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The Strange Death of Bill Woods

Did He Fly Too Far In The Zone Of The Generals?

By Ron Chernow

Photo-illustration by Brian Hagiwara

THE SINGLE-ENGINE plane rose from the runway in Guatemala City and banked before the enormous volcano. Bill Woods, the pilot and a Maryknoll priest, had squeezed four American volunteers into the aircraft; they squatted on sacks of sugar and flour destined for the jungle co-op Woods had founded. It was a cloudless morning in late November 1976. Woods smoothly piloted the Cessna over the mountains that cup the plateau city. He was a husky, blue-eyed Texan, an exuberant comic and kibitzer who got a boyish kick out of sailing through the Guatemalan skies. Woods was as fabled in flying circles as a pilot as he was in the Catholic Church as a missionary. During his 18 years in Guatemala, he had chalked up 2,000 hours in the air, most of it over the dense jungle of the North. This was where he was headed today, flying over a landscape crumpled into a concertina of green ridges, formed by years of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions.

At about 11 in the morning, Bill Woods cleared the brow of the last mountain. The land then plunged to tropical forest. When Woods had first flown into this bush country ten years earlier, it had been one of the most secluded spots in the Western Hemisphere. In an airlift that lasted six years, Woods had flown 10,000 peasants from hillside postage-stamp plots and relocated them here in a jungle co-op that proved to be a model of its kind. These rural Indians revered him and felt that his plane was guided by special providence. But as the Cessna glided over the last ridge this November morning, some migrant workers on the back of a truck looked up and saw that something was terribly wrong. The plane was plummeting toward the earth. As they watched, horrified, it twisted and spun back into the mountain at a speed of 150 miles per hour. It shattered under the impact; Bill Woods and his four passengers were killed instantly.

Why did Woods' plane tumble out of the sky as if struck by lightning? It is conceivable that this priest suffered a sudden heart attack and that none of his passengers grabbed the controls. Conceivable, but not likely, given that Woods was healthy, athletic and only 45 years old. What, then, was the invisible force that disabled him? The suspicion that Woods was murdered is strengthened by a warning he received from the American ambassador to Guatemala shortly before his crash. And once, speaking to some Texas schoolchildren, Bill Woods had prophesied that if his enemies ever tried to kill him, they would post a marksman on that last mountain ridge.

Who, then, were Bill Woods' enemies? And what were their reasons for wanting to knock his plane out of the sky?

Zone of the Generals

The death of Bill Woods came in the midst of a continuing epidemic of violence across Northern Guatemala. This coast-to-coast strip has recently become infamous among human rights activists around the world. For years, this thinly peopled bush country was a sanctuary for landless peasants. Since the land was ignored by the government, it became a haven for homesteaders and the soil on which Bill Woods' co-op flourished. But today, civilization is starting to impinge on these Indians. In recent years the Guatemalan government has auctioned off gargantuan chunks of this mineral-rich territory to foreign oil and mining companies. The exorbitant leap in land values has led to frenetic real estate speculation and a land grab by the military. In fact, officers have bought up so much land in the area that the peasants have dubbed it the Zone of the Generals.

The Indians know that they will gain nothing in this Gold Rush atmosphere. The metals in the soil will be shipped to the industrial countries. The new roadways will attract the big landlords, who

will evict them from their small plots. Doubling the tragedy is the fact that many of these Indians came here to the zone in the first place because they were uprooted by powerful landlords from Guatemala's lush Pacific lowlands. Carving out a new life as homesteaders here in the wilderness was the only alternative to being dollar-a-day migrant laborers on the big Pacific plantations, a life 600,000 Guatemalans now lead. But this time, as zone peasants are again forced off their land, they are cribbed in by sheer cliffs on one side and the Mexican border on the other. They have nowhere left to go.

The opening of the boom zone has made it the scene of frightful peasant massacres. Amnesty International calculates that in 1973 three provinces in the zone accounted for only four percent of all death-squad killings in Guatemala. By 1976, however, 28 percent of the victims came from this area.

Perhaps the most harmful influence of all has been the influx of foreign oil companies. For 20 years, North American oilmen had plumbed the northern jungles for oil. But, since the Guatemalan wells weren't profitable to drain at the global prices of the '50s and '60s, they were capped and became overgrown by grass. The quintupling of oil prices in the '70s sent teams of geologists scurrying back into the jungle. And the government has been signing away big blocks of land for exploration ever since. Getty Oil has one big concession; Texaco and Amoco share another.

The big powerhouse has been a Luxembourg-based outfit called Basic Resources International. Basic Resources has wangled an oil concession of nearly one million acres just east of the Bill Woods co-op and is building a $25 million pipeline to the Caribbean. After the Arab oil embargo, Woods even offered his hospitality to some BRI geologists who came snooping around the co-op. It must have been a strange meeting there in the jungle between the two faces North America presents to the South—the idealist and the exploiter.

"Padre Guillermo"

The search that led me into the Guatemalan jungle started some months ago in a small eyrie above London's Covent Garden. I was with Michael McClintock, a bearded young American who keeps tabs on Central America for Amnesty International. Over the last 12 years, McClintock said, Amnesty estimates that 20,000 Guatemalans have been exterminated by paramilitary right-wing death squads. Tortured and mutilated bodies are fished out of ditches and ravines. The favorite targets have been union organizers and peasant leaders, which explains why fewer than two percent of Guatemalan workers carry union cards. Prisoners are often hooded during

Photo courtesy of Maryknoll Missioners

interrogations and forced to sniff insecticides. McClintock assumes that anyone in a Guatemalan jail for more than a month is dead.

Amnesty has graphed the escalation of violence in the boom zone. "This is where things are really hopping now," said McClintock at his wall map, his fingers moving across Northern Guatemala. "Ten years ago, there was nothing, just Indians quietly moving in and setting up their little farms. They cleared the land and sent out their goods by mule." McClintock pointed out the little town of Panzós—over on the Atlantic side of the zone—where between 60 and 100 Indians were savagely slaughtered less than a year ago (see box, page 37). The hamlet, as McClintock indicated, is located between oil-drilling and nickel-mining areas. Then, flicking his hand toward the Pacific, he told me of a Maryknoll missionary from Texas named Bill Woods, whom the Indians called "Padre Guillermo." "He had helped the peasants set up cooperatives here near the Mexican frontier. He built an airstrip and had a fleet of little Piper Cubs. He'd fly their sacks of corn to the city. Then in 1976 his airplane blew up. No one knows why. The people who knew Bill Woods say, 'This man was the best pilot in Guatemala.'"

