ON THE ATTACK WITH SALVADOR REBELS: BATTLE STARTS EARLY AND LASTS ALL DAY

BY RAYMOND BONNER, Special to the New York Times

JOCOAITIQUE, El Salvador

With the stars providing the only light, the rebels remained within touching distance of one another as they moved cautiously for three hours up and down rocky mountain trails and across streams.

At 11 P.M., when the full moon rose and its light made it more difficult to advance undetected, they stopped. They slept on the cold, damp dirt path without bedrolls.

Ahead of them was Jocoaitique, a hilltop village surrounded by higher hills about a mile from the paved road that links San Francisco Gotera and Perquin, the major towns in Morazan Province. Their mission was to attack the fortified Government positions there as part of a larger military campaign begun by the Faribundo Marti National Liberation forces in the last week of December in their effort to overthrow the United States-supported junta in El Salvador.

Goal: Get Closer to Cities

The goal of the campaign, according to the guerrilla leaders, is to work their way closer to the major cities, such as San Francisco Gotera and ultimately San Salvador itself. If successful, it will enable them to attack the garrisons in those places and weaken the Government before the elections it has called for March 28.

The primary objectives of this particular attack were to force the Government forces to withdraw and to capture weapons. The battle, which the Government fought with helicopter gunships as well as ground forces, began early in the morning of Jan. 12 and did not end until after nightfall. By that time, the last of the Government troops had fled from the village, and the rebels were counting the casualties on both sides.

Final Orders Are Given

The night before the attack the guerrillas, with whom this correspondent spent two weeks, stood in a long line that wound around a dirt-floor adobe hut where girls and men served each of them two tortillas and small pieces of meat. Then, standing in a mountain clearing, they received their final orders. They were instructed not to harm any civilians or damage their property and not to shoot any fleeing soldiers who were unarmned.

At 3 A.M., the rebels were awakened by their commanders, and they advanced for one more hour until they were in position for the attack.

One platoon kept advancing. Led by a a former Government soldier who goes by the name of Goya, about 30 guerrillas began a tense, tedious crawl into the village.

The final 400 or so yards were up a slight hill across an open field of low hemp bushes. They crawled until they were within 30 feet of one enemy post.

In the dark, it was difficult to make an exact count of the rebels, but there appeared to be about 120 of them. They wore dirty and tattered civilian clothes and were primarily armed with Korean War-era carbines, Belgian-made automatic rifles and German-made G-3 automatic rifles that had been taken from Government soldiers in previous battles.

With each platoon of about 30 guerrillas were communications personnel, primarily young women, who carried rifles as well as small Japanese-made walkie-talkies. There were also 12 or so “brigadistas,” as the rebel medics are called, who had been trained at the health school that the guerrillas operate in the mountains in northern Morazan.

The commander of the operation was Licho, a 21-year-old Morazan peasant who has had only two years of formal schooling. He wore a baseball-style military hat and civilian trousers with extra pockets that had been made at a rebel factory in Morazan. A few years ago, he had been discharged from the Salvadoran Army. Next in command were two other Morazan natives, aged 24 and 29, who had also fulfilled their military obligation.

The commanders thought there were 15 to 20 National Guard soldiers in Jocoaitique as well as about 50 paramilitaries, who are civilians the Government has pressed into service and armed with pre-World War II rifles.

The Attack Begins

The attack began at 5 A.M. The explosion of homemade grenades, which the rebels call “contact bombs,” and the ringing chatter of automatic weapons fire splintered the morning quiet.

The Government forces defended from at least four bunkers, including one strategically placed on top of a hill overlooking the village. These bunkers were built out of heavy rocks piled to a height of four or five feet, with an opening of about one foot beneath a roof of red tiles. Goya said that the rebels had been unable to throw their grenades directly into the bunkers through the narrow apertures and so had broken holes in the tiles with heavy rocks. They had then tossed their grenades through
Three hours into the fierce battle, the guerrillas were asked why the Government's helicopters had not arrived. "The pilots are still sleeping," answered a reporter for Venceremos radio, the revolutionaries' radio station. They would not arrive before 9 o'clock, he said.

