

# POSO DE LOS MUERTOS

## A Short Story

By

George Pararas–Carayannis

The sun was about to rise behind the high, snow-covered peaks of the Western Cordillera when a convoy of Spanish soldiers appeared on the bend of the cliffy trail leading to Cerro Colorado. This was not an unfamiliar sight. Ever since the exploitation of gold and silver resources of the New World began, convoys of this type traversed the mountains of Mexico. Mule trains loaded with the gold and silver production of the rich mines would leave the central and northern regions for the fortified port of Veracruz. From there the gold and silver would be shipped to Spain to finance the King's wars in Europe and the high seas and to pay off the merchants and investors that had financed the looting of the New World and its transport to Spain. The silver and gold would be shipped either in bars or in coins minted in Nueva España. The silver coins were minted in “reales” and the gold coins in “escudos”. Merchant ships escorted by warships for protection from French or English privateers did most of the shipping. The



ship convoys would follow the great sea stream in the Golfo De Nueva España, all the way to Havana where supplies would be replenished before heading for the great ocean beyond. Some of the ships of the treasure fleet would make it back to Spain, but others would be lost to pirates or storms. Nonetheless enough treasure would make it back to Spain to

help sustain and enhance the power of the empire, which spanned across four continents.

As much as a ton of silver would be carried to Veracruz along the dry beds of rivers and streams, through mountain passes, and wherever nature had cut a path. The leaders of the mule trains had the choice of choosing their own routing to avoid hostile Indians or bandits, some of whom were even Spaniards or French from the North. And although only one out of three mule trains would make it through the rugged mountains of the Cordilleras to the safety of the plains on the other side, enough gold and silver would reach Veracruz for shipment to Spain. But only heaven knows what would happen to the leaders of a mule train if it was ambushed and reached the port without its load of treasure. Death or lengthy imprisonment would be the punishment regardless of the circumstances. Thus, many of the mule train leaders, if they escaped death during an ambush but lost their valuable cargo, opted never to return but to head north to the New Territories where the Viceroy's soldiers could not get them. Some would even turn bandits themselves, since it was so lucrative.



Death or lengthy imprisonment would be the punishment regardless of the circumstances. Thus, many of the mule train leaders, if they escaped death during an ambush but lost their valuable cargo, opted never to return but to head north to the New Territories where the Viceroy's soldiers could not get them. Some would even turn bandits themselves, since it was so lucrative.

*The great sea stream in the Golfo De Nueva España*



The contingent traversing the mountains this morning was not heading southeast toward Veracruz, or towards Jalisco, Aguascalientes, Nayarit, Guanajuato or Zacatecas. It was heading northwest, in the opposite direction, away from Guadalupe y Calvo, towards Canyon de Cobre, the New Territories and the Gran Chichimeca where a rebellion of the natives had spread. Furthermore, the group was not a fully armed garrison of a regular mule train. No, these men were hard-bitten, tough, rugged, professional fighting regulars of the Spanish Army returning from some kind of skirmish with the natives – one with a dubious outcome. Although they had no similar uniforms, most were wearing the regular long sleeve army camisas but had a variety of coverings from the waist down. Some of the cavalymen were wearing boots but most of the foot soldiers were wearing simple shoes or yucca fiber sandals, as most professional soldiers in Nueva España. Although the morning was getting hot, some were wearing quilted cotton jackets but others wore leather jackets, adequate for protection against the Indians'



longbow - the most commonly used of the native weapons. None of the soldiers in the contingent was wearing any metal armor or chainmail vest - la Jacqueta de Mala – but in this kind of environment and terrain it would have been extremely uncomfortable – even if they could afford it. The only exception was the four

horsemen, two up front and two further behind who wore the heavy chainmail vests. It must have been most uncomfortable – even this early in the morning. Most of the riding soldiers wore the usual borgonata or morrion helmets, but most of those on foot did not and none even wore any quilted-cotton head armor. It was simply too hot. As for weapons, they were armed with crossbows, daggers, two-handed swords, as well as a few matchlock muskets. Some of the men riding horses or mules were carrying the lighter, shorter field lances.

Men and horses in this strange assortment on the trail looked exhausted as if they had marched for hours, long before daybreak. Some of the soldiers were riding, but most were on foot or walking their horses, as if to give them a rest. A few of the soldiers dragged their feet and some seemed wounded because there was blood on their camisas.



