

ZONA ROSA

Situation: US Marines killed at a street-side café in El Salvador.

On the evening of 19 June 1985, terrorists assassinated four US Marine embassy security guards and two American businessmen in the "Zona Rosa" restaurant district in the capital of El Salvador. The attack occurred at a popular restaurant frequented by US Embassy personnel located only two blocks from the US ambassador's residence.

According to one witness, a young man approached the Marines, briefly spoke with them, and then bicycled away. It is possible that this individual was a terrorist confirming the targets for attack. Ten minutes later, at about 9:00 PM, a light-colored pickup truck parked on the street in front of "Chili's" cafe where the Marines were seated. Ten men wearing camouflage shirts and caps jumped from the truck. The patrons of the cafes seemingly ignored the armed men, perhaps assuming they were a routine military patrol conducting a search or a document check.



In high threat environments, being clearly seen as an American in an area frequented by Americans can be a deadly combination. Keep a low profile and avoid areas that Americans are known to frequent. Extended living in a high threat environment can lead individuals to become complacent. They become desensitized to the dangers that routinely surround them. Fight complacency, stay alert.



Some of the men from the pickup took up security positions, watching for any approaching police or other security element, while the majority of the men moved directly toward the Marines firing US M16s, German G3s, and Uzi submachine guns. They initially directed their fire at the Marines but then turned their weapons on other patrons. The gunmen chased one Marine into a neighboring café and killed him.

The Marines failed to react to the threat quickly enough and the terrorists suffered no casualties. When the firing was over, four Marines, two US businessmen, a Guatemalan businessman, and five Salvadorans lay dead. The terrorists escaped from the scene in their pickup truck.

Good planning can help you anticipate and avoid high-threat and high-vulnerability areas. Choose locations and times that present lower risk, and be prepared to react instantly to an emerging threat.

Two days after the attack, the Mardogeo Cruz Urban Commando (CMC) issued a communiqué claiming credit for the attack. The CMC was a terrorist element of the Central American Revolutionary Workers' Party (PRTC). The PRTC was known as a splinter faction of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN). The CMC communiqué called its operation "Yankee



Aggressors in El Salvador, Another Vietnam Awaits You." According to the CMC, it was directed against U.S. advisors, CIA agents, and other nations "in the service of the North American imperialists." Captured documents suggested that the rebels were turning to urban terrorism in order to recoup recent losses in the field.

In the months before the attack, the US Embassy assessed a high threat to US personnel working in El Salvador. US military advisors were considered to be probable targets. The day before the attack, US Embassy personnel were briefed on the terrorist threat and reminded of appropriate security precautions. These precautions included avoiding outdoor cafés and restaurants with curbside tables, avoiding areas frequented by Americans, and varying their routines.

In a high threat environment, it is easy to become insensitive to frequent threat warnings. Take threat warnings seriously. Don't become complacent. This attack was a tragic reminder that continual vigilance and planning are vital to personal safety.