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Transcript of 12/21/90 Interview of
Lt. Col. Fred M. Berger
USATC, Ft. Eustis, Virginia

Interviewers:

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EDITED TRANSCRIPT

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CONGRESSMAN JOHN JOSEPH
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Interviewer: The purpose of this interview is to discuss your knowledge of the killings of Jesuit priests on November 16, 1989 at El Salvador. If you would at this time state your name and your current duty assignment please.

Berger: My name is Fred Berger, B-E-R-G-E-R. My current duty assignment is the Army Training Support Center, Fort Eustis, Virginia.

Interviewer: Describe for me the period of time you were in El Salvador and why were you there?

Berger: I was assigned to El Salvador from July 16, 1989, through July 9, 1990. I was assigned at the OPAT (Operations, Plans and Training) team chief. My team covered the National Training Center in La Union, El Salvador, the CEBRI which is the El Salvadoran Ranger School and the Atlacatl battalion just outside of San Salvador. I had four members on my team including myself; Major Ramirez who you've already spoken to; Major Hall; and Sgt. Pecena. I spent most of my time, about 80 percent, in La Union with the National Training Center which was their larger organization. Major Ramirez was assigned to the Atlacatl battalion/CEBRI and spent about 95 percent of his time with those organizations.

Interviewer: Let's go back now in time to the offensive which began on November the 11th of 1989, where were you then?

Berger: In Panama.

Interviewer: You were in Panama? When did you leave to go to Panama?

Berger: I believe it was about the 10th of November.

Interviewer: Describe for me the location of where your assignment was in relationship to the UCA, to the military school, and to the military headquarters. How far away were you from that area?

Berger: La Union is the farthest place from San Salvador in the country. It's on the Gulf of Fonseca on the far eastern section of the country. From my location, as a matter of fact, you could see El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua, so it's as far away as you could be. The other location where I worked was in Sitio Delnino, with the Atlacatl

battalion. That's about a 30 minute drive from San Salvador. As we both know, that's the battalion and platoon that allegedly killed the priests.

Interviewer: How often would you physically interact with the Atlacatl?

Berger: I'd get down there about every two to three weeks.

Interviewer: From the Atlacatl how far were you in distance.

Berger: You couldn't drive; we weren't allowed to drive across. About an hour and 20 minutes helicopter flying time.

Interviewer: How often would you talk to Ramirez?

Berger: Every other day, every third day. The problem, once you're east of the Limpa river, the phone lines were blown down on a very regular basis. There were times, 30 to 40 percent of the time that I didn't even have radio communications. It was easier to call the States than it was San Salvador. The State side calls went through Nicaragua.

Interviewer: In your position did you have occasion to interact with the high command of the Salvadoran military?

Berger: Quite a few times, yes, quite a few times. Both from the CEBRI side and from the the CEMFA side which is at La Union.

Interviewer: With those of the El Salvadoran military that you interacted including those of the high command, what were the comments during the time you were down there about the Jesuits prior to the killings?

Berger: There's Colonel Rivas, Carlos Rivas, who was the commander of CEMFA. His son, his oldest son, was a student at the UCA. Consequently, everything I heard from him about the Jesuits was good. Colonel Rivas was as disgusted at the killings as anybody else was; probably more so than most.

Interviewer: In focusing on the time you went to Panama. When did you get back?

Berger: Not long after the killings. I really don't remember the date.

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Interviewer: The offensive is going on when you get back. Are you hearing any propaganda calls for action against the Jesuits?

Berger: Didn't hear any of that. No, and I had contact on the U.S. radio system, the radionet. The place I slept was right next door to our communications center so I was listening on all the radionets.

Interviewer: When you went to San Salvador, once every couple weeks, who would you deal with in the Salvadoran Army?

Berger: In the Salvadoran Army? It's depends on what I went for. If I went just to visit Sam, I'd go out there and spend my time with the folks from CEBRI and the Atlacatl battalion. Colonel Leon was the commander of the Atlacatl. If I went on CEMFA business, I'd go right to the Estada Mayor headquarters.

Interviewer: Did you see Colonel Ponce during December of 1989? Would you have discussed at all with Ponce the killing of the Jesuits?

Berger: No I never discussed that with him at all.

Interviewer: Did you know Lieutenant Espinosa?

Berger: Yes.

