moment with smile emerging, "let me tell you a funny story. We were fighting in the Guacamaya in Morazán for twenty-two days of intense fighting. Which meant a lot of time without sleep, hardly any food or drink. I was charged with treating some injured guerrillas and to get them to one of the mobile hospitals units set up nearby. I had a one guy shot up with a lung injury in bad shape, another with a broken foot that I had already 'cured.'

I needed help carrying the one in bad shape. So, I tell another male soldier who was rested and fresh to help me with carrying the one who was in bad shape. That worm tells me he won't; he doesn't want to get bloodied up from the other guy. I realize he's new as he gives the excuse he can't. She gestures he means will get sick from the sight of the blood and serious open wounds. I tell him pick up the stretcher or I'll kill you. Now granted, we had been fighting for twenty-two days straight with little rest, food, or water, and here I am with two injured comrades and this guy is telling me he doesn't care about this soldier enough to help?! Not recognizing that this is something necessary to do... how would that make you feel?" She is telling this story to show how sometimes a man would treat a woman differently, she explains she believes he is saying no partially because it is her job to take care of this guy not his. She gestures that she has a gun

pointing at this guy refusing to help and I ask incredulously, “So you shot him?” She continues, “Well, yes. There was nothing else I could do. I shot him.” She laughs again. “I didn’t really mean too, it was a joke, but yeah I shot him. And when we got to the camp I reported the three injured guerrillas, the broken foot, the guy with a punctured lung and the guy I shot, without embarrassment.

Once I reported in I went to go rest being worn out. It was getting near dark when we came in so I went to one of the tents where there were some cots. All the cots were full so I see a guy in the nearest one and as I start taking off all my gear to rest I tell this guy, ‘get up its past your time to take your post and come on give up the bed.’ He wasn’t getting up and remember what I just went through so I wasn’t in the mood for lazy guys, so I started harassing him saying things like ‘you slacker, get up you lazy bum, what kind of man are you, you can’t just sleep until whatever hour you like, come on get up.’ I was super tired and almost delirious so I sit down on the cot and start to shoving the guy and frustrated I squeeze onto it roll away from him and fall immediately asleep being exhausted.

In the middle of the night I get cold and am still mad this guy hasn’t given me more space so I ripped the covers from him and go back to sleep. This time the joke was on me, I wake up to some talking to me, “hey Dolores get up, you got to move so we can remove this guy.” I’m standing there half asleep sort of remembering this guy being rude and that I had been giving it to this guy. The whole time he had been dead, they were coming in to go bury him. I didn’t realize he wasn’t getting up because he was dead or even notice that it was his body that had been cold the whole time. After I woke up, they

sent me to go treat the guy I shot, and I told them no way and I didn't. Somebody else had too because I was still too mad at him."

Wonder Women

Carmen puts some of male and female interaction into perspective that sets up the last two stories. "They [commanders] didn't give any different training or treatment for women, all were treated as men. They also didn't really give any special consideration or different treatment to me being so young. The *jefes* were people with more training and knowledge and understood the philosophy better to begin with so they lead everybody like equals. There were some guys that were *machista* and would treat some women bad, though never any of the *jefes* only some of the regular soldiers including occasionally one in my squadron. He would cuss at me and tell me I didn't know anything or I was a worthless little girl. There was more of this [behavior] at the beginning." She clarifies 'beginning' to mean both the outset of the war as well when a girl enters or joins. "When a girl enters she acts like a girl but as you go on through training and prove yourself you become twice as equal. But also you learn how to give anything someone dishes out right back at him.

At the beginning, they [*jefes*] didn't listen to suggestions from the women much but as they [women] went on proving themselves, the attitude noticeably changed and there was more of an exchange." I asked what caused the change or how was the situation. Did leaders argue amongst themselves about the role of women or was she talking about the men in lower divisions like squadrons? "Yes, there was some kind of argument farther up and some recognized that women played a useful role, that they could do certain things men couldn't. For example in the workshops women are better at

being nurses. I watched men clean wounds there and they were too rough. Women are softer, more caring, and pay more attention to details. In [military] operations, it is easy for a woman to get in and out of a town or do certain things without suspicion. It was part of the plan or strategy to use women combatants to do things men couldn't do.