At 9:30 A.M., the first helicopters appeared, spraying the battle zone with machine-gun fire. They returned several times during the battle. The sun had set when they returned for the last time, and the firing seemed to be out of frustration and anger because most of the rebels had left the village and it was too dark to spot them as they marched along the tree-covered trails.

Lunch in the Heat of Battle

Shortly before noon, two unarmed peasants and a boy about 12 years old approached leading donkeys laden with tortillas and kettles of beans wrapped in white cloths. Dodging sniper fire, they dashed across a small clearing with the guerrillas' lunch.

Seven hours after the battle began, Licho began to register the Government soldiers who had been captured or had surrendered. One was a burly National Guard sergeant with a bullet wound in his chest and a mangled hand. Rebels shouted for water and a medic, but efforts to save the sergeant's life failed.

Twenty-six paramilitary soldiers were also taken prisoner. Dressed in civilian clothes, several said that they had been forced to help the National Guard contingent in the village. A 17-year-old among them said the paramilitary soldiers were issued weapons, usually old-fashioned bolt-action rifles, only when they were on their two-hour tours of duty.

"They are not our enemies," Licho said as he recorded their names and villages, adding that he believed their story that they had been forced to fight. Therefore, he said, all would be released.

Two Guerrillas Are Slain

At least one paramilitary soldier was not so fortunate. The body of a boy who appeared to be about 15 years old lay at the base of a rock wall, possibly where he had been fighting against the rebels.

As Licho and the command post contingent neared the edge of the village, they passed the bodies of two comrades sprawled near one of the National Guard bunkers.

About 3 P.M., when there was still shooting on the outskirts of the village between guerrillas and the National Guardsmen who had fled, a few villagers began to appear cautiously through slightly opened doors.

"We did not open our doors until the soldiers left and the comrades arrived," said a 46-year-old villager who is the father of four young children.

In one house, a woman baked tortillas for the rebels. The owner of a general store gave them bananas.

Payment Is Refused

Inside the store, a 17-year-old woman laid her G-3 automatic rifle on the counter and took out money to pay for a tube of toothpaste and two bars of soap. The man refused to accept her money.

Nor would he accept money from the rebels who wanted to pay for bread rolls, cigarettes, candy and flashlight batteries. "These are fresh," he said to one rebel, giving him a small bag of rolls instead of the two the rebel had asked for. When the rebels had left the store, a visitor returned and asked why he had not allowed them to pay. "It's my satisfaction," he said. "They're fighting for us."

In front of the San Lucas Pharmacy, which the Government troops had used as its headquarters, 12 black National Guard helmets lay upside down on the cobblestone street. Inside the pharmacy were several green metal military beds. Sitting on one next to a National Guard manual, a rebel was being treated. He had been lucky; the bullet had only grazed his neck just behind his left ear.

Outside, a group of rebels assembled four duffel bags and several large cartons filled with gauze, bandages and medicine. Other rebels rummaged through the suitcases that contained the guardsmen's personal belongings. One found a flowered shirt he liked; another put on a pair of brown dress boots - too large, but sturdier than the shoes he had been wearing.

Radio Report From the Scene

A Salvadoran newspaper would report that "the terrorists ransacked and destroyed several houses, and also dragged several children from their houses and took them away, presumably to some camp." But while this reporter was in the village, until just before dusk, he saw no destruction of property except that belonging to the Government soldiers. Nor did he see rebels enter any private houses unless invited.

Standing on a cement bench in the central plaza filled with trees and bright flowers, the Venceremos radio reporter, using a black Japanese-made walkie-talkie, filed an on-the-scene report.

Salvadoran and United States officials have charged that Venceremos radio operates from Nicaragua. This correspondent visited the well-concealed underground location of Venceremos radio in the mountains near here. Members of the six-member collective that operates the station insisted that it has been in Morazan ever since it began broadcasting on Jan. 10, 1981.

"El Salvador deserves your vote in 1982." read a blue and white poster on a building near the white Spanish colonial church with two bell towers. It was the Government's appeal for Salvadorans to vote in the March elections.

GRAPHIC: Illustrations: photo of hospital in Salvador

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH