



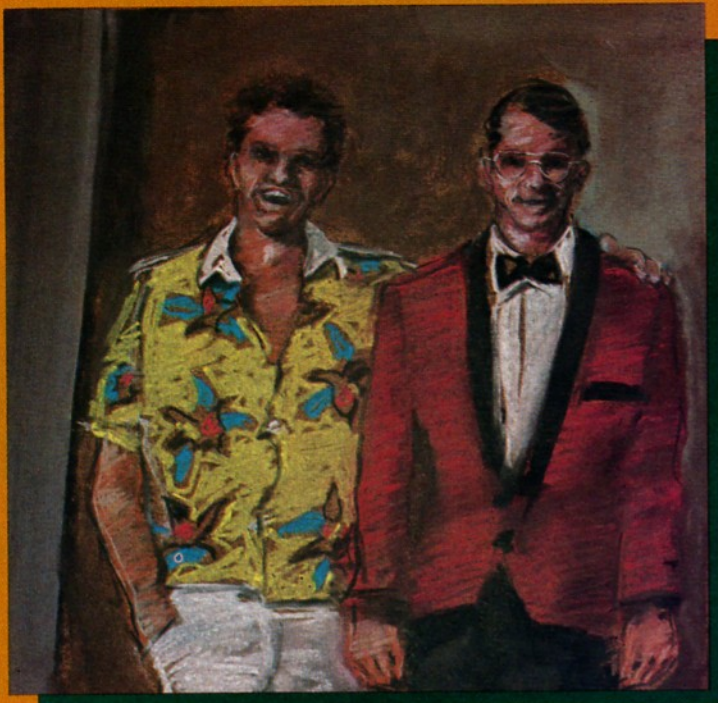
Y ■ The ■ YEARS of Serving

DANGEROUSLY

Tending bar or waiting tables can be hazardous duty anywhere. But in war-torn El Salvador, it can be deadly.

The three of them look edgy. Sitting in the coffee shop of the Camino Real Hotel in San Salvador, El Salvador's capital city, the American-network cameraman and sound technician have been talking over breakfast when their Salvadoran driver suddenly motions for quiet. A moment drags by, then another. The cameraman tenses his lanky body and tightens his grip on his fork. His eyes follow two dark-skinned men as they walk across the lobby toward the coffee shop and then—at the last minute—turn left and go out the hotel's main entrance.

Article by *DON RAY* Illustrations by *SCOTT REYNOLDS*



“We don’t talk politics here,” says Carlos, the tall, soulful-looking bartender who has been mixing daiquiris at the Camino Real’s Lobby Bar for nearly a third of his 33 years.

“Damn,” the Salvadoran driver says. “I tell you they are up to something. The last time they skipped breakfast, they beat us real bad.”

As it turns out, this morning’s episode is nothing more than friendly competition between rival networks covering the civil war in El Salvador. The two men skipping breakfast have inside information on a military operation, and they’re trying to get on the road before anyone else can follow them. “The journalists always want to sit with their backs to the wall,” says Maritza, the Camino hostess. “They will not sit anywhere else.”

One of the curious things about the Camino Real is that a careful observer can pretty much tell how the war is going by looking in at breakfast. On this particular morning in early January, probably fewer than 30 journalists are on hand—not yet enough to justify a buffet. That—the tropical fruit, refried black beans, *ranchera* sauce, and fried bananas—won’t show up on the menu until several weeks from now. By then the election campaigns will be fully un-

der way and as many as 100 journalists will be around to witness the handshaking, the baby-kissing, and the occasional murdered campaign worker.

On election day itself, the network stars will appear. They’ll put on their khaki shirts, stand with their backs to scenes of war, and deliver the election results. Perhaps even Tom Brokaw will return to broadcast the news from the roof of the Camino Real as he did two years ago.

At stake in the elections, of course, is the fate of President Napoleon Duarte’s middle-of-the-road vision of the country’s future. Ever since El Salvador first came under attack by leftist guerrillas six years ago, the government has struggled to find the best way to hold on to power and at the same time to preserve some semblance of a democracy. Until recently the answer for many in the government and the military seemed to be to eliminate the opposition: death squads struck down anyone who posed a threat. With the election of Duarte in 1984, though, came a promise to end the random kill-

ings and a pledge to seek a negotiated peace with the rebels.