I was struck by the tale of "Padre Guillermo." Partly, I think, because after years of hearing about what Ugly Americans have done to the world in Vietnam and elsewhere, here was an American of a very different sort—an idealist, someone who identified with the dispossessed and who had, perhaps, been killed because of that. And so, one day in early October of last year, I flew to Guatemala City.

The city was in the throes of a general strike. Tear gas clouded the air. My cabbie threaded the back streets to the hotel like an ambulance driver in trench warfare. He had the radio turned up loud, trying to learn the site of the latest clash, so his fare wouldn't be gassed on his first day. After I checked into the hotel, I went out for a stroll. A truckload of soldiers with Rough Rider hats was cruising down the street in an open cattle truck. They rested their Israeli-made machine guns on the side slats, pointing at people on the sidewalk.

At my downtown hotel, only two other guests dined with me each night in the dark, cavernous dining room. In the local tabloids there were three or four items daily about bullet-riddled bodies being dug up out of ravines. The details were often grotesque: one corpse had genitals swollen like footballs; another had been pecked to shreds by predatory birds. Not all of the violence was conducted sub rosa. During the three weeks that I spent in Guatemala, two trade union leaders were shot down in public; the chauffeur of the opposition Christian Democratic leader was plugged by a bullet intended for his boss; and the leader of the Association of University Students was machine-gunned to death.

At first glance, it seems incomprehensible that a small clique of landowners and generals can control a whole country. One can cite reams of data about conditions in Guatemala so bad you would think people would revolt: 81 percent of the children under five are malnourished; the average five-year-old weighs as little as an American baby of two; 20,000 children perish yearly from hunger and disease; 82 percent of the rural population is illiterate; and, perhaps accounting for all the rest, two percent of the population owns 67 percent of the land.

But starting a revolution in Guate-

mala will be no easy matter. The country's poor are in singular disarray, stymied by three deep historical feuds: between urban factory workers and rural peasants; between the mixed-blood, Western-oriented *ladinos* and the Indians; and between the more than 20 indigenous Indian groups themselves, each with its own tongue. Alone of the Central American countries, Guatemala has a largely Indian peasantry, a high percentage of them pure-blooded descendants of the Mayans.

On the other side, the trinity of generals, landowners and entrepreneurs that reigns over Guatemala turns out, on closer inspection, to be three faces of the same all-powerful class. Many of the military are also major landowners and businessmen, and employ mobile military units as their private armies. "In Guatemala, the army doesn't just defend the interest of the private sector," said one Guatemalan journalist. "They *are* the private sector."

The Adventurer-Priest

Bill Woods seemed an improbable choice as one to leap these hurdles. The son of a Texas oil engineer, he learned to fly from crop-dusters as a teenager. His destiny seemed to be more that of an adventurer than of an activist priest in one of the most liberal Catholic orders. His friends will tell you how Bill Woods roared all the way from Guatemala to New York by motorcycle or how he shot the rapids of some frothing jungle river. He was, from all accounts, the classic American boy, a Norman Rockwell stripling tinkering with the car motor. To his skill with tools was added a sure feel for politics, which made him, when he finally came to Guatemala, far more than a feather-headed utopian. Another American priest remembers him rattling off ideas, brainstorming with the speed of a Madison Avenue ad man. "Bill would throw out ten quick ideas and reject nine of them," he said. "He sensed just which one would work." Of course, Woods could be bullheaded about his blueprints. He had an Irish temper and would secretly sulk after criticism. But, then, there may be a touch of megalomania lurking inside all great reformers.

It didn't take Bill Woods long to see that landlessness was the great problem of the Guatemalan peasants. He also saw the government paid lip-service to land reform, but perpetuated a system that insured a surplus pool of landless Indians to work the large estates. So in the late 1960s, the Maryknolls assigned Woods, at his request, to a colonization project in the steamy Ixcan (pronounced *Ish*-kahn), a jungle area just below the Mexican border. Though several hundred families had already been transplanted, Woods had a larger plan. He wanted to buy up all the land between two rivers—a square ten miles on each side—and distribute it to thousands of peasants in identical plots.

When Bill Woods first went to the Ixcan, it was a blazing paradise with temperatures that often rose above 110°. As his plane took off for the jungle, the scared peasants on board would genuflect. It was their first time wedged into these flying contraptions. Many of the peasants wore all their belongings on their backs and came without a cent. They slept in makeshift shacks beside the dirt airstrip that had been hacked out of the jungle with machetes and chainsaws.

"One of the biggest problems the people had with their chickens and pigs was that the *tigres* [jaguars or pumas] would come in at night and snatch them up," says Dave Hollstegge, a brawny, ruddy American from Cleveland and Bill Woods' chief assistant on the project, whom I found in an Indian village near Guatemala City. "Every night we would hear tigers crying out in the yonder there. We didn't know how far they were. But we'd find paw prints in the ground."