Interviewer: Espinosa, who headed up the commando unit?

Berger: Yes. My first contact with the gentleman was when he came back from Fort Bragg. You know he graduated from the SF course and he left about a \$2500 phone bill down there. He left a pretty hefty telephone bill and the first contact right after I got in country in July was, let's see if we can get AT&T or Southwest or Southeast Bell to reimburse on the telephone calls.

Interviewer: So that was your first contact? How often were you in contact with him?

Berger: Pretty regular. I'd see him when we'd go in. Once a month. As a matter of fact, I even saw him in my advance trip when I went down there in June on the advance party trip.

Interviewer: June of '89?

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Berger: June of '89. He had just gotten back from Bragg and he spoke fluent English and he would want to speak English. I'd want to speak Spanish to keep up my Spanish, he'd want to speak English to keep up his English. He seemed like a pretty decent guy.

Interviewer: Alright. Now, in December you're back from Panama, do you see Espinosa?

Berger: I don't recall. After I got off the plane I came in on, I spent the night on the airfield, and slept at the Mack terminal, and I think Sam picked me up the next day and I don't remember if I stayed in the city or went out to Atlacatl. I really don't remember.

Interviewer: Did you know any of the other members of that commando unit?

Berger: A half a dozen, not by name, just by sight.

Interviewer: Let's talk more about this unit. This was a unit that was known for its expertise, being a well trained unit, some of them U.S. Military trained, if not all.

Berger: The entire battalion was originally trained by the U.S. Military. It was one of the five ranger, I call them ranger battalions, they call themselves special forces. This was a national level asset here, the same way we would look at our ranger battalions. Unlike other units, they were allowed to recruit from across the country. They had the cream of the crop in officers, they had well trained NCOs, which is something you don't find in El Salvador. The troops were well trained and highly motivated. They were given all the dirty jobs, around the volcanoes, any bad mission. I find it surprising because in my whole year I don't recall one single incidence where they took the best platoon, which was a recon platoon, and chopped them or reassigned them to someone else. Now I've seen it happen where the entire battalion was put into the third brigade sector and they worked for the third brigade or in the sixth brigade sector and they worked for the sixth brigade. At times they would leave one company back to help security. I don't recall a platoon like that ever being chopped across before.

Interviewer: Expound upon that. What do you mean chopped across? What happens?

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Berger: Reassigned. I don't know if Sam Ramirez told you about it, before this happened or about the time, there was a U. S. Special Forces A-team there under deployment for training.

Interviewer: Yes, go ahead.

Berger: The SF-team was there to work with some of the guys at CEBRI and at Atlacatl. When the offensive started there was nobody left to train. As I remember, they were working with the commando platoon and the platoon still had some of their night vision sights. The SF-team was ready to leave and they had one hell of a time getting the equipment back, because the battalion couldn't contact them. That's one thing Sam did talk about after I got back in, all the problems getting this equipment back. I know, I'm positive they had one heck of a time locating that platoon to get their equipment back. And that's what chopping is, when they lose all command and control from that battalion and it's given to someone else. I find that to be personally, as a military officer, very strange with a platoon like that.

Interviewer: Who was it given to?

Berger: As I understand, to the Military Academy. As I understand, no one has ever shown me in writing, "you are chopped," and "you are attached," but as I've been told, it was to the Military Academy.

Interviewer: Who was in charge there?

Berger: The Military Academy?

Interviewer: Yes.

Berger: It was a Colonel Benevides, something like that.

Interviewer: Did you know him?

Berger: Met him once. All of us down there use to use the Military Academy to run on their track and use their gym. I met him at the gym once, that's all, didn't know him.

Interviewer: No other interactions with him?

Berger: No, nothing at all.

Interviewer: While we're on this area, if you would, I'd like

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for you to take a look at these photographs and when you do, turn them over and pronounce the name of the individual that is on the back and see if you know any of these guys.

Berger: Moran, Mario. I can't read the other name.

Interviewer: Mario Denis Moran.

Berger: He does not look familiar. Ochoa Perez, I met him quite a few times.

Interviewer: What was his role?

Berger: Don't know what his official role was.

Interviewer: How did you come to interact with him? Do you remember in what capacity, what was going on?

Berger: The first time I met him, I think, was at the artillery regiment bar.

Interviewer: Social function?

Berger: Social functions, that's about all.