“We used to get up as soon as the sun was up,” says Mario, a small, muscular CBS cameraman with a brushlike mustache and a thick Portuguese accent. He swallows a slice of melon and washes it down with ice water. “We went out on what we called the body count. We’d just ride around in the morning and count all the bodies lying in the streets—sometimes 20 or 30 of them.”

“Why so early?” a woman at the table asks. “Because the government got up early, too,” he says flatly. “If there weren’t any bodies, then people like us couldn’t count them, could we?”

Marta, a motherly waitress in her late thirties, interrupts to ask in Spanish if everything is all right. “*Bueno*,” Mario answers. “Everything is fine.” Marta says later that she’s been waiting on Mario for four years. From bits of conversations she’s picked up, she knows that he’s covered nine wars for CBS and is among the more respected journalists in the room. Now 35, he’s been shooting footage in such places as Iran, Beirut, and Northern Ireland for more than a decade.

At the next table, the conversation shifts back and forth between English and French. An Australian reporter is sitting with two broadcast journalists from Paris: a thin, youthful-looking man in his late twenties and a slightly older woman who is telling them a story about a close call she had the day before.

“I was driving to the cathedral downtown when one of those motorcycle cops with a machine gun blew his whistle from the side of the road,” the woman says, pausing to light a cigarette. “I thought I was a goner. I had no license, no papers, and I was speeding. My God, they’ve killed journalists here for less. Anyway, he walks up to the car and—are you ready for this—he tells me it’s a crime in El Salvador to drive a car while smoking a cigarette. He let me go with a warning.”

The French woman goes on to say that she was so nervous afterward that on the way back to the hotel she heard another whistle and immediately pulled over. “I had been driving past a soccer field, and it was the referee who had blown the whistle,” she says. “I didn’t stop shaking for 15 minutes.”

The Frenchman who’s with her laughs as he takes the first bite of his fried eggs. “Ugh! Why can’t they learn to make eggs here? I should go back there and teach them how to cook.” As Marta approaches the table, the

Frenchman switches to Spanish and tells her, "Take this stuff back. It's awful! And tell the chefs not to put frijoles on my plate. They make me sick. I'm liable to do something violent to them."

"To the frijoles?" Marta asks.

"No! To the chefs!"

After breakfast most of the journalists go upstairs to pack up their equipment and to make last-minute plans for the day's assignments.

Only about half of the journalists actually stay at the hotel. Many have been covering the war for more than five years, and El Salvador is now their home. A few have rented houses nearby. Some have their families with them. Even so, breakfast at the Camino remains a daily ritual, the equivalent of the morning briefing the Salvadoran generals receive at military headquarters. Besides, even the journalists who don't stay at the hotel have to report to their bureaus each day, and nearly all of the foreign news bureaus are located in the hotel. The entire second floor, in fact, has been converted to busy offices, communication centers, and elaborate editing bays.

More important for the hotel, the journalists have meant economic survival. Eight years ago, says hotel manager Alfredo Lievino, the Camino Real was crowded with tourists. "Every day we'd get another charter flight," he says. "We could count on a full house." Then Nicaragua fell to the Sandinistas in 1979, Lievino adds, and when violence erupted in El Salvador soon afterward, the tours abruptly ended.

For the Camino Real's employees, the arrival of the journalists has added an uneasy mixture of adventure and danger to their jobs. News reports about El Salvador—particularly those that might be interpreted as liberal—often make their way back to the country, and the journalists who file them are about as popular as the leftist rebels.

Several years ago the bank across the street from the Camino Real was damaged by a bomb blast, and the "journalist hotel" came under closer-than-usual scrutiny. Government soldiers patrolled the parking lot between the hotel and the bank for days, says Carlos, the hotel's usually sphinxlike bartender. "One morning a convoy of three trucks carrying soldiers was passing the hotel," he says, "and a tire on one of the trucks blew out. Before anyone knew what was happening, the soldiers were shooting in the direction of the hotel. They thought the blowout was a sniper."

More recently, a local businessman—a regular at the Lobby Bar—was sipping a drink and talking to Carlos when the soccer team from a

neighboring Latin American country walked in. At least two of them were carrying guns, and it was clear that they didn't like journalists. "I was paying them no mind," the businessman recalls, "until they told me that they thought I was a journalist and they were going to kill me." Fortunately for the businessman, Carlos convinced them that his customer had never been near a microphone or a typewriter in his life.

No place, it seems, is off-limits to the violence. Four years ago, government soldiers walked through the front door of the nearby Sheraton Hotel, then into one of the hotel's banquet rooms, where they fatally shot two U.S. land-reform specialists and the head of the Salvadoran land-reform program. "The restaurant was full of people," one waiter remembers. "But the soldiers just ignored everyone and opened fire."