If the Ixcan is today a showcase for

Photos courtesy of Maryknoll Missioners

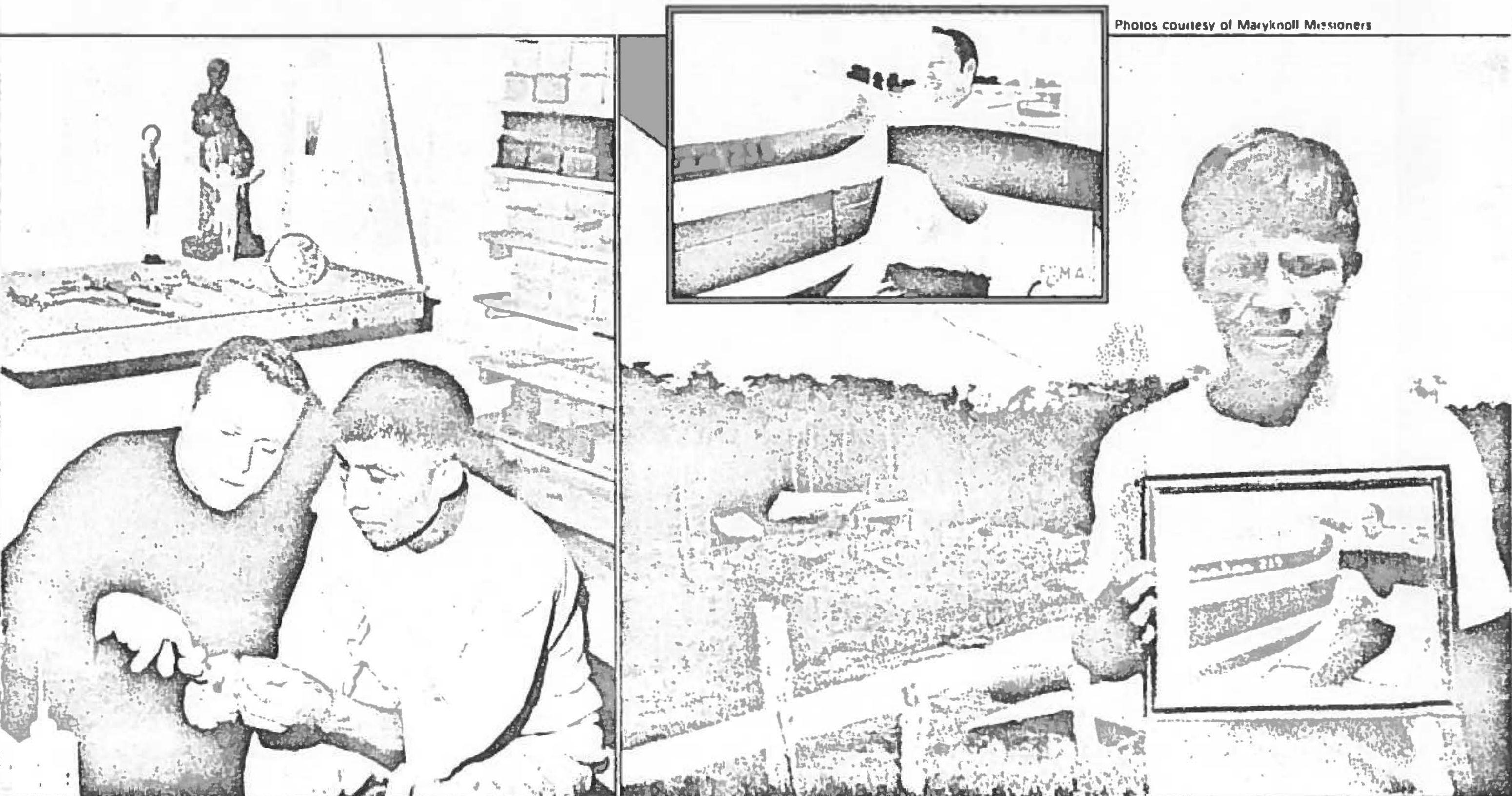


Photo courtesy of Mrs. Anna Woods

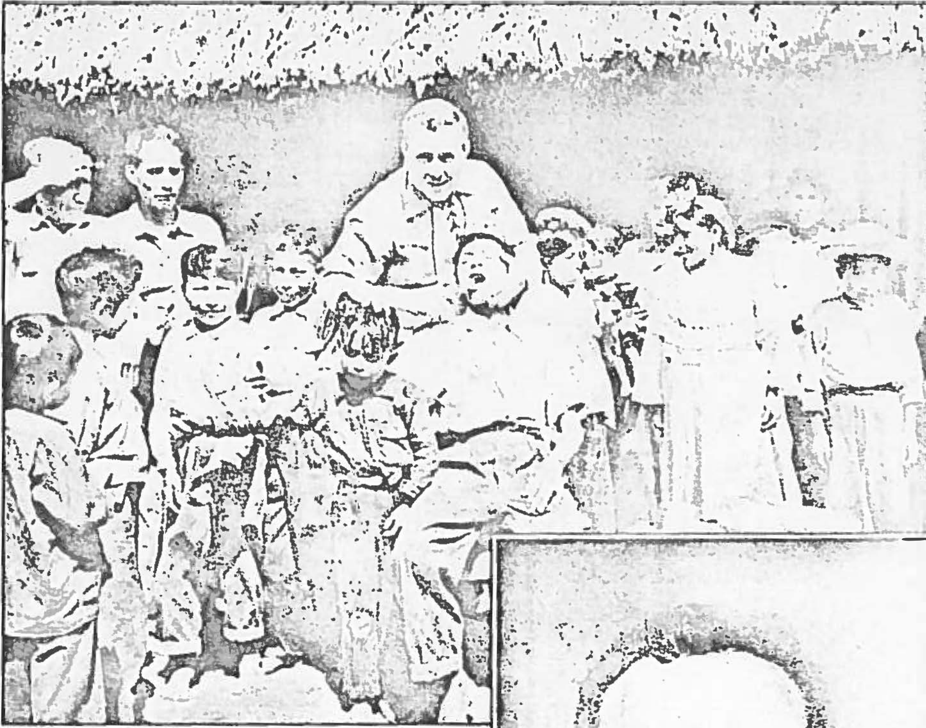


Photo courtesy of Maryknoll Missioners

land reform in Guatemala, it may be because Bill Woods was never the slave of any theory. He was as egalitarian as the next reformer, and it must have been tempting to experiment with collective ownership of land. But Woods recognized that the Indians had been swindled out of property so many times that, despite their own cultural heritage of communal ownership, they needed the security of individual plots. At the same time, Woods wanted to create a structure that would safeguard the co-op from any government land-busting scams. The solution was to parcel out separate plots—which the peasants could work as they pleased—but place the title for all the land in the name of the co-op. Outfoxed by this strategy, the government kept stalling Woods in his efforts to obtain the deed. Local politicians felt threatened by this island of prosperity in the midst of their own corrupt and impoverished fiefdoms. They started to whisper about the "little Cuba" in the jungle. It was the opening shot of a prolonged fusillade.