Rafael Bustillo Toledo. Looks familiar, but I'm not sure.

Juan Carlos Carillo Schlenker, I don't know him. Inocento Montano, I don't know him.

Cerna Flores, there he is, G-3, a "sleezebucket" from the word go. That's a very bad picture of him, by the way. In January, pretty quickly after it became known that the military was involved, he had a real quick retirement after that. I found it interesting that the G-3 retired pretty quickly after this stuff happened, as I recall my time.

Interviewer: After it became public in January he retires?

Berger: I believe so. He fades out pretty quickly right around that time and everybody was glad to see that. He left in January or February sometime.

Interviewer: What was known about him? You called him a "sleezebucket."

Berger: He used to command CEMFA. He had an atrocious reputation as being an egomaniac, his way or no way. He would spend whatever money it took to get himself taken care of. He was totally incompetent

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in his job. The only reason he got to where he was stemmed from being a member of the Tondona, a friend of Ponce, a friend of the rest of the crowd.

Interviewer: Was he a member of the Tondona in '66?

Berger: I believe so.

Interviewer: Did you know Colonel Aviles?

Berger: I met him through Eric Buckland.

Interviewer: Major Buckland worked with him?

Berger: Eric Buckland used to work for me on a DEA project.

Interviewer: Down there?

Berger: No, in the U.S. That's how come I knew Eric. And I would go to visit Eric in the Estada Mayor once in a while. After we finished the project he was on orders for some job at Bragg. I made a few phone calls to try and get him to El Salvador, which I did.

Interviewer: Did you know anything about Buckland's relationship with Aviles?

Berger: From what I recall he introduced me to him so he seemed to like him.

Interviewer: But nothing specific about the guy or how he was as an officer?

Berger: No, nothing specific.

Interviewer: Could there have been any conversations with Buckland during December after you came back from Panama concerning the killings?

Berger: No. I went back out to the eastern zone and I don't believe I saw Buckland.

Interviewer: Alright now, when did you go on Christmas leave?

Berger: December 20th. I came back in the beginning of January.

Interviewer: You came back in the beginning of January? You and Ramirez both were roughly out of the country at the same time?

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Berger: We were out of the country about the same time. The next time I really seem to recall seeing Buckland, and I don't know if it was the day after we got back in from leave or a week or two when I came back for a meeting, but he was standing in Milgroup headquarters with the JAG from Southcom. I asked him what was going on and he basically told me that he made a report.

Interviewer: You get back in January, you're out at the Atlacatl. The focus is now on that commando unit. What is being said about the commando unit?

Berger: You don't know how adamant these guys were that they didn't have control of these people. The orders to close the unit came in and back then you have to remember about the El Salvadoran military that Lieutenants don't even sneeze without permission. Colonels, lieutenant-colonels ask permission to enter a mess hall. Colonels don't make decisions. There is no way that Colonel Leon Linares would have chopped a platoon without somebody pretty high telling him to do it and the only one who told him to do things was the Estada Mayor. Colonel Linares worked directly under the Estada Mayor.

Interviewer: Do you know the purpose, or what mission the commando unit was serving at the school? What were they doing at the school?

Berger: Absolutely no idea. Just what I read in the newspapers after that. They just got attached. The newspapers said they were assigned for security purposes.

Interviewer: What was being said in the press and what were you picking up in your conversations with the Salvadoran military, after the fact, about the Jesuits in January?

Berger: January?

Interviewer: What's being said about the Jesuits at that point in time?

Berger: That they were the intellectual leadership of the FMLN, I heard that an awful lot. It was totally wrong to do it. It was just such a damn stupid thing. Just, matter of fact, personal opinion, this war would be over right now if they wouldn't have done it. That murder, in my opinion, really

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prolonged that war and it's going to prolong it until we stop aid and that's my personal opinion. My personal opinion is that I don't think Benevides, personally speaking, no proof, I don't think Benevides would have done it alone. Colonels that commanded in the Military Academy down there wouldn't act alone. I can tell you, Colonel Lopez, Colonel Rivas' replacement, even Colonel Rivas, didn't make a decision for more than a few hundred dollars without getting permission from Ponce. To get mattresses in, they had to go up to the Estada Mayor for permission. To ship troops, they had to get permission. There was no way someone was going to give this order without someone higher knowing it, that's my personal opinion, I don't think there's any way.