### *Tarahumaras*

Behind the dusty and fatigued soldiers, a couple of dozen or so Nahuatl and Tarahumara natives were carrying loads of different kinds on their backs. Still behind them, there were two Franciscan friars and a dozen or more mules with heavy loads strapped to the saddles, apparently provisions for a long journey or an expedition. At the end of the strange procession there were more foot soldiers and more cavalry men walking their horses. There were simply not enough soldiers in this contingent to defend against a massive attack by the rebelling Indians in the region.

An older man with long white hair was riding in front. He was the obvious leader of the group - one of the King's fearsome men who conquered and tamed the land to the south, following Hernando Cortés, the Pizarro brothers and the waves of other conquistadores sent to the New World. Strangely the Indians that were now revolting in this region, were from the same war-like, lesser tribes that back in 1520 Cortes had conquered and formed alliances with, as he worked his way to Tenochtitlán in his quest to conquer the Aztecs and their capital. With the help of these tribesmen and the Tlaxcalan warriors, Cortés completely had crushed Tenochtitlán and renamed it Ciudad de Mexico. Now, a little more than twenty years later, these same Indians revolted and became the new enemy of the Crown. The divide-



and-conquer strategy of Cortés and of the Pizarro brothers in Nueva España and in Peru that had exploited pre-existing indigenous rivalries, did not work this time. Regardless of tribal differences, the natives had now focused on their common enemy that had enslaved them all and grabbed their lands – the Spaniards.

### **On the Trail of Cerro Colorado**

Shifting his body in the saddle, the older man turned to face the rider behind him. As he moved, streams of sweat flew from his temples and vanished, airborne, amid the dusty gusts of arid, hot air. Uneven strings of matted white hair whipped around his shoulders.

“Enrique, come here at once!” he ordered. His mouth, dry and full of dust, caused his tongue to grate against the roof of his mouth.

Without haste, Enrique spurred his horse and came along side. Small in stature but stocky, his chainmail vest and bogonata helmet overwhelmed him.

“Yes your Excellency”, he said.

“How much further to this damn ventilation shaft on this side of the mountain, How much further?” the old man asked.

We are close Don Carlos, muy cercita ”, answered Enrique. “Another ten minutes perhaps and we will reach it”.

Thirsty and fatigued, Don Carlos’s nostrils flared and his brows came together.

“Muy cercita, muy cercita. I’ve been hearing this for the last hour but we don’t seem to be any closer”.

“We are close, Your Grace, indeed we are very close. I believe the shaft is along the next bend of the trail”, reassured him Enrique.

“Send people ahead to make sure they are no savages waiting for us”, ordered Don Carlos.

“Yes, your Excellency”.

Enrique dispatched the order with firm conviction. In an instant, two riders broke formation and outpaced the group, vanishing into a cloud of dust up ahead.

### **Boyaca, Chivor, Cosquez and the search for “El Dorado”**

Don Carlos had been always harsh with his second in command. However, he knew that Capitan Enrique de Mendoza was a man he could rely upon, under any circumstances. He was a brave and dedicated soldier who he knew he could trust from their days in Colombia. Enrique had been wounded in a skirmish with the natives in Boyaca and had a deep scar across the left side of his face, partly covered by his beard.

The old man who Capitan Enrique de Mendoza addressed as “your Excellency”, was none other than Don Carlos Velasques de Vega, a proud noble

in his early sixties who had spent most of his life in the King's service. They both had landed in Cartagena in 1538 with Gonzalo Jimenez de Quesada, who Don Carlos had helped conquer Colombia. But when they begun their conquest and looting of the native villages there, they were stunned to see emeralds finer and larger than any ever seen before in Europe. Subsequently, another of Quesada's officers, Capitan Pedro Fernandez de Valenzuela, found an emerald mine in the Chivor area of the Eastern Andes, near a gap between two peaks from where the "llanas" of Rio Orinoko could be seen. This Chivor mine had been known by the natives as "Somondoco" or "God of the green gems".

Shortly after this discovery Quesada assigned to Don Carlos command of the mountain district of eastern Boyaca. His job was to keep control of the region and to oversee emerald mining operations at Chivor and later at Tuzmeque and Sogamoso, when new finds of the green stones were made. Additionally, he was asked to search for the treasure of "El Dorado".