Into the Jungle

On a Friday morning in mid-October, I stood on a grassy airstrip in Santa Cruz del Quiché. It is the "airport" for the shuttle founded by Bill Woods and the only way of reaching the Ixcan without spending a couple of days on horseback. The runway resembles a golf fairway shaved from a cornfield; there are mountains in the distance. The waiting room consists of two crates under a corrugated shed. When I arrived the overture from *Carmen*, from the mechanic's radio, sailed out over the cornstalks. Barefoot women walked down the road with firewood on their heads. And beside the airstrip, teenage paratroopers in jungle fatigues—members of the army units one sees everywhere—stalked phantom subversives in a counter-insurgency drill. Then, with machine guns balanced on their skulls, they bunny-hopped to the strains of *The Toreador Song.*

My pilot was a cigarette-smoking lapsed priest from Quebec named Guy Gervais. After a bumpy takeoff, we flew north over the 4,500-foot Cuchumatanes Mountains, a spectacular range that has sequestered the Ixcan from the modern world. For all Gervais' nonchalance, bush-piloting can be a scary business. If you hit clouds, you have to estimate the time of the remainder of the flight and then duck under the cloud cover at the proper moment. Laughing, Bill Woods used to reassure his passengers that the Lord would provide.

After 15 minutes, the mountains vanished. Jungle stretched to the Mexican border in one vast plain. Gervais pointed out the 78,000-acre holding of President Fernando Romeo Lucas García to the west of the co-op. To the east, we could see a maze of red dirt roads that Basic Resources had bulldozed through the forest. The Transversal Northern Highway—created at the behest of the oil companies and once under the personal supervision of President Lucas himself—will cross the co-op and hook up his estate with the Basic Resources oilfields.

The Ixcan is now occupied by the Guatemalan Army—allegedly to root out guerrillas. Five groups of people are banned: union leaders, peasant organizers, foreigners, tourists and journalists. Faced with triple jeopardy, I clutched a letter from Iowa Congressman Tom Harkin; I was hoping to flash it quickly and talk my way past the soldiers. As Gervais descended over a jungle clearing, three paratroopers sprinted out onto the spongy airstrip. Submachine guns in hand, they were standing by the plane door by the time we seesawed to a stop. The soldiers scrutinized my passport and looked at my suitcase. Miraculously, they let me pass. Thus I became the first journalist to visit the Ixcan in more than a year.

I stayed in the house of Karl Stetter, Bill Woods' successor, overlooking the airstrip. "It's a strange world," Stetter said one night. "The children here have seen lots of helicopters and machine guns. But they've never seen an automobile or a bicycle." [Editor's note: As we were going to press, Karl Stetter was expelled from Guatemala; see page 2.]

For several days, I flew with Stetter from one Ixcan village to the next. It's a lovely landscape with tall skinny trees that stick up above the jungle, bushes with wide, sun-soaked leaves, bright swarms of orange and yellow butterflies, parrots, crocodiles and lightning that crackles pink during night storms. But for the co-op members life is pure struggle, especially since they're accustomed to cool mountain plateaus. There are no paved paths and the rubber-booted peasants must wade through knee-deep mud. To shop in the marketplace or haul their crops to the airstrip, they must ford streams and trudge up slippery slopes in two- and three-hour treks.

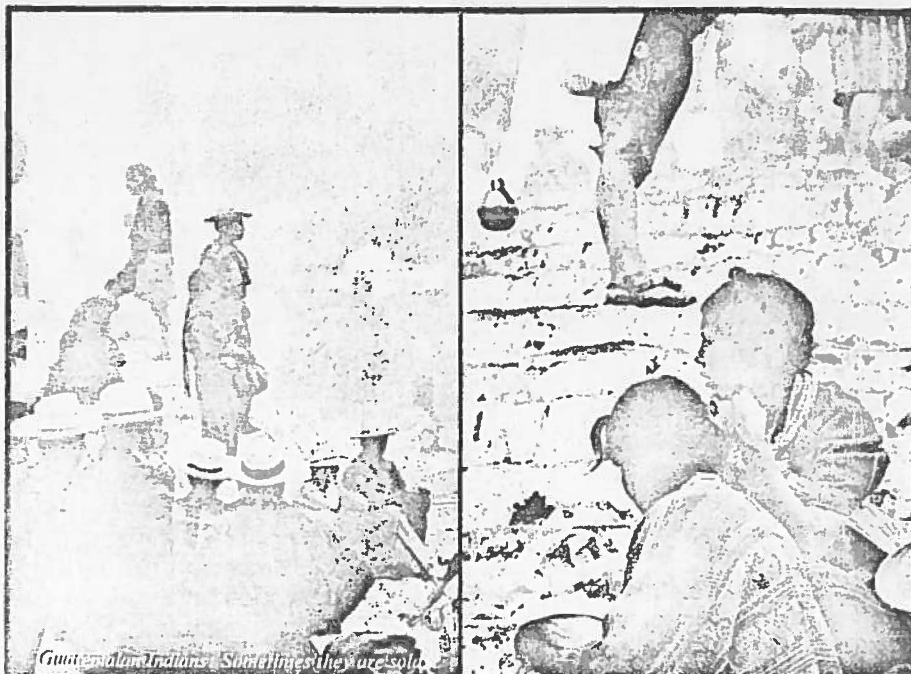
The co-op is enriched by an astonishing mixture of Indian tribes. Stetter's home hamlet has many members from the Todos Santos tribe, who wear what look like Uncle Sam outfits: the men in red striped pants, rainbow collars and high cowboy hats; the women in blouses with red and mauve parti-colored bands and blue skirts. The various tribes mingle in everything but marriage. The Ixcan co-op today is a happy community in which seven languages are spoken.

"To me, the project is very revolutionary in so many ways," says Dave Hollstegge. "It's not customary within Indian culture to just pick up and go away and set up new residence in another town. Here these people picked up and hauled off to this unknown, godforsaken land, completely different in climate from what they were accustomed to. The whole idea of their having the opportunity to acquire land—of living with other Indian groups with different languages, culture and customs—is revolutionary in the best, nonviolent sense of the word."

A Warning

Bill Woods' spirit is still much in evidence at the co-op. In the general store, his photo hangs like an icon. Traveling with Karl Stetter, I got some sense of what Woods' life must have been like. On a typical day, Stetter would repair an electric generator; fly a sick child to the hospital; assemble a new rice polisher; conduct mass in the hilltop church with log benches (always accompanied by at least six young guitarists); and marry a young Indian couple by candlelight, their two-year-old offspring dozing on the bride's back.