For the employees the war has brought other changes as well: access to information and foreign contacts and a modest income that puts servers on the bottom rung of the country's almost nonexistent middle class. One Camino server has watched the flood of journalists coming into the hotel for several years now and has decided that he wants to emigrate to Canada. "The Americans are too loud," he says. "The Canadians are not as crazy."

Even such a simple dream as his, though, can be dangerous in El Salvador. If his manager finds out, he'll almost certainly be fired. If certain persons in the government or military were to hear about it, the consequences could be even more serious.

Not surprisingly, most of the hotel employees are reluctant to talk about their personal lives and are even more hesitant to discuss their political leanings. "We don't talk politics here," says Carlos, the tall, soulful-looking bartender who has been mixing daiquiris at the Camino Real's Lobby Bar for nearly a third of his 33 years.

When Carlos first came to the hotel 10 years ago, the country was at peace. Most of his customers were local businessmen or Yankee tourists. These days Carlos does what he can to keep the war outside the doors of the hotel. The fighting sometimes makes it difficult to keep the bar stocked with a few popular liquors, and the journalists sometimes bring talk of the war to the bar; but for the most part, Carlos succeeds in making it a kind of oasis.

Eduardo, too, the 25-year-old cashier who often works behind the bar with Carlos, is careful to sidestep any talk about politics. But if Carlos is the bar's quiet, almost detached diplomat,

then Eduardo is his more emotional counterpart. The young Salvadoran talks openly about the intrusion of the war into the life of the hotel.

Four years ago, he says, Ian Mates, a young South African cameraman who worked for UPI out of London, was sitting at the Lobby Bar sipping a Coke and talking about the dangers of covering a war. "He told me he was here only for the money," Eduardo says. "He needed it to survive. I asked him if he was afraid, and he said yes. He told me he didn't want to die." The following day, Eduardo says, news spread through the hotel that Mates had been killed—a land mine exploded beneath the car he was driving.

"The journalists upstairs heard the news first," Eduardo recalls, his face darkening over. "Then everyone knew. I remember seeing all the waiters and waitresses crying. We all liked him."

Also injured by the blast that day was John Hoagland, a photographer on contract for *Newsweek* who was a passenger in the car. He was briefly hospitalized but quickly returned to work. His brush with death didn't seem to faze him. His name even made the death squad's wanted list, but he refused to leave. He had a place near the hotel and had been recently married to a Salvadoran woman. "This is my home," he told friends.

Carlos remembers Hoagland by what he drank—always beer or a margarita—and by what he wore—blue jeans and a short-sleeved shirt. On March 16 of last year, Hoagland and a *Time* photographer were walking up a contested road between the capital and the small town of Suchitoto. They found themselves dodging mortars that were being fired at the government soldiers they were following. Suddenly they were in the middle of a cross fire, and Hoagland called out that he was hit. He died moments later.

After Hoagland's death—and the deaths of four Dutch journalists who had been staying at the Camino Real—their colleagues began to wonder if all the incidents were accidental. More than a few decided to leave El Salvador because of the danger. So many of them left, in fact, that Duarte himself made an unannounced visit to the hotel and assured the journalists that they were not targets.

Toward midafternoon, things begin to pick up at the Lobby Bar. One by one the reporters, photographers, and camera-crew members wave or nod to Carlos as they pass near the bar on their way back to their offices. Many of them are returning from a protest in front of the



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Supreme Court. The protesters, who call themselves the Mothers of the Disappeared, are all relatives or close friends of those who vanished one day and either ended up in jail or, more likely, were killed. Many of the marchers say they are sure that government death squads are responsible for the abductions, and they want the present government to give them some answers.

The protest, in fact, is fairly common. Those planning the marches know they won't get much coverage, but they want cameras present in case something violent happens to the participants. The camera crews and photographers are there for the same reason.

Shortly after the reporters and editors have finished their work and shipped their stories around the world, a good number of them gravitate to the Lobby Bar, an expansive, open room with a small bar at one end and a small stage used for live entertainment at the other. Two large, spoked light fixtures hang from

the high ceilings, but they provide only a fraction of the light that comes from the tall, arching windows that look out onto the pool. Along the other wall are shops, a car-rental desk, and the doors to a small meeting room that's frequently used for news conferences. The only thing that keeps the large room from looking like a train-station lobby is the series of rectangular and L-shaped planters that break up the floor space. In fact, if anyone were judging by its appearance alone, the hotel could fit as easily into an American urban landscape as it does into a war zone.