Interviewer: What, from your knowledge, is the Tondona?

Berger: Tondona is a graduating class from the Military Academy. But it's more than that, it's a fraternity or a club and El Salvador is one of the few countries that has it. What happens when a class graduates is that whoever does the best just keeps pulling the others along. As a matter of fact, it's a very close fraternity. I think Ponce was out of the '66 Tondona. They had all the power locked in concrete. They had everything. I think the minister of defense, Larios(PH), was a year or two ahead of them but that was more on the political side. But that Tondona locked up all the power slots. Cerna Flores, who had the first brigade, the guy who had the third brigade, Ochoa Perez, I believe, were in that Tondona.

Interviewer: From your knowledge of him, how would you depict or characterize Eric Buckland?

Berger: First time I met him was about nine months to a year before I went to El Salvador, I think. I'm not really sure of the time frame. He came to work for me and my first impression of the guy was that he was a bullshit artist. That was my first impression and my first impression was wrong. As soon as we got him on line with what we were really going to do, he did a damn good job. When I first met him, I think he was trying to cover for some inadequacies. He had no idea what we were trying to do. But once he got into it, I think it was November of '88, October of '88, once he got into it he did a really good job; 100 percent accurate,

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100 percent straight; and never caused problems. He did everything you asked and then some. I trust him right now.

Interviewer: Do you know anything of his ideology as far as the Salvadorans are concerned? How he meshed with that war or that effort? How he felt about anything along those lines?

Berger: He, like the rest of us, wanted to see El Salvador win but it wasn't win at any cost, I don't think any of us believed in that. You know, ends don't justify the means and I don't think he believed in that. I know there are some problems, having read it in the paper, I read it in Newsweek, having read Newsweek a couple weeks ago, there's suppose to be a problem with some time gap between when something was said. Eric does not speak Spanish very well. He does not understand Spanish very well. He doesn't understand present and past and future tenses very well. So if there is a problem with that, it's one of Eric's weaknesses and I don't know if anyone has pointed it out to you yet. But if it's yesterday or if someone said something right now, he wouldn't know the difference if the guy said, "I'm going to do something," "I will do something," "I did something," he just wouldn't know the difference. So, you know, there's a time he just wouldn't know unless they gave a date. I think and right now I wouldn't either, my Spanish has fallen so far in six months. But I trust him, I trust him implicitly.

Interviewer: In the normal course of your business after the killing of the priests at the UCA, the normal course of your business you're in contact with many people, some more closely involved than not. In the normal course of your business, again not any particular special event or anything, wasn't there alot of speculation, scuttlebutt, theories, opinions going around?

Berger: Do you mean before they made the announcement?

Interviewer: Yes.

Berger: Yea, everybody was worried that somebody in the military did it. The Milgroup commander and the Ambassador made it pretty specific that if anybody heard anything, no matter what, call it in.

Interviewer: When was this?

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Berger: Early. It was out when I got back. There was no doubt in anybody's mind. We were all looking, trying to find something out. There was absolutely no doubt. The Ambassador was livid and when the Ambassador down there went livid he was not a very polite man when he didn't want to be. When the Ambassador got pissed off he got everyone pissed off with him and the Ambassador was ugly. Let there be no doubt in your mind, the Ambassador was furious.

Interviewer: Think back, to the best of your recollection, do you recall any time during December, Ramirez picks you up, possibly picked you up at the airport?

Berger: At the military airport?

Interviewer: Right. At the military airport. You're coming in from Panama, do you recall any conversation where he was giving you information about the military, at that point in time, about the military being responsible for the killings or at least talking to you in general about that? Anything during December at all between you and Ramirez?

Berger: No. I don't remember, I'll be honest with you I don't, nothing. When I was picked up the biggest point of conversation and concern was that SF team sitting in the Sheraton Hotel. They were not suppose to go to the Sheraton. I was there the day that they came in at the airfield. They got right on the bus, went right out to Atlacatl and they were suppose to leave the same way and we couldn't figure out why the hell they were at the Sheraton.

Interviewer: Let me add another piece to this. In December did you talk to someone in the Salvadoran military about the Atlacatl being responsible for the killings?

Berger: I don't recall hearing about the Atlacatl even being linked to it, until it came out in the paper, until the President made his announcement in January.