It all might have seemed idyllic, except for the telltale signs that kept bringing me back to the puzzle of Bill Woods' death. First, there were the government people, with their fancy cowboy hats and city duds, who came to survey the co-op for the Transversal Northern Highway. Already, land in the Ixcan fetches about *15 times* the price that Bill Woods originally paid. Then, too, there are guerrillas, far more numerous than a few years ago. Early last year, the guerrillas cordoned off one co-op village with machine guns and addressed the residents. They warned them that the army would soon move in, not to hunt for guerrillas but to protect the *gringo* oilmen and preside over the


Guatemalan Indians: Sometimes they are sold

Photos by Elliott Erwitt/Magnum

ANOTHER MY LAI

LAST SPRING, THE American press was filled with much outraged hand-wringing over the loss of European lives in Zaire and Rhodesia. But, except for one buried piece in *The Washington Post* and a few paragraphs in *Newsweek*, we heard nothing at all about a Guatemalan village called Panzós. But in May 1978, Panzós witnessed one of Latin America's largest peasant massacres.

The Panzós massacre had many roots, but the main one—like that of all other politics in the Zone of the Generals—was land. Many peasants in this eastern tip of the boom zone live as tenant farmers on large estates. They spend most of the year tending the landlord's fields in return for a house and a small garden to farm. Landlords will sometimes sell their tenant farmers along with their estates to enhance the value. The Anti-Slavery Society of London has singled out Guatemala as "the Central American country where evidence suggests that conditions fall into the category of slavery."

The Panzós tragedy began when 700 members of the Kekchi tribe marched into the village brandishing machetes and sticks. Whole families marched up a dirt road flanked by palm trees and coca-thatched huts. They came to meet with the mayor of Panzós about a lengthy list of land tenancy problems. They also wanted to hear a letter read aloud from the Autonomous Trade Union Federation of Guatemala, advising them of their property rights.

As they approached the town square, however, they spied paratroopers with machine guns perched atop the flat-roofed town hall. After one Kekchi was taunted into assaulting a soldier, the machine-gunners fired a volley into the throng. The terrified peasants threw themselves on the ground. Then the paratroopers flung three grenades into the crowd, covering the town with black smoke. Local landlords, packing sidearms, then moved in and shot at people writhing in the dust or chased them down side streets. Bleeding Indians staggered down a pebble path toward the river, screaming and crying. They splashed through pools and shoulder-high reeds. Many of them flopped, exhausted, into dugout canoes at a bend of the Rio Polochic. Some escaped into the hills and were hunted by helicopters.

Throughout the day, soldiers worked, heaping up the dead Kekchis in two truckloads—one for whole corpses, the other for the skulls, limbs and torsos blown apart by the grenades. With wounded Indians still gasping in the streets, the army banned the Red Cross from town. After bulldozing a pit in the cemetery, the troops dumped both truckloads in together. The Catholic Church of Guatemala estimates that at least 60—and perhaps as many as 100—Kekchis are interred in that communal tomb. Another 40 or 50 were wounded. By contrast, seven soldiers —mostly Indian boys rounded up by press gangs—were wounded by peasants' machetes.

—Continued on next page

Photo by Elliott Erwitt/Magnum

ANOTHER MY LAI

—continued from page 37

TO GET TO PANZÓS, you take a bus, Rápidas Polochic, named after the river that foams in and out under the rocky road. A dozen times, the bus splatters through wide streams that cross its path. At first, the river valley is thickly forested and a few hundred feet across. Then it splays out into a flat and treeless plain. On a relief map, the valley stands out as one of the few stretches of Guatemala not covered by crags, making it prime farming land. Yet, incredibly, this splendid piece of level property is covered with cattle and hemmed in by barbed wire. You ride for hours, hardly seeing a soul in this terrain. But behind them Kekchis work minute corn patches high up in the hills that cradle this fairyland for fat cows. The cows will be butchered and sold for hamburger in the United States. It's difficult to overstate the hardship that cattle raising has brought here. A landlord might require 300 tenant farmers to grow crops; but once he switches to cattle, he can evict more than 90 percent of his tenant peasants.

In the Ixcan, Bill Woods' area in the west of the Zone of the Generals, oil development has been the major threat. But in this eastern segment of the boom zone, nickel is king. At the far end of the river valley, the land rises up to Lake Izabal, famed for its sea cows. The lake is rimmed by blue mountains, but the soil is the deep red color of nickel. In this idyllic spot, Exmibal—a joint venture of International Nickel and Hanna Mining—has started one of the biggest open-pit nickel mines in the world. Nickel is one of the key strategic materials for waging modern war. Mixed into steel alloys, it strengthens everything from jet engines to atomic power plants. Consequently, Exmibal is dear to the hearts of defense analysts in Washington, and the area around its concession has been subjected to rigorous and repeated counter-insurgency sweeps.

Exmibal still reigns omnipotent over a 150-square-mile kingdom. Taking a cue from local landlords, it grazes its private herd of cattle over a rich portion of the valley while poor Indians clamor for land. Many Kekchis complain that the company has either expelled them from their holdings or made them pay rents where they had been contented squatters before. They've also criticized the company for not giving them the land titles they were promised when Exmibal first arrived.

When I finally reached Panzós, I found a village that has again recovered its picture-postcard charm. Palm trees shaded a turquoise fountain in the square, and the bushes sprouted coral buds. But the children still have a nervous, haunted look in their eyes; some of them will ask if you can take them home with you.

On a sunny morning, Carlos, six, and his brother Ramón, eight, took me to visit the communal grave in the cemetery. The tropical foliage had nearly erased the dirt path up the hill. We got lost in the high grass and Ramón had to ask the way from a child in a hut on the cemetery grounds. We went past other graves gaudily decorated with bouquets of faded paper flowers. Finally we found the crude memorial erected by the townspeople, a lean-to with a zinc roof and a hand-lettered sign: "May the blood of the martyrs be the seed of a just and humane Guatemala." On the grave itself the nickel-red earth still looked freshly turned. □

theft of co-op land. You can still see the guerrillas' initials—"E.G.P." for Ejercito Guerrillero de los Pobres or the Guerrilla Army of the Poor—daubed in red paint on the village houses.

Unfortunately, the operating thesis of the guerrillas seems true. Already the government helicopters ferry personnel and supplies into the oil fields. And this may be the prelude to an attempt to bust the co-op. Last year, in one Ixcan village, the mayor of a nearby town outside the co-op came with soldiers, handcuffed one of the co-op members and tried to seize his land. Instantly hundreds of co-op people assembled with machetes and angrily forced the mayor to drop his bogus claim. But the fear is still there.

For a year before his death, Bill Woods must have had forebodings about the future of the co-op. In July 1975, 30 peasants disappeared from the Ixcan during a counter-insurgency sweep by the Guatemalan Army. Irate, Woods and others signed a protest letter to then-President Laugerud on November 12, 1975—a year before his plane crash. This sort of public indignation can be perilous for a priest in Guatemala.

After the earthquake in February 1976, which left more than a million Guatemalans homeless, Woods flew into Guatemala City and ordered a quarter-million dollars' worth of corrugated roofing. He even founded a housing project. Clearly Woods was emerging as the sort of social-oriented, charismatic leader of the poor that the Guatemalan elite has always feared. And his power base was now expanding beyond the remote confines of the Northwest. The government had already taxed Woods' religious radio station out of existence (he served on the air both as D.J. and catechist). Now, a month after the quake, the government grounded Woods' airplane flights on specious charges of carrying excess weight.

Amid these omens, Bill Woods was summoned to the office of Francis E. Meloy, Jr., the American ambassador to Guatemala. Meloy informed Woods that four high Guatemalan officials were displeased with his activities and suspected he was involved with guerrillas. Meloy suggested that Woods, for his own safety, leave Guatemala. This was the account of the meeting Woods gave several friends immediately after it had occurred.

(The Guatemalan military often

sought to discredit Woods by claiming that he had links to the guerrillas. In fact, however, he was a rather vocal opponent of their efforts. His opposition came partly from his own deep, perhaps naïve, faith in nonviolence and partly from the fear that the military would try to bust the co-op with the excuse of routing out revolutionaries. To the military, distinctions between armed guerrillas and nonviolent reformers are unimportant; both groups threaten the pattern of land ownership.)

Officially, State Department representatives deny that Meloy asked Woods to leave. Meloy himself cannot give his side of the story, for he is dead—the victim of terrorists during a following assignment in Lebanon. It makes obvious sense, however, that officials would have to deny that Meloy warned Woods. For, Woods told friends, one of the four Guatemalan officials cited was General Fernando Romeo Lucas García, then Minister of Defense and now President of Guatemala.

The U.S. government has been an apologist for Guatemala's dictators ever since the CIA engineered the overthrow of the last liberal regime, the Arbenz Government of 1951 to 1954. Arbenz had distributed 1.5 million acres to poor peasants. But he also expropriated 387,000 acres of United Fruit Company land, offering little more than $1 million in compensation — a decision that proved his undoing.

Arbenz's downfall was followed by continued American attempts to shore up shaky regimes. In 1962, the U.S. Special Forces went to Guatemala to conduct a counter-insurgency campaign in the eastern corner of the boom zone, near the nickel holdings of Cleveland's Hanna Mining Co. and Canada's colossus, International Nickel (see box, page 38). Amnesty International estimates that between 3,000 and 8,000 Guatemalans died during the campaign carried out from 1966 to 1968. In a bizarre boast, Colonel John Webber, U.S. military attaché during the campaign, told *Time* magazine in 1968 that "it was his idea and at his instigation that the technique of counter-terror had been implemented by the Guatemalan army in the Izabel areas." Pleased with the campaign, the U.S. Military Assistance Program funneled in another $6 million in aid plus $11 million in military sales to Guatemala between 1969 and 1970.

There is no current U.S. military assistance program to Guatemala. But the generals will still be receiving $6.5 million in military aid based on past agreements, and Congress is considering a $250,000 proposal to train Guatemalan military officers in the United States. The United States has also assumed an attitude of benign neglect toward Israel's stepped-up sale of weapons to Guatemala.

The Cover-Up

The warning conveyed by the Ambassador caused a crisis for Bill Woods. It squarely pitted his personal safety against the project to which he had dedicated his life. Due for a vacation in any case, Woods flew back to Texas in the tiny Cessna that the Guatemalan government had let him keep flying for strictly clerical duties. For a month or two he brooded and shared a retreat with the President's sister, Ruth Carter Stapleton. Then he told his friends that since the Ixcan peasants couldn't just desert their land, he couldn't desert them. Woods flew the Cessna back down across the Texas border.

On the morning of November 20, 1976—almost six weeks after his return to Guatemala—Bill Woods loaded up the plane for his last flight to the Ixcan. He took four eager American volunteers on board. They took off from Guatemala City without a hitch and disappeared. By lunchtime, the Maryknolls were aware that the plane had gone astray. They kept calling the civil aeronautics authorities, trying to get information about its whereabouts. Later, they learned that the army had materialized at the crash site almost at once—strange, considering the desolate nature of the area. And the Maryknolls could obtain *no* information about Woods or the plane till 7:30 that evening —eight or nine hours after the crash—even though the army "rescuers" must have been in radio contact with Guatemala City the whole time. The next day, Woods' fellow missionaries journeyed to the crash site. The plane was a heap of splinters; its engine, at first wedged six feet into the mountain from the impact, was now rolled down the hill.

