

Excerpt from *Kill the Gringo* (Chapter 6):

One of the most time-consuming and least favorite parts of my job as ambassador was the social circuit. I had anywhere from two to ten cocktail party invitations a day. I found these gatherings dreadfully sterile and dull, so I developed what I thought was an artful approach to that scene. I walked in, immediately took a glass in my hand, made one round, and began to glide on a diagonal toward the door. When I tired of that act, I went up-country for the weekend.

Having lived in Panama before, I had many good friends throughout the country. I loved visiting farmers in the rural areas and listening to their problems and aspirations. My dear friend Fernando Eleta, who was now foreign minister, owned a large stud farm in Boquete, a picturesque town in the northwest near the Costa Rican border. I often went there to visit him on the weekends.

In those days, security concerns were minimal. The incredibly detailed planning now required for ambassadorial travel outside the capital did not become standard operating procedure until near the end of the 1960s. All I needed with me on these trips into the bush were a plainclothes security man and a radio operator with a single side-band set.

In September, I flew up to Bocas del Toro, a provincial capital on the southern tip of Colón Island in the Caribbean Sea. It was an old United Fruit center that had slowed down since its heyday but still produced bananas and plantains. About forty miles from Bocas del Toro was a large, prosperous ranch in Chiriquicito, where I had been invited to meet with a group of poker players disguised as cattlemen to discuss hoof and mouth disease.

My host and pilot was a young man named Juan Ameglio. Juan, a novice pilot with a new, single-engine plane, put us down as smoothly as could be expected on a short grass strip at his ranch. My security man and radio operator awaited my return in Bocas. I was the only American among the two dozen men on the trip. We had a wonderful, lazy weekend of poker playing and good talk about political banditry and animal husbandry. I caught dozens of the world's most delicious river fish, *boca chica*.

When we boarded Juan's plane for the return trip on Sunday, our cargo had expanded. Instead of two passengers, we were four, adding my good friend Fabian "Curro" Velarde as well as a friend of Juan's in the copilot's seat. We brought a huge, wet cardboard box full of iced *boca chica* fillets that must have weighed 100 pounds. It had been raining off and on all weekend, making the ground soggy and the grass high.

Our overloaded plane did somehow manage to leave the strip with a wallowing motion, like a hippo struggling out of a marsh. With the stall horn blaring, we stayed airborne for five seconds at about forty feet. Then one wing dipped and we nosed down at a sharp angle, crashing headfirst into an enormous *cedro amargo* (cedar) tree. Flying fish fillets and ice cubes clobbered us from behind.

Immediately there was the smell of burning wires, smoke, and a hissing sound. Curro was groaning next to me, and the pilot and copilot were unconscious. As we crashed, I had assumed a fetal praying position and was a bloody mess from a self-inflicted thumbnail cut between my eyes. Worse and more enduring was a deep hip bruise caused by the Colt .45 Curro was wearing on his belt when he fell on top of me.

Our friends from the ranch arrived in seconds, trying frantically to open the door, which had jammed from the compression. Finally someone arrived with a hacksaw and we crawled out of the wreck. I felt whiplash in every joint and was bent in pain. The others were worse off. Curro, while technically intact, seemed debilitated. A presidential press secretary and bon vivant, Curro never fully recovered from the crash; he died very young just a couple of years later. Juan and his friend regained consciousness but were badly banged up and had some broken bones. The four of us were woozy and gimpy, still in shock, trying to crack jokes and act macho.

With our plane out of commission, Porfirio Gomez, a dear friend who was head of the agricultural extension program, suggested going by boat to the airport at Bocas del Toro. The four of us survivors and a cast of about twenty friends set off on an old houseboat. Half the boat had been converted into a bar, which we turned into our floating recovery room.

The weather was blustery and the sea rough. Our barge was powered by a small outboard motor that seemed to be propelling us in reverse against the heavy seas. The ten-mile trip from the ranch to Bocas del Toro took about four hours and ten cases of beer. As we inched along, the weather grew worse, the sea became slate-gray and the sky almost black.