Interviewer: So you can't recall any conversation wherein Ramirez would have come to you with information pertaining to the Atlacatl or possible Atlacatl involvement in December and then you're talking to anybody in the El Salvadoran military about the same thing?

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Berger: If Ramirez would have come to me I would have gone to a Milgroup commander. Doesn't ring a bell at all.

Interviewer: What have you heard or what do you know about the term death squads? How did that come about?

Berger: Death squads. Historically?

Interviewer: Yes.

Berger: I can tell you a few different sides of it. I guess I know alot of people down there. Historically the death squads were rumored to be military guys and civilian guys who went out and knocked off leftists. I have been told by the governor of La Union province that the death squads didn't go looking for leftists as much as they went knocking off criminals. There was a lot of fear of the death squads in the country. I've heard rumors in the newspaper that D'Aubuisson was a member of the death squads, that he lead the death squads.

Interviewer: Okay. Did you ever hear the name Lieutenant Hector Ocompo and the middle name would have been spelled C-U-E-N-C-A.

Berger: It doesn't ring a bell but I might know him by sight. Where is he assigned to?

Interviewer: Salvadoran Military Intelligence.

Berger: It doesn't ring a bell at all.

Interviewer: Did you have any dealings with the the Salvadoran Military Intelligence?

Berger: Almost none. The only real dealing I had with them was we got hit pretty hard one night and in the briefing the next morning they swore we weren't hit at all. I sent an RPG into them to show them. We just kept away from those crazies. They just didn't even come out to our area.

Interviewer: Alright. Approximately two days prior to the killings the word is that the same commando unit who committed the killings did a sweep of the UCA. Did you have any knowledge of that?

Berger: I wasn't even in country, I wouldn't know.

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Interviewer: I mean nothing later talked about?

Berger: No.

Interviewer: The fact that they swept the UCA?

Berger: Doesn't even, as a matter of fact, most of my actual information about what happened came from the newspapers and that's kind of fuzzy, especially trying to translate it into English.

Interviewer: Okay. Did you know any of the Jesuits that were killed?

Berger: No, I don't believe so.

Interviewer: Did you ever hear the name Ella Curia?

Berger: I heard the names after it happened but before that nothing rings a bell. It was probably the stupidest thing that they could have done. The military was doing well. How the hell do we support a government who the central figures of their military forces do things like this? How can we say we're aiding democracy? I heard a rumor at a party that Benevides's wife supposedly said Benevides wouldn't take the fall himself. Supposedly Colonel Rivas's wife heard Benevides's wife say at a party, when it comes time to go to court he's not going to be the only one to go down. You know, it's the typical garbage that you normally hear. Someone gave the order, you're going to have to break the Tondona to find out who did it. There is nobody in El Salvador strong enough to do that. There is nobody strong enough to do that right now. You see, Ponce is still chief of staff. He still has got the same crew and they've been taking care of him for years. That's the problem down there. I don't think Christiani is strong enough to break it either and Duarte wasn't strong enough to break it, nor is their military. I don't know if anybody's saying they're going to but the military is not strong enough to beat the guerrillas nor do they really want to. There are a lot of things that could be done but they're just not doing it.

Interviewer: Why do you think?

Berger: The "class" system in El Salvador. The senior military leadership is doing a hell of a lot better now than they have ever done before. You see, I was down there as early as '72. They are living

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extremely well. They've got the base of power, they've got the general popular support and there is alot of popular support for democracy down there. People stand in line to vote. You don't see that here. People stand in line even though they're threatened by the guerrillas, I've seen buses burnt. But, it goes the whole way back to Spanish culture. They've got the power base, they've got the prestige and they're getting money. You ought to see the way some of these guys live. Because some of the guys, you know, retire as a colonel where active duty pays less than one of ours or about equal to one of our lieutenants, yet they've got huge, beautiful houses. Kickbacks are known across the board there. Skimming off the top from the troops on the mess hall accounts, why change? Why are they going to change? And we'll just keep sinking money and money and money and as long as we do they're not going to change because after the '66 Tondona leaves, there will be another group. It's just the question of who it's going to be. Look at the guy who did the killings, he was one of the guys we trained in the States. If anyone should have gotten the human rights classes, if anyone should have picked it up, it should have been Espinosa. It makes it interesting doesn't it?

(END OF TRANSCRIPT)