When the news of Woods' death spread, dozens of Indians hiked for a day across swamps and forests to the town of Barillas, then took the bus down to the funeral in the mountainous capital of Huehuetenango. On the day of the burial, Dave Hollstegge wore the immaculate white robes of a former Maryknoll brother. Ixcan peasants shouldered Woods' casket at the head of a huge procession. In the photographs, their faces look severe and drawn.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

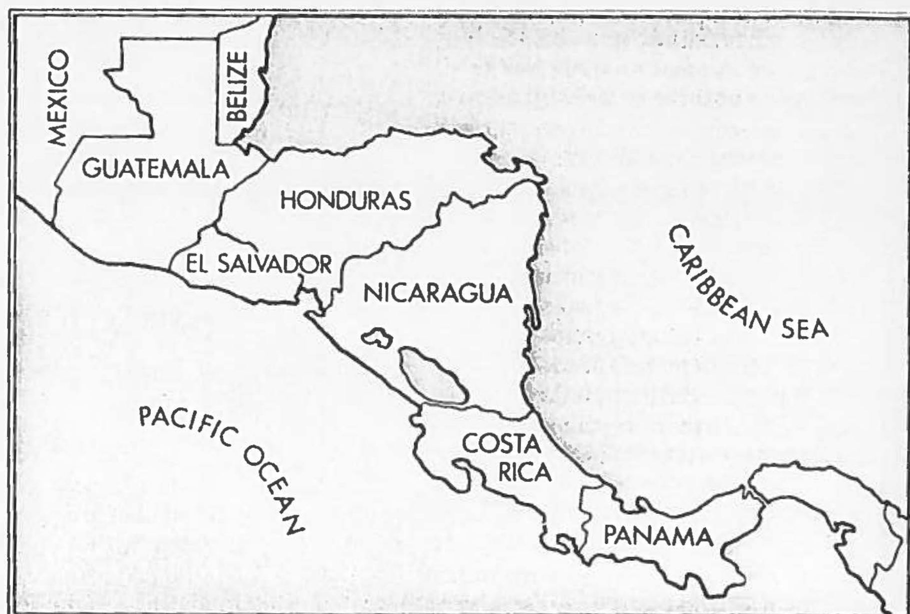
ONE WAY INDIVIDUAL Americans can aid in the struggle for justice in Guatemala is by helping the country's political prisoners. For information on how to do this, contact *Amnesty International*, the world-wide human rights organization working for the release of political prisoners everywhere. Amnesty's West Coast office, at 3618 Sacramento Street, San Francisco, California 94118, (415) 563-3733, handles information on Guatemala. The *Washington Office on Latin America*, 110 Maryland Avenue N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002, (202) 544-8045, is also a good resource.

Photo by Donna Dell'Aro

THERE ARE SEVERAL good sources of Latin American news not covered in the establishment press. One is the *INTERNEWS International Bulletin*, Box 4400, Berkeley, California 94704, a biweekly newsletter available for $12 a year. Another is *NACLA Report on the Americas* ($11 a year), published bimonthly by the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA), 151 West 19th Street, New York, New York 10011. The Guatemala News and Information Bureau (GNIB), P.O. Box 4126, Berkeley, California 94704, publishes a quarterly report called *Guatemala*, available on request. —*Ruth Henrich*

CENTRAL AMERICA: MORE IRANS?

GOVERNMENT REPRESSION is a booming business in nearly all of Central America these days, with varying degrees of profitability. A few countries seem on the brink of an Iran-like turbulent upheaval. For others revolution is still distant. Here is a pocket guide to what to expect in each of the six countries of Central America:



Map by David Reavis

Guatemala: Last December, the Guatemalan press reported ten labor leaders arrested, 60 labor activists fired for trying to organize unions and 70 dead bodies showing signs of torture found near the capital and in rural areas. During the holiday season that same month, the government broadcast a message on radio and TV exhorting the people to "dedicate this month to meditating on the concept of 'social peace' . . . love, tranquility and thought, joy, and a good time for all."

In its less tranquil moments, the government is supported by rightist vigilante groups with names like "Eye for an Eye" and "White Hand." Another goon squad is the Secret Anti-Communist Army (ESA), known for its widely publicized hit list of 38 people marked for assassination.

The ESA is especially concerned with smashing labor unions. It has already killed the head of the union that won the right to represent workers at the country's Coca-Cola bottling plant. Another labor organizer on the list—still alive at press time—directs the umbrella group that coordinated a strike over raised bus fares last October. (On page 34, Ron Chernow describes landing in Guatemala City while this strike was in progress.) More assassinations—like the previous waves of killing—will not stop the opposition, but the military remains strong.

Nicaragua: Compared to Guatemala's leftist guerrilla movement, Nicaragua's is well organized, and very close to ousting President Anastasio Somoza. With its mixture of two generations of political power plus vast commercial holdings, Somoza's dynasty is much like the Pahlavi monarchy of Iran, although Somoza likes to claim that, unlike the Shah, he was democratically elected. Of all the Central American countries, this one is most likely to become an Iran in the near future.

The biggest threat to Somoza is the militant Sandinista National Liberation Front, which focuses its armed attacks on the National Guard—the Somoza family's power base. The Guard's 8,000 troops function as both army and private police force to Somoza; the officers are largely U.S.-trained. The Sandinistas engage mostly in hit-and-run attacks on National Guard garrisons.

The Sandinistas also organized Civic Defense Committees and in September made a coordinated attack on eight cities—a move that Somoza compared to Vietnam's 1968 Tet offensive. A Sandinista told American reporters, "We learned [in September] that Somoza will destroy the country rather than give up power. We never expected him to bomb civilian areas and kill thousands of people."

After considerable waffling on the issue, the Carter Administration has withdrawn support from Nicaragua. Early this year, more than half the U.S. government employees there (including four members of a "military assistance group") were brought home, and $10 million in loans was cancelled. But other than this basically symbolic move, the Administration's policy toward the Somoza government has been "schizophrenic," as *The Washington Post* puts it. This is partly due to pressure at home from the "Nicaragua lobby," whose main ingredients are a $1 million annual public relations campaign financed by Nicaraguan public funds and two powerful and avidly pro-Somoza Congress members. The most vocal of the two, Rep. Charles Wilson (D-Tex.), threatened to block aid to Zaire and other countries last summer unless Nicaragua got its $12 million. The other, John Murphy (D.-N.Y.), was a classmate of Somoza's at West Point.

El Salvador: More volatile perhaps than all of Central America, except for Nicaragua, is this tiny time bomb. A recent human rights investigation here by the Organization of American States (OAS) uncovered evidence of rampant torture by the military government, including "systematic persecution of the Roman Catholic Church." At least four priests have been murdered in the past two years; all four were active in organizing peasant labor.

El Salvador is the only Central American country that is overpopulated; there are about 550 people per square mile. The population is expected to double by 1990 in this country where the majority of the 4.5 million inhabitants already rank with the world's poorest.