Blessed

Carmen had five injured guerrillas left out in the jungle near a town where they had had a heavy exchange with the Army. As was usual badly wounded were sometimes hidden and left behind so the squadron could keep fighting and tried to lead the Army away from them. She was alone to tend them but there was problem. The wounded were spread out on both sides of the Black Road, the main highway between San Miguel and Perquin, and a whole fully armed battalion was still holding their position on the road in between them. She had to figure out how to get to each one of her injured guerrillas and treat them without giving herself or them away.

She came up with an idea and went to the nearest village away from the road. She borrowed a homemade dress and wore an embroidered, white linen pinned over her head to make herself to look like an Evangelical lay person that is very common in the country still today. She carried a bible with passages marked in one hand and carried some of her medical supplies in the bottom of a basket under some food. She walked back to the road, hid her gun and took a deep breath. Then Carmen walked right through the middle of the battalion who didn't even raise a gun in her direction. They greeted her as any gentlemen should, saying things like, "good day sister, may God be with you." "Thank you, and with brothers." she responded. She was able to treat and stabilize her injured where they were so she could come back and get them once the Army had moved on.

She sometimes wonders if God minded her using Him as part of a disguise since she is not very religious to begin with.

Gun in a Garter and Grenade in a Bra

Dolores chimes in as Carmen's story reminds her of another of her own. "I had to evacuate a town!" She goes on to explain that the Army had control of Joateca and the majority of the inhabitants were mothers, cousins, children, and family members of Guerrilla combatants. Her *peleton* had been charged to retake Joateca and push the military out. But they needed to get the people out of town before they could attack. They gave that mission to Dolores. She was to go in and inform the people to sneak out that night so they could attack in the morning. She laughs as she remembers something, "Carmen's mother was in the town that night!" Carmen nods. Dolores doesn't want to do it at first, proposing colorfully "and what happens if they grab me recognizing I'm a guerrilla soldier, they surely kill me or worse." They devised a plan, tomorrow Dolores will be getting married! She puts on a beautiful white dress to look like a bride, they put an Evangelical veil on her head and a bible under her arm. She laughs again, "I couldn't read a single word of the Bible at the time neither, but off I went, walked straight into town." When she walked into town there was a whole battalion in the center square, one hundred armed soldiers with jeeps and trucks with heavy guns mounted on them. She said her heart was pounding through her chest so hard she thought you could see it and it didn't give her much assurance to be armed herself. She wore a garter around her thigh and had a .38 special tucked into it, but she said, "what was the point, one versus a hundred wasn't going to work in my favor." The gun was bulky and almost too heavy for

the garter and she was afraid it would slip which made her more nervous. She also carried a hand grenade in her bra in between her well-endowed chest.

She started walking down the street into town. A soldier with a beret with a gold bar on it stopped her and asked her where she was going. She told him she was going to pharmacy of “sister *fulana*” including an evangelical modifier. She makes up some story about her aunt needing some medicine for some kid who fell out of a tree during and she’s in a hurry because it’s her wedding day. They kept chatting with her for a moment. Some soldiers whistled at her, others gave her good wishes for her wedding. Up walks up Carmen’s mom who was obviously surprised and confused as to why she was there dressed that way, but this gave Dolores a way out of the conversation. Once a comfortable distance from the soldiers, she gave Carmen’s mom the message and told her to pass it on. The message being, the townspeople were to leave town in the middle of the night in staggered intervals and in different designated directions. Her role completed, Dolores kept walking through town and left the other through woods and met back up with her squadron. That morning the guerrillas surrounded the town and mounted the attack with mortars and rocket launchers and managed to dislodge the Army and force them out of the town. Dolores was in the fire-fight too.

Sleeping With the Enemy

Dolores mentions another time she wore a dress to do surveillance in Perquin. She was less enthusiastic to tell this story but still, she did so with an air of pride and importance. Dolores got all dressed up to scope out a Guard post at the heart of the town. She describes the post layout from the outside as having trenches and wire set up before you could reach the door of the building. Her mission was to find out how many guards

were in the trenches and in the house. Also, they needed to know the inside floor plan, like how many rooms and which rooms were the sleeping quarters.

She says she put on a dress but more like a sexy prostitute this time. She walked right up to the headquarters where the officers were. They cat called and whistled at her but she pretended she wasn't interested even a little offended. One of them asked her in, she told him not a chance, but this time flirting back a little. He kept it up and she "gave in." She let him continue to come on to her, letting him grope her, but now egging him on and encouraging him. She paused and then asked me as if she was also asking herself at the same time, "can you imagine giving up your body for the mission?" Once she was in she had to stay the night and slept with him just to find out where everybody slept and how many there were. "I slept with the enemy." She said without a hint emotion, which was a huge contrast to her usually jovial and bigger than life personality. The next morning as she was leaving he asked when she was going to come back to visit, she replied simply "later." He flirtingly asked, "later when?" She said she just smiled and repeated "later" again and pretended she was going back to her house in the town that didn't exist. She slipped on back into the jungle to meet up with her squadron. Dolores didn't get the satisfaction this time of going back to attack.

Carmen jumps back in with a lighter mood and says, "see the women were not just important to make tortillas but to be able to complete strategic missions." She verifies something Daniella had said when I interviewed her a week before. Carmen explains that she never slept with the enemy but tasks like that were things some women did to resolve an immediate problem. That a mission would be given to the *peleton* or squadron and it was up to them to figure out how they were going to pull it off. So these

tactical roles of women may or may not have been necessarily orders passed down but creative solutions that women combatants volunteered in the heat of the moment. It is tough to tell. When I rephrased the question to if they were told to do one these jobs or did women volunteer themselves to do it, she said that, “no, a *commandante* wouldn’t say you are going to do this mission this way. They would give you a mission and it was up to you how to pull it off.” She also clarified that sometimes there were missions that the squadron did together but sometimes there were individual missions. Which raises the question, is one to believe that giving a women a mission to scout out a guard post and find out how many are stationed there and where they sleep implying an expectation or acknowledging specific advantages a female combatant might have over a male as far as options.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

Women participated in every aspect of the Salvadoran Conflict from its inception to its negotiated peace in the end. As this thesis shows women were there in the initial rebellious seeds to the culmination and design of an extremely complex political and military force. It is impossible to acknowledge any success of the FMLN without giving some degree of credit to these women who made up nearly a third of all its members who participated in the high command to the boots on the ground. Women fought alongside of, and at times in charge of, men. And as stories of Chapter 7 show, there were many things that guerrilla forces simply could not have achieved without women fighters in vital roles at all levels. I believe the war would undoubtedly be shorter with a far less successful outcome for the FMLN had it not embraced and integrated its female members. It is doubtful that the FMLN could have mustered local and international public support, recruitment of troops and supplies, or maintained morale and the will to carry on the fight against ridiculous odds over such a long time without women present as combatants and in other vital roles.

In this thesis I examined how and why women of all ages joined the revolution and the roles and responsibilities they performed as combatants through their own personal stories. This thesis begins to fill the previous gap in our knowledge and helps to give some shape to what a female combatant did in various roles. While it begins to answer some questions, the women's stories also raise many more new questions and highlights that there is still much work to be done. For example there are many questions about how the FMLN managed relationships between men and women or if they did at all. Did the FMLN actively include women as a strategic choice or was it an ideologically

driven decision? Were women truly treated and respected as equals and were the jobs they performed assigned as a result of sex or gender rather than ability and skill? In the interviews the women mentioned many things that were beyond the scope of this thesis including rules and regulations on male/female relationships, including marriage, keeping couples in separate units or even regions, and the punishment for rape or mistreatment of women. I hope this thesis will inspire others to investigate these issues and others in the near future.

Appendix A: Interviews

Adelita. Interview by Author, 24 June 2006, Perquin, Morazán.

Carmen . Interview by Author, 26 June 2006, Jocoatique, Morazán.

Celeste. Interview by Author, 16 July 2006, Perquin, Morazán.

Dalia. Interview by Author, 10 July 2006 , San Salvador.

Daniella. Interview by Author, 14 July 2006, San Salvador.

Dolores. Interview by Author, 25 June 2006, Jocoatique, Morazán.

Hermina. Interview by Author, 15 July 2006, San Salvador.

Lucia. Interview by Author, 15 July 2006, Perquin, Morazán.

Maria. Interview by Author, 14 July 2006, San Salvador.

Pilar. Interview by Author, 11 July 2006, San Salvador.

Rosa. Interview by Author, 26 June 2006, Jocoatique, Morazán.

Appendix B: Acronyms

AMES	Women's Association of El Salvador
ANDES	National Association of Salvadoran Educators
ARENA	Nationalist Republican Alliance Party
BPR	Revolutionary Popular Bloc
BRAC	Rafael Aguiñada Carranza Battalion of the FAL
BRAZ	Rafael Arce Zablah Brigade of the ERP
COMADRES	Committee of Mothers and Relatives of Political Prisoners, the Disappeared and the Assassinated of El Salvador
DRU	Unified Revolutionary Directorate
ERP	Popular Revolutionary Army
FAL	Armed Forces of Liberation
FARN	Armed Forces of National Resistance
FDR	Democratic Revolutionary Front
FES	Special Elect Forces
FMLN	Farabundo Martí Liberation Front
FPL	Popular Liberation Front
FSLN	Sandista National Liberation Front
ORDEN	Nationalist Democratic Organization
PDC	Christian Democratic Party
PRTC	Revolutionary Party of Central America
RN	National Resistance
RV	Radio Venceremos
UCA	Central American University

Appendix C: Timeline

- 1920-22 Working-class women protest against the Meléndez administration, demanding release of political prisoners.
- 1930 The Communist Party of El Salvador (PCS) is formed.
- 1931 General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez ousts president-elect Arturo Araujo.
- 1932 PCS leader Farabundo Martí leads unsuccessful revolt against Hernández Martínez. Martí is publicly executed by hanging, thousands of peasants and indigenous are assassinated, and the PCS is outlawed. Women's Committees support the popular uprising led by Martí.
- 1938 Women's right to vote is recognized by the Constitution.
- 1944 The Association of Democratic Women (AMD) and the Women's Democratic Front (FDF) are formed.
- 1945 The Salvadoran Women's League is formed.
- 1950 Women are able to vote.
- 1957 Rosa Ochoa becomes a confounder of the Sisterhood (Fraternity) of Salvadoran Women, an association that has links to the Communist Party. It is disbanded in 1969 due to political persecution. Many participants in this organization later join ANDES, the predominantly female teachers' union. Others regroup in AMPES, the Association of Progressive Women of El Salvador, which has ties to the Communist Party.
- 1961 The Christian Democrat Party is formed.
- 1969 The "Soccer War" between El Salvador and Honduras takes place, taking several thousand lives and leaving one hundred thousands Salvadorans homeless.
- 1972 José Napoleón Duarte, the Christian Democratic Party candidate, wins the presidential election, but the electoral commission hands the presidency over to Colonel Arturo Armando Molina.
- 1975 The Association of Progressive Women of El Salvador (AMPES) is formed.
- 1977 Monsignor Oscar Arnulfo Romero becomes Archbishop of El Salvador. The Committee of Mothers of Political Prisoners (CoMadres), the Committee for the Liberty of Political Prisoners and the Disappeared, and a Feminine Front are formed. General Carlos Humberto Romero becomes president.
- 1978 The Association of Market Vendors and Workers (AUTRAMES) is formed. The Association of Women in El Salvador (AMES) is formed.
- 1979 Over six hundred political killings take place. The first military junta is formed. The United States increases military aid.
- 1980 Archbishop Romero protests death squad killings. He is murdered while saying Mass. Four churchwomen are raped and killed. The United States cuts off military aid to the Salvadoran government. The Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) is formed to coordinate guerrilla movement. The FMLN includes the PCS, which forms the Armed Forces

- Liberation (FAL), the Popular Liberation Forces (FPL), and the People's Revolutionary Army (ERP). The Lil Milagro Ramírez Association of Women for Democracy is formed.
- 1981 Ronald Reagan takes office as President of United States and resumes military aid. Right-wing extremist Robert D'Abuisson forms the National Republican Alliance (ARENA). FMLN launches "final offensive." The Unitary Committee of Salvadoran Women (CUMS) is formed.
- 1983 The Association of Salvadoran Women (ASMUSA) and the Organization of Salvadoran Women for Peace (ORMUSA) are formed.
- 1984 The Reagan administration supports winning presidential candidate Duarte against ARENA's D'Abuisson.
- 1987 AMES becomes part of the Salvadoran Women's Union (UMS), a coalition of the five revolutionary women's associations associated with the FMLN. A new generation of partisan women's organizations is formed. This new generation includes Women for Dignity and Life (Las Dignas) and the Mélida Ananya Montes Women's Movement (MAM).
- 1989 Alfredo Cristiani, the right-wing ARENA candidate, wins the presidential election. FMLN launches offensive. The government retaliates with aerial bombings. Six Jesuit priests are assassinated by the army.
- 1990 The United Nations sponsors peace talks between the FMLN and the government.
- 1992 The ARENA administration and the FMLN sign a peace agreement. The FMLN disarms its forces.
- 1993 The U.N.-sponsored Truth Commission finds that 85 percent of the nine thousand human rights abuses investigated and 95 percent of the killings that took place in the 1970s and 1980s were committed by the government-supported death squads and the military.
- 1994 The FMLN is the country's second strongest political force in the presidential election won by Armando Calderón Sol of the ARENA party.
- 1996 Female representatives in the Legislative Assembly create the Women's Political Party Forum, a nonpartisan women's coalition. A law against domestic violence is approved.
- 1997 Legislative Assembly passes a bill requiring that all political candidates get clearance certifying that they are not in arrears for child support payments.