The provincial governor of Bocas del Toro, a wiry and stooped little fellow of Jamaican ancestry, greeted us most graciously on the dock. Seeing our makeshift slings and bandages and our crippled gaits, he was eager to hear our story. Then he warned us of an approaching storm that he described as “monstrous.” “This will really be a dandy,” he said in English, “and will surely blow down all our bananas and plantains.”

With a population of 10,000, Bocas had a quaint but dilapidated feel, with quiet streets lined by tall palms, old homes, and crumbling churches. The governor invited us to stay with him at the nicest house in town, owned by the sanitary engineer. It was a three-story home in classic United Fruit Company style, with unpainted wood and spacious balconies. We went up to the third-floor balcony overlooking the Caribbean, where we sampled our host’s best rum and *patacones* (fried green plantains). I was only occasionally able to stanch the blood flow from the cut in my forehead and was now also bleeding out of both nostrils.

As we steadily sedated ourselves with rum, the winds intensified. The vintage house began to shake and creak. Then, ominously, the wind stopped. Our host shouted at us to head for cover, and we all stumbled down the stairs to the cellar. Given our impaired coordination, I can’t believe we made it in time. The tornado hit just as we shut the basement door; it lasted three long minutes.

Torrential rain followed: six or eight inches in an hour. The cellar started to fill up. The sanitary engineer had stored his dead soldiers there, and soon we were up to our chests in water and hundreds of floating, clinking bottles. My old buddy Curro, by then barely conscious, shouted bravely above the clinking, “I’ll drink to that!”

After the rain abated, we climbed out of the water like muskrats to find the town of Bocas del Toro decimated. The storm had wound its way through the town's streets, destroying two churches, two school buildings, and whole rows of homes. More than ninety buildings were destroyed and 500 people left homeless. One four-year-old girl was killed when her house collapsed. The tornado hit at 11:30 p.m. while most people—completely unaware it was coming—were asleep.

The governor, a policeman, a Peace Corps volunteer living in Bocas, and I picked our way through the splintered and muddied town with flashlights to see if we could help. We saw that dozens of people were badly hurt. There were no medical supplies, no doctors, very few flashlights, and no hope of starting a fire.

I had reunited with my security detail and radio man when we docked in Bocas. Miraculously, the wet radio equipment worked. We got through at about three a.m. to the Southern Command Air Force headquarters at Quarry Heights in the Canal Zone. I told the colonel in charge what had happened and what I thought the needs were; he had his own checklist of questions. "Roger. Will inform Pentagon and Secretary of State immediately. Will have two loaded C-47's and two U-10's circling Bocas at daybreak. Please clear all debris from the landing strip. Good luck."

It was a long night with a lot of suffering; we would have traded all our bananas for an aspirin. At daybreak, four fully loaded US aircraft circled above the obliterated town. Most of the villagers were down on their knees in prayer when the planes touched down. The Air Commandos brought rations, medical supplies, and countless cots and blankets. These Air Force personnel were well trained, quick, friendly, and Spanish-speaking. Within three or four hours they had attended the worst injuries and splinted all the broken bones, including those of my fellow plane crash victims.

There are more times than one might imagine when being a US government employee abroad becomes a source of tremendous pride—of country and competence, technology and character, and generosity. Few thrills, however, could surpass what I experienced that morning of salvation in Bocas. The chemistry

among the Air Force crews, medics and villagers, especially the children, was palpable. It was a glorious moment for US-Panama relations: the US military was in its finest hour, asking no questions and saving the day.

Returning to Albrook Air Force Base in the Canal Zone in a triumphantly empty C-47 marked the high point of my respect for the US armed forces in Panama. I was greeted with lots of attention from the media, who had caught wind of my double-catastrophe weekend. Curro Velarde's advice on how I should characterize our plane overloaded with *boca chica* fillets was, "*Bueno es el culantro, pero no tanto,*" meaning in Panamanian parlance, "You can have too much of a good thing."