According to a local legend, long before the arrival of the Spaniards and the conquest of Colombia, the local Chibcha Indians had worked these mines of Eastern Boyaca, as emeralds were used for their religious ceremonies. The legend held that at the crater lake of Guatavita, an annual ablution rite of "El Dorado" (the Golden One) took place in a dawn ceremony. The Indian chief, "El Dorado", would cover his body with gold powder prepared with an adhesive mixture, and then he would dive into the water from a large raft in the middle of the lake, just as the sun was breaking over the horizon. Emeralds, gold objects, and other valuables were thrown into the lake by the priests of the tribe as an offering to the gods.

Don Carlos allured by the story of "El Dorado," send expeditions in the mountains of the region to find this treasure of emeralds and gold. But the local Indians, rather than let their emeralds fall into their enemies' hands, proceeded to destroy the fine stones. Thus, many fine stones were destroyed this way before Don Carlos' soldiers would arrive. The search for the treasure of "El Dorado" turned out to be futile. Nothing was found. The only way to get emeralds was to mine them. Thus, following Quesada's strict orders, Don Carlos had his men recruit by force people of the local tribes to work at the mines. The practice was to imprison the Indians and to cage them in the mine tunnels where they were forced to produce emeralds in exchange for their meager rations. This went on for a while, but so many died that the local labor supply was soon exhausted. In a very short time, hundreds of natives died from exhaustion, starvation, and accidents or by the hands of some unruly Spanish soldiers. Don Carlos did not care. The King and Jimenez de Quesada wanted emeralds and he had his



orders. It was a hard life and Don Carlos did not like being isolated in Boyaca, away from his family, who had arrived in Cartagena subsequently. He was very happy when, in early 1540, Viceroy Mendoza asked for his transfer to Mexico.

### **El Fuerte and the Northern Territories of Nueva España**



Antonio Mendoza, prior to being appointed by Emperor Carlos as Viceroy of Nueva España, was known as the Marquis of Mondéjar and as the Count of Tendilla. He had been a good friend of Don Carlos' family back home in Castille-La Mancha. The Viceroy's wife, Maria Ana, was a relative of his own wife Isabella. Thus, when Don Carlos was summoned to Mexico with his wife and son Alfonso, he was pleased because anything would have been better than the damn mountains of Boyaca. Soon after his arrival in Ciudad de Mexico, Viceroy Mendoza assigned him full command of the northern regions of Nueva España. A couple of months later, Don Carlos ended up north in a small town in a valley near Rio Fuerte, where he established residence for his family, as well as a military camp for the contingent of about 400 soldiers under his command, which he named El Fuerte. The Viceroy had also given him 20 of the new small canons, a dozen of which he used to fortify his compound. The rest he sent to the outposts of Chinipas near the mines of Canyon de Cobre and to Guadalupe y Calvo.

### **In Search of Coronado and the Seven Cities of Cibola**

Right after Don Carlos established camp in El Fuerte, Viceroy Mendoza send him orders to find out about the progress of Coronado's expedition to the north of the New Territories. Earlier that same year, Francisco Vázquez de Coronado, the governor of Nueva Galicia, had marched north with 300 conquistadores in search of the seven cities of Cibola and their purported gold, as well as the conquest of new lands. However, there had been no news of his whereabouts and Viceroy Menoza was anxious to know if the expedition was successful, if the gold of Cibola was found and whether he could claim the northern lands to be part of Nueva España.

Immediately after receiving the order Don Carlos dispatched scouts north to trace Coronado's route and establish contact. It was almost November when the scouts finally returned to El Fuerte with news of the expedition. They had been able to reach Coronado's contingent far north in a region near a big river, which had been named Rio Grande and where he had established a permanent camp in the land of the Zunis, after conquering the pueblos of the Tiguex Indians. But the news was not going to please the Viceroy at all. Coronado had split his small army into three parts and had lost many of his men in skirmishes with the Indians.



The news was that Coronado had sent García López de Cárdenas and his soldiers to a region northwest where they encountered a great canyon and could not advance further. Another of Coronado's party under the command of Hernando de Alvarado had been sent to explore the upper region of this Rio Grande and no one had returned yet. Their fate was unknown. Yet a third party under Pedro del Tovar had been sent to the Moqui pueblos, north of Zuñi. The bad news was that none of Coronado's parties found gold or the seven cities of Cibola. Also, there had been friction with the natives and Alvarado had to put down a revolt, burning some of the Tigua Indians alive at stakes. The Tiguas retaliated by killing some of the Spaniards with arrows dipped in rattlesnake poison. Coronado's army had been practically decimated and controlling the northern territories had become extremely difficult. Coronado needed help.