"Look who's back from Managua," an American tape-editor announces as a network TV cameraman and a wire-service photographer join their friends at one of the tables. "How are things in Nicaragua?"

"Cheap—if you have enough greenbacks," the photographer says. "Shit, I tipped a bellhop \$10, and he almost kissed me. The son of a bitch will probably go out and buy groceries on the black market for a couple of months with that. The word is that some of the wait-

ers and bellhops are making the equivalent of about \$2,500 a day in tips."

"The government is still as paranoid as hell, though," says his friend. "The soldiers must have searched my camera bag a dozen times in three days. They're crazy! They always want to search the stuff when we're not around. Now, the Israelis are smart. They don't touch anything. They say, 'Press that button there on the camera. Open up the back of that thing. Let me see what's in that cassette box.' Those bastards aren't stupid."

At the bar, two journalists are watching Carlos mix a daiquiri. He puts everything in a metal container, holds it high over his head, and shakes it.

"Don't you have a blender?" someone at the bar asks. One of the cameramen answers for Carlos. "Who needs a blender? Besides, as often as the guerrillas are blowing up the power plants here, we'd never get a drink if Carlos had to rely on an electric blender."

In the past few days, much of the city has been experiencing blackouts as often as twice a day. The hotel has a gasoline generator, but it takes a few minutes for it to get cranked up, and it has only enough power to light the main floor and to run the elevators. For guests who happen to get caught in their rooms, about the best they can do is to light one of the candles that the hotel provides and read a book.

As Carlos pours the drink, one of the Salvadoran employees of a U.S. newspaper spots some activity near the registration desk.

"Oh, my God. I don't believe it," he says. "Look over there. If I didn't know better, I'd say they were tourists!"

Walking up to the desk is a group of what indeed look to be tourists. After a few minutes, an elderly man and two women walk up to the bar and in loud, deliberate English ask Carlos if he has any orange juice.

Carlos pours three glasses and places them on napkins in front of the visitors. He places a flimsy plastic straw in each glass and then hands the check to Eduardo to ring up. Then he places the check, which totals 16.50, on the bar.

"Excuse me, sir," one of the women asks. "Is that 16.50 in U.S. dollars?"

Carlos smiles and calmly explains that it is 16 and a half colones, about \$1.50 for each drink.

"Oh, this is fresh-squeezed orange juice," the woman says with surprise. "Girls! Come over here and try this great orange juice."

Before long the bar is filled with members of the group sipping on orange juice and smiling broadly. When the time seems right, one of the reporters pops the question. "Tourists?"

"Oh, no," says one of the women.

"We're here for a 24-hour prayer session. We bring in light and love to the area, and we anchor the light here."

She hands a card to one of the reporters that lists the seven steps to effective prayer, and he reads part of it aloud. "I am a light being. I radiate the light from my light center to everyone. I am a bubble of light and only light can come to me and only light can be here." Hey," he says to a reporter reading over his shoulder, "these people will come in real handy the next time the lights go out."

As dinnertime approaches, the scene at the bar begins to break up. A few years ago, says Mario, the CBS cameraman, it wasn't safe to go out at night. "The death squads would drive around in Jeep Cherokees with tinted windows and no license plates," he says. "They'd just drive up next to someone, roll down the window, and open fire."

Now incidents of that sort are rare, Mario says. Tonight he and a group of four other journalists are going to a Spanish bar he discovered in Zona Rosa, a tamed-down version of a red-light district. The area, officially called Colonia San Benito, consists of a few blocks of sidewalk cafes and intimate bars that face mansions owned by some of San Salvador's wealthier citizens.

The rest of the bar crowd either stay where they are or wander into the Caminito Coffee Shop. For those who choose the Lobby Bar, the two cocktail waitresses, 18-year-old Morela and 19-year-old Rosario, make regular trips to the hors d'oeuvre bar and, without being asked, bring the customers minitacos, tiny sausages wrapped in dough, meatballs wrapped in bacon, and tiny Salvadoran versions of dumplings.

Morela and Rosario do little socializing with the customers. It's partly because they don't speak much English. Both attended a three-year vocational high school, Instituto Nacional General Francisco Menendez, which trains young men and women in the restaurant-service trade. Many of the other hotel employees, including Eduardo, also attended the school. They were able to get jobs, albeit low-paying, right out of high school. They each make the equivalent of about \$30 a week, plus another \$35 or so in tips. Even Carlos makes less than \$100 in an average week. But in the Salvadoran economy, a job at the Camino Real is something to hold on to.

Rosario is the more gregarious of the two. She has a playful smile and occasionally kids around with customers she's known for a while. Tonight she's continuing a running game with a mag-

azine writer from the United States. "*¡Dime algo!*" he says to her each time she walks by. "Tell me something." She smiles and replies facetiously, "*¡Algo!*" Morela seems less willing to talk. She admits that very few customers ever end up as close friends. One exception was a reporter from Japan.

"He would come in and practice his Spanish on me," she says. "But I couldn't understand anything he was trying to say. He had to write every word on a napkin for me to understand him. We became very good friends."

In the coffee shop, meanwhile, a local eight-member band is entertaining a small group of journalists. One of the first songs they play sounds familiar, but most of the journalists in the room are having a hard time identifying it. While the lead singer sings—or rather speaks—in English, a backup singer occasionally shouts out something that sounds like "Gas bassers!" It's only when the lead singer finally says, "I aina afraid o' no gas!" that the crowd catches on.

By about 10 p.m., things at the Lobby Bar begin to get a bit crazy. Mario is telling war stories to two TV technicians from another network. Not stories of battles, but stories that reflect the frustrations of trying to televise a modern war.

Mario pantomimes a typical battle he covered in Beirut. He holds a large imaginary radio up to his ear and chants a Middle-Eastern song.

"You see, both sides are listening to the same music," Mario tells the bar crowd. He pretends to put the radio down long enough to unpack a mortar, put it in the tube, fire it, and then hold his ears in anticipation of the explosion. "They attack only between songs." Then he pretends to be a militiaman on the other side, taking a similar radio off the shoulder, and then ducking when the mortar hits nearby. He starts chanting again and picking up the radio. "It goes on and on like that. It's crazy."

Another cameraman talks about the assignment editor he works for on the second floor. She's a local Salvadoran.

"I called her on the phone yesterday and she told me, 'There's a beeg battle twenty miles north of here. Go up and geet some peectures!' I said, 'There's no battle there. Where did you get that information?' 'Eet's good eenformation, but I can't tell you where eet came from. I have a source.' So I said, 'What do you mean a source? You can tell me! We work together!' 'Okay,' she said, 'I heard eet from another network.'"

An explosion of laughter fills the room. A moment later Frank, a tall,

freckled journalist from Alabama walks in. "Where you been?" the others ask.

"Went to Gloria's Bar," Frank tells them. "I got a special." He smiles a little boy's smile, raises his eyebrows, and rolls his eyes back. "It only cost a hundred colones." The rest of the group pretends to be appalled.

A wire-service reporter pokes his friend in the chest with his index finger. "The chances are real good you got the crabs from her," he tells him.

Frank pretends to open his pants. "Ohmygosh! You're right! There's some crabs, all right. Oh, and there's some shrimp, and look—a lobster! I've got myself an entire seafood salad down there!"

The madhouse continues until past midnight when another group of journalists manages to sneak a prostitute into the hotel by completely surrounding her and walking, crablike, through the lobby. Finally one of them says he's going to turn in. Another suggests having one last bit of fun on the way up to the room.

"Let's do some decorating," he says.

"I don't think so," one of them answers. "I tried that last night. The security man is going to be watching us like a hawk."

The others prod him until he gives in. "What the hell," he tells them. "Let's do it." They take the elevator to the fifth floor, prop the door open, and grab all the fifth-floor-lobby furniture. When they're finished, two of them pose for a photo while sitting on the sofa, one smoking, the other reading a magazine off the stack that's sitting next to the lamp on the end table.

"We've got it!" shouts the photographer. "Documented evidence showing the world's best decorated elevator."

They leave the furniture and fixtures in the elevator for the frustrated security man to discover the next morning. As they head off to their rooms, one of the rookie journalists shakes his head and laughs. "This is better than *Animal House*," he says.

Downstairs, the bartender closes the Lobby Bar for the night. Morela and Rosario have already moved into the disco; they won't be off until three in the morning.

Outside, the lights of San Salvador flicker for a moment and then—in the second hour of the 24-hour prayer vigil—go out completely. It's as if someone turned off the city for the night. For a moment it's silent. But within seconds the nighttime calm is broken by the sound of the big generator kicking in on the roof of the hotel. Life goes on at the Camino Real. And so does the war. ■

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