Bibliography

- Arrom, Silvia Marina. Book Review. Journal of Latin American Studies 36 (2004): 823-824.
- Baldez, Lisa. Book Review. Latin American Politics & Society 45.4 (2003): 162-166.
- Bracamonte, José Angel Moroni and David E. Spencer. Strategy and Tactics of the Salvadoran FMLN Guerrillas: Last Battle of the Cold War, Blueprint for Future Conflicts. Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1995.
- Díaz, Nidia. I Was Never Alone: A Prison Diary from El Salvador. Melbourne: Ocean Press, 1992.
- Franceschet, Susan. "Explaining Social Movement Outcomes." Comparative Political Studies 37.5 (2004): 499-530.
- Goldstein, Joshua S. War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War Systems and Vice Versa. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- González, Victoria, Karen Kampwirth, eds. Radical Women in Latin America Left and Right. Pennsylvania State University Press. 2001.
- Gorkin, Michael, Marta Pineda, and Gloria Leal. From Grandmother to Granddaughter: Salvadoran Women's Stories. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.
- Jaquette, Jane S. "Women in Revolutionary Movements in Latin America." Journal of Marriage and the Family 35.2, Special Sections: Moving and the Wife, Women in Latin America (1973): 344-54.
- Kampwirth, Karen, Feminism and the Legacy of Revolution : Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004.
- . Women Guerrilla Movements: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas, Cuba. University Park: The Pennsylvania University Press, 2002.
- Kelly Rivera, Ana. Valió La Pena?! : Testimonios De Salvadoreñas Que Vivieron La Guerra. 1st ed. San Salvador, El Salvador, C.A: Editorial Sombrero Azul, 1995.
- Luciak, Ilja A. "Gender Equality and Electoral Politics on the Left: A Comparison of El Salvador and Nicaragua." Journal of Interamerican Studies & World Affairs 40.1 (1998): 39.
- . "Gender Equality in the Salvadoran Transition." Latin American Perspectives 26.2, Reassessing Central America's Revolutions (1999): 43-67.

- Radcliffe, Sarah A. and Sallie Westwood, eds. 'Viva' Women and Popular Protest in Latin America. Routledge. 1993
- Reif, Linda L. "Women in Latin American Guerrilla Movements: A Comparative Perspective." Comparative Politics. 18.2 (1986): 147-169.
- Richards, Patricia. "New Readings on Women's Movements and Women's Rights in Latin America." Latin American Politics & Society 45.2 (2003): 159.
- Sheldon, Sayre P., ed. Her War Story: Twentieth Century Women Write about War. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press. 1999.
- Shayne, Julia Denise. "Gendered Revolutionary Bridges: Women in the Salvadoran Resistance Movement (1979-1992)." Latin American Perspectives 26.3, Women in Latin America, Part 3 Identities and Localities: Social Analyses on Gendered Terrain (1999): 85-102.
- Thomson, Marilyn, Comisión de Derechos Humanos de El Salvador, and Institute for the Study of Human Issues. Women of El Salvador : The Price of Freedom. Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1986.
- Viterna, Jocelyn S. "Pulled, Pushed, and Persuaded: Explaining Women's Mobilization into the Salvadoran Guerrilla Army." American Journal of Sociology 112.2 (2006): 1-45.
- Wickham-Crowley, Timothy. Guerrillas and Revolutions in Latin America. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- Wood, Elisabeth Jean Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.