What needs changing most desperately is distribution of land. All but a tenth of El Salvador's arable land is owned by the country's famous "Ninety Families," and five of the 90 own a quarter of the land. The OAS deemed this inequitable distribution responsible for the "despair and misery of the peasant" and the consequent "atmosphere of tension and polarization." International Political Surveys, Inc., a consulting firm that advises U.S. corporations on political risks involved in doing business abroad, lists El Salvador as one of the ten countries in the world most likely to experience turmoil or revolution in the next 18 months.

Honduras: This, the poorest of Central American nations, has also been experi-

encing militant peasant uprisings in recent years. And since last August, when a junta put General Policarpo Paz García in power, the military regime has toughened. The government claims there will be an election for assembly in 1980, but opposition parties have been prevented from registering, and things don't look hopeful.

Honduras' per capita income is the lowest in Central America—below $400 yearly. The army has reportedly been cooperating with the Nicaraguan National Guard in hunting down and capturing Sandinista guerrillas in Honduran territory bordering Nicaragua.

Costa Rica: Its democratic tradition is 80 years old, and it has no army. It enjoys a 90 percent literacy rate, the most even distribution of wealth in Latin America, and a lower unemployment rate than that in the United States. With the highest standard of living and the lowest birthrate of the countries in the region, Costa Rica is a Central American anomaly.

But the nation's year-old administration, headed by President Rodrigo Carazo, is moving to the right. This government is worried about the Communist Party's influence on labor unions. In a televised speech made after a strike last year, the Public Security minister said his people were losing respect for democratic authority, and "many have confused liberty with libertinism."

On the other hand, the Costa Rican government is increasingly anti-Somoza. Late last year it began sending police to shoot at the Nicaraguan National Guard, who regularly enter Costa Rican borderlands in search of Sandinistas.

Panama: Panama also has become important in the anti-Somoza struggle. It is now a refuge for many Sandinista guerrillas, and the government here called for the Nicaraguan president's resignation early this year. Panama has sent military aircraft to Costa Rica to help its fight against the Nicaraguan National Guard.

Panama's alliance with the Nicaraguan opposition could lead to trouble with the U.S., however. The two pro-Somoza Congress members, Wilson and Murphy, threatened to hold up crucial legislation needed to implement the canal treaties unless Panama stops aiding "Marxist revolutionaries," i.e., the Sandinistas.

After decades of politics centered largely on tension with the U.S. over the Canal issue, no one is quite sure what will be the direction of Panamanian politics now that both countries have passed the treaties. The new Panamanian President, Aristides Royo, has a reputation as a leftist but was hand-picked by the outgoing dictator, Omar Torrijos Herrera. —*Lori Onstenk*

Of course, most people familiar with Bill Woods' work suspected foul play. The slipshod investigation of the accident by Aeronáutica Civil only fed their paranoia. My own investigation of the accident—as complete a one as I could make a year and a half after it occurred—indicates the following additional reasons for suspicion:

- Investigators from Aeronáutica Civil flew out to the crash site from Guatemala City in a helicopter, hovered over the spot, then whirled back to the capital to file their report—without having set foot on the site. When Bill Woods' associates pointed out that their report erroneously claimed that the engine had burned up, the investigators rushed to delete this information.
- No one ever was able to find fragments from the plane's windshield. But if Woods *had* been shot by a sniper, such fragments might have borne evidence of bullet holes.
- When Armand Edwards, a Texas-based investigator from the U.S. National Transportation Safety Board, flew to Guatemala to aid in the investigation, he was thwarted repeatedly by the Guatemalan government. First they told him darkly that the crash region was crawling with dangerous guerrillas and that he had best travel there armed. Then they told him that they couldn't offer him air service to the distant site (some 14 hours by car from the capital) because all the helicopters in Guatemala were grounded for maintenance. The American Embassy was no more helpful. Edwards admits that he spent most of his sojourn in Guatemala City hanging around the hotel. Asked if the Guatemalans had obstructed his efforts, Edwards chuckled, "I'll let you draw your own conclusions."

A Frontier Mass

One Saturday in the Ixcan, I attended mass. It was a scene from a John Ford western: the hilltop church, its cross etched against the clouds, the parishioners climbing the chapel path while hymns issued from the doors. The church was so crowded that some of the men stood outside, hats pushed back, and poked their heads in through the open sides of the church during the sermon. Elsewhere in the other villages of the co-op, the soldiers were ubiquitous. But in this settlement, they stayed holed up in their Fort Apache, their presence betrayed only by smoke squiggles.

When I mentioned this to Karl Stetter, he told me a story that sums up the Woods legacy. He said that the soldiers used to ring the church during mass. One evening, they had nabbed a co-op leader returning home through the forest with sacks of sugar. He was shopping for his neighbors. But the soldiers accused him of smuggling food to a rebel hideaway and terrorized him during a three-hour interrogation. The outraged co-op members grabbed their machetes and confronted the *comandante* in a group. Frightened by this show of strength, the officer had ordered his men to make themselves scarce during services.

Unfortunately, it has been otherwise in most parts of the Zone of the Generals. In Panzós and other towns, the gathering of Indians has been a signal for slaughter and terror. More massacres are expected, as Guatemala seems to be moving toward civil war. The "progress" that the pipelines and highways were meant to bring to the country has been perverted by the Guatemalan elite. The gringo-backed development has been a pathetic substitute for a true development program that might bolster native industries and, more important, redistribute wealth and land.

Bill Woods was not the Messiah of the Guatemalan Indians. He would have been the first to resist t[illegible] idea. And he would have protested that too much focus on his own death misdirected attention away from those of thousands of murdered Indians—and hundreds of thousands more who have died the slower deaths of disease and poverty. But he is someone who could have made the Indians' plight known to the rest of the world. Most dangerous of all, he helped show them how, by banding together, they could make their own strength felt by the government. Bill Woods used to fantasize about duplicating his co-op clear across the boom zone to the Caribbean; he thought in big Texas terms. But in the end, his vision was too bold, too spacious for this mountainous country of gullies and ravines, tyrannized by greedy little men.

Ron Chernow is a contributing editor of Mother Jones. *He also writes regularly for* Quest/79, The Saturday Review *and other publications. This story was sponsored by the* Mother Jones *Investigative Fund, a project of the Foundation for National Progress.*