Indeed Viceroy Mendoza was displeased by the news, but there was nothing more that he or Don Carlos could do to ease Coronado's miseries on his fortune-hunting journeys in the lands of the red men. To make matters worse, news were received subsequently that the Franciscan father Juan de Padilla, who had been with Coronado and had managed to convert many of the Quivira Indians to Christianity, was murdered further north by members of another Indian tribe.



## **Guadalupe y Calvo and the Rosario Mine**

The Viceroy expected a lot more of Don Carlos. Not only he wanted him to maintain control over the northern lands, but also to make sure that the mines in the region were worked properly, that production was up, that looting was kept down to a minimum and that the mule trains with their valuable loads arrived safely in Veracruz. Rosario, the best producing gold and silver mine in Nueva España, was also his responsibility. The Viceroy wanted to put a “Casa de Moneda” and mint “reales” and “escudos” in Guadalupe de Calvo since the region was so rich in silver and gold. The only problem with the Viceroy’s many expectations was that Don Carlos had to carry all these tasks and the defense of the region with only 400 Spanish soldiers under his command and not enough muskets, canons and ammunition to safely guard the mines. With such limitations, all Don Carlos could do was maintain his main garrison in El Fuerte, and split the rest of his soldiers to fortified locations near Chinipas, Batopilas and Guadalupe y Calvo, from where he could dispatch them to trouble spots in Canyon de Cobre and elsewhere, if needed.

In spite of the limitations, Don Carlos had managed to follow the Viceroy’s orders well since his arrival north. He had managed to do that by ruling the northern region with an iron hand. However, the responsibility was too great. To keep production up at the mines, he had to ignore completely the King’s mining rules about easing the plight of Indians under the system of forced labor. Also, he had to ignore the rules of the “encomienda” system that had served so well the last twenty years of colonization of the new lands. Anyway, there was not opposition in not enforcing the King’s mining laws, even by the holders of the encomienda grants, most of them early Spanish settlers and retired army soldiers, who had been granted control over the indigenous native labor supply. The encomienda system had worked well in this northern region and was an absolute necessity in meeting the needs of the agricultural and mining economies. Don Carlos wanted to keep in good terms with the grantees. He needed their support and the native labor supply they controlled. He fully realized the need to have the savages “civilized”. For that he needed the help of the Franciscan friars, who were busy “Christianizing” the native Indian laborers of the encomiendas and burning any idols found in their possession.

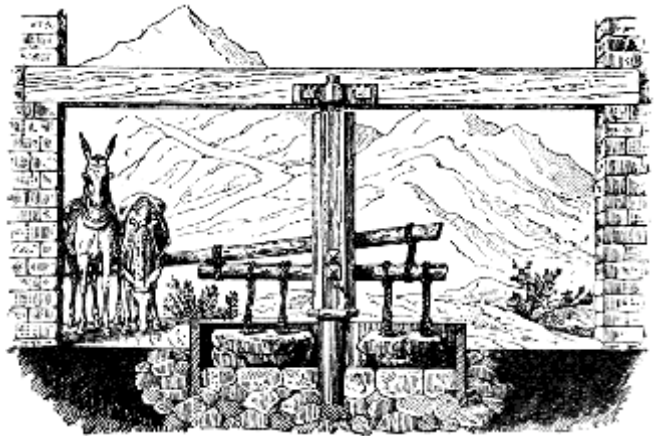
For a while Don Carlos had managed to keep everyone happy and the mines working at full capacity. He made sure that the natives did not have a chance for uprisings. The friars were busy converting them to Christianity. His soldiers kept on recruiting most of the able men of the local tribes. Under continuous armed

supervision, he kept the natives working, as he had done in Colombia. Production was up. By using more soldiers and alternate, safer routes over the great plateau and the Eastern Cordillera, all of his mule trains made it safely to Veracruz. Both the King and Viceroy were pleased with his performance of the last two years, while obviously pretending they did not notice his labor recruiting methods, or the extreme cruelty that made possible the higher yield. What mattered was that Don Carlos kept on pumping the gold and silver into the Royal Treasury. That is all that mattered, and he was doing that. He had gained not only the Viceroy's trust, but Emperor Carlos' as well - who gave him the title of Earl de Osuna, although he was not from Andalucia. It didn't matter. A title of nobility was a title of nobility. His son Alfonse would inherit it.

Of course what the King and the Viceroy did not know was the fact that a sizeable portion of the gold and silver production from the mines was diverted into Don Carlos' own coffers, thus increasing tremendously his personal wealth. Skimming was part of the game. Everyone was doing it. He had done the same thing with the emeralds while in Boyaca, where he had managed to skim a large quantity of the precious stones from Chivor's production. He had brought these gemstones to Nueva España and was able to even sell some of them to traders from the north. But his real bonanza in the last two years had been the Rosario mine from which he was hoarding his share. At his fortified house in El Fuerte, he had built a number of secret compartments into the walls where he hid several bars of silver and gold as well as a wooden box with at least a kilo of emeralds. Only his son and his wife Isabella knew the hiding places. He had told them to look for these if anything ever happened to him and had even given them a drawing with clues of where these were hidden.

In the last year, the work at the mines was progressing well. By following the techniques he learned in Colombia, Don Carlos was able to open many more tunnels at Rosario and the other mines in the region and increase production. He taught the foremen at the mine, who in turn showed the workers how to make holes into the rock or how to enlarge existing cracks with hammers and chisels. He showed them how to insert gunpowder with fuses into these cavities and how to ignite them. The gunpowder explosions would help open tunnels along rich ore veins, much faster than before. Also, he managed to improve production by a better extraction of the silver and gold from the ore by using mercury amalgamation, a technique he learned from Bartolomé de Medina, a metallurgist he had met in Sevilla, just before leaving Spain. Also, he had improved production of silver and the gold by developing a better method for pulverizing the rocks.

The “arrastre” he designed, comprised of an upright axle with large spokes that used horses or mules that drug a heavy round rock in a circular motion, which would pulverize the ore. After the ore was pulverized, they would put the powdered rocks in large crucibles and would apply intense heat to smelt and burn off the sulfur. To



speed up the process, rock salt would be added. They would then melt the molten sulfides in these crucibles, and then add iron nails to the mix. The iron would react with the metals in the sulfides and silver and gold would be reduced to their own metallic states. The only problem with this method was that burning off the sulfur created a pungent and very offensive smell, released arsenic and other harmful substances in the air and that caused all kinds of breathing and health problems for the native workers. To alleviate the problem, Don Carlos had ordered the foremen at Rosario to rotate the native workers at regular intervals, away from the smelting operations.

### **The Mixtón Rebellion**

Things were going smoothly in the northern territory for Don Carlos until the damn Mixtón Rebellion begun spreading. Further north, some of the rebellious Chichimecs and Apaches were even getting swords and crossbows from the French. Viceroy Mendoza ordered Don Carlos to subdue any uprisings in the New Territories and to keep the mining operations going at any cost. But with inadequate supplies and men, Don Carlos’s task became increasingly more difficult. He simply did not have enough soldiers to guard all the mining operations at the Guadalupe y Calvo or the Canyon de Cobre regions. His resources had been stretched to the limit and the soldiers were apprehensive. They feared a repeat of the 1531 massacre, when the Indians of Teul had massacred the local garrison as well as the reinforcements dispatched to subdue them.

In subsequent weeks, much to Don Carlos’ dismay, the initial unrest became a full-scale rebellion. There were no safe areas in the Eastern or the Western Cordillera and no mule train had left for Veracruz for more than three long months. Many of the native workers at the mines - even those converted to

Christianity – had begun to escape. Some were even joining the rebels. The problems snowballed because these same Indians returned to their tribes, organized themselves and then attacked the Valencia mine, killing the soldiers at the guardhouse and freeing more of the workers. There was no way that peace could be easily restored or for production to resume.

When notified in El Fuerte of how badly the situation had begun to deteriorate, Don Carlos sent messengers to the Viceroy asking urgently for reinforcements. The Viceroy dispatched two hundred more soldiers and fresh supplies of gunpowder, swords, lances, pikes, and pole arms of various kinds, as well as new type of muskets that had been sent by King Carlos. The new muskets were longer and heavier than the older arquebus, but fired more accurately a heavier lead ball. But even with this additional help, everything seemed to be hanging in the balance.

Immediately after the reinforcements arrived in El Fuerte, Don Carlos gave them a two-day rest, then trained them in the use of the heavier muskets, which he assigned to the bigger men in his regiment. After completing the training, he marched with the convoy northeast of El Fuerte until they reached the area where Rio Batopilas and Rio San Miguel met. Then he split the group in two. He sent Capitan Gomez de Sandoval with about ninety men to Batopilas to make sure the rebellion did not spread to the mines there.



