

TDY to El Salvador

By Joseph Gueron

At last after more than a year in limbo, the process of obtaining my security clearance was completed, and I was able to join the US Agency for International Development (USAID) as an analyst. I would like to think the delay was due to the fact I was foreign born, and twice an immigrant, rather than my dissolute youth.

In the early eighties the Agency had fully embraced automation both for administrative applications as well as in many of our development projects. Thus, all sorts of Information Technologies (IT) were introduced as tools to strengthen Host Country institutions and to assist development project attain their objectives. A unit had been organized to support such projects, and I was part of it.

My knowledge of Spanish was useful, in particular when dealing with bureaucrats in some Latin American ministries, since as a matter of pride, many of them, even when educated in the USA, would insist in speaking Spanish. Soon I learned that to be successful in that milieu I had to develop a second set of skills to compliment my computer skills. That was to be able to tell jokes, not mild, civilized jokes but raunchy, dirty ones. This skill would serve me well on my next assignments in El Salvador.

It was 1981 and a civil war was raging in El Salvador. A triumvirate of generals had seized power and was trying to keep a balance between the extreme left and extreme right with US assistance. One of the most liberal generals took the initiative to push for a

symbolic land reform program. The USAID Mission in El Salvador was fully supportive and asked Washington for help to accelerate its success.

The kernel of the strategy consisted in leveraging remote sensing technology to, survey the land which otherwise would have taken months, if not years. The use of satellite imagery was perfect to identify property boundaries since the cadaster system in El Salvador, like many other developing nations, was in disarray and in places non-existent. More importantly, by applying spectral analysis to the satellite images of the soil, its potential for agriculture production could be estimated and value for the expropriated land could be established to properly compensate the original landowners.

The initial phase of the project, determining boundaries and economical value of the land was finished in time and was a success. One small step was still needed to be completed, before the general could bask in success, the automated production of land titles.

Thus Gueron riding his white horse, with a brand new Hewlett Packard minicomputer in tow, arrived to post full of hope and determination and fully prepared. I had spent the previous weeks absorbing lessons learned from a similar agrarian reforms, the intricacies of cadaster systems, the proposed algorithms for identifying soil composition, and hence its value.

My first days in the capital were surprisingly pleasant full of wonder and small pleasures in spite of random gunfire and a 9 PM curfew. My repertoire of sexual and scatological jokes told in Spanish with a slight French accent was the delight of many Salvadorian senior army officers and opened unexpected doors. Hectic working days would terminate with great evenings full of good food, generous drinks, in particular an

aged rum imported from Guatemala, jokes and dancing. Well past midnight the gathering would end, and fully armed soldiers would escort me back to my hotel.

There was an eerie beauty in the deserted urban streets. The silence of the night interrupted at moments by a lovely voice of a woman filtering through half-closed windows, the soulful notes of a bolero, or the sensual syncopation of a cumbia interrupted by the barks of a dog. The play of shadows, sparse street lights and the occasional red traffic light ignored by the slowly advancing jeep would at moments counterpoint the lights of other jeeps patrolling remote streets.

Suddenly, in my mildly inebriated state I was enthralled by the moment. The balmy, starry tropical night. A full moon tricking me in making me forget this was in a country at war with itself, where death was a normal occurrence.

Sadly the pleasant after-party-glow was short lived. The following morning when I arrived to the mission, I learned that my efforts to develop the system to print hundreds of land titles were in vain. Our legal counsel, a bright young woman whose handsome face was spoiled by a discrete moustache, advised us that a computer printed land title would not have any legal stand under Salvadorian law. A contract to be valid had to be printed on “papel sellado” – it is a special kind of paper, and which would have printed on it the national emblem- and was issued by the Treasury Department. At that time, computer paper had to have holes on the side, so it could be moved by the printer carriage. Of course the Department had not produced printer friendly “papel sellado”.

In spite of such noble failure, the system still produced useful cadaster related information and calculated the value of the land. At long last the ceremony took place. The General handed to a small number of landless peasants a mysterious piece of rolled

paper held by a multicolored ribbon with the national colors. It was a perfect photo opportunity, and many papers carried the image on the front page.

When I returned to Washington, it took me weeks to complete my painful TDY report. I overused the term “lessons learned” and misused the very best program evaluation jargon I could muster to produce a masterful report. It was a “bureaucratic poem,” a first class intellectual “mea-culpa,” full of nuances and half-truths. I had never been prouder of my new acquired capabilities. I was baptized in the sacred murky waters of Washington lingo.

Alas, my state of euphoria was short lived. My Division Chief using his bright blue colored pen, which I hated, ravaged my TDY report. The hard learned lessons were transformed, converted, metamorphosed into a bland modest grey success. A mush of incoherent, absurd and useless information, full of dates and names, and little more; just another common TDY report.

That evening when I got home I was devastated. I promised myself then that when the time would arrive for my retirement, I would turn my back on technology and any kind of consultancy. I would immerse myself in pure fiction. Holly, holly invention, far from any real stuff... I would write screenplays and short stories. Of course, it took many more years in my job, many failures, some success, some adventures, some drama, some laughs and tears before I would start writing my short stories and experience the bitter taste of rejections. At last I was the writer I always wanted to be.