Subsequently, he marched with the rest of the troops along the dry riverbeds in a southeast direction for two more days, then along mountain trails to Guadalupe y Calvo, where the Valencia mine had been attacked and shut down. As customary, he would always send scouts ahead, as he had become well aware of the Indian tactics of decoy and ambush.

When he arrived at Guadalupe y Calvo, much to his dismay he discovered that the situation was even worse than he had anticipated. In the last two weeks, skirmishes with the rebellious natives had already claimed the lives of many more soldiers at the garrison. There was no way that he could retake Valencia or that he could contain the spreading rebellion. He did not have enough soldiers.

The best he could do was to wait it out. Immediately he ordered all operations at the Rosario and the Atenas mines be stopped, as well and for his troops to help reinforce the Guadalupe y Calvo camp in preparation of further hostilities. To the Cordova regiment that had marched with him from El Fuerte, he assigned the responsibility of defending the guardhouse at Las Gollondrinas, where the ore was crushed and smelted and the gold and silver separated, refined and cast into bars for shipment. Several tons of unprocessed ore were still waiting smelting there, but many bars of gold and silver had been cast for shipment to Veracruz. However, he did not want to take any chances of leaving the three month production of silver and gold at Las Gollondrinas, so he ordered transfer and storage of the bars at the vault of the fortified cave of San Juan de Gracias, on the east side of Rosario. Then, a waiting game begun with the troops confined in their fortified quarters and the native rebels having total control of the countryside.

### **Massacre at Las Gollondrinas**

However a little over a week later, hell broke loose. Hundreds of rebels attacked and overrun the garrison at the Las Gollondrinas smelting facility, killing everyone in sight. Fortunately, during the early afternoon prior to the attack, Don Carlos had managed to gather most of his soldiers from the Guadalupe y Calvo camp inside the large cave of San Jose de Gracias, as well as what remained of the Rosario garrison and of the remaining loyal Christian natives. The rebels attacked Las Gollondrinas, believing that the silver and gold were still stored there. However, after overrunning the guardhouse and finding out there was nothing of value stored there anymore, the rebels took the weapons of the dead Spaniards and regrouped for an attack at San Jose De Gracias cave later that afternoon.

Don Carlos' decision to retreat to the cave with the remaining troops was good as it could be better defended. Its heavy iron grill gate was closed just in time as the rebels attacked. With the gate closed, the soldiers were able to fire their muskets and had time to reload. After a skirmish that lasted almost half hour, the rebels retreated but set camp just outside and lit fires. Some of the rebels were ordered by their leaders to check out the ventilation shafts for another way into the cave, but it was getting late in the evening and darkness of the dusk was setting in.

Leaving through the front entrance of the San Jose de Gracias cave would have been impossible for the Spaniards. Realizing the futility of the situation, Don

Carlos decided that their only hope for survival would be to leave with the remainder of his troops through the tunnel in the rear of the cave and to return to his stronghold in El Fuerte, where he was certain that additional reinforcements sent by Viceroy Mendoza, would be waiting.

### **San Jose De Gracias Cave – 22 hours earlier**

Men and horses were relatively safe inside the cramped quarters of the San Jose de Gracias cave but it was very uncomfortable – particularly when the rebels outside begun lighting larger fires near the iron gate entrance, trying to drown the Spaniards in smoke and force them out in the open. Fortunately, a strong breeze blowing from the east was pushing most of the smoke away from the cave entrance. But the air inside the cave was heavy and repugnant. There was a strong smell of uric acid and sulfur from bat guano in the back of the cave, in spite of the ventilation tunnels and prior cleaning and removal of soil. Breathing the air burned the lungs, even though most of the bats had been killed with gunpowder explosions.

That same evening and right after an early dinner of roasted goat meat and flat corn bread, Don Carlos called his officers to explain their predicament.

“Men” he said. “Here is the plan. We need to get back to El Fuerte for a while, but we will return here after the rain season to take care of these beastly savages that killed our brothers. But right now, we must leave San Juan de Gracias and need to do it tonight. Viceroy Mendoza has sent to El Fuerte at least three hundred more soldiers, as well as gun powder and many more of the new muskets and at least a dozen of the new small cannons”.

He was lying of course since he had no way of knowing whether reinforcements had indeed arrived from Ciudad de Mexico. However, he needed to restore hope to his demoralized troops who had seen their comrades decimated by the rebels that same afternoon.

“But there are close to a thousand beasts out there”, commented Teniente Felipe Cinceros, the young lieutenant from Sevilla. “How can we leave?”

“We’ll leave through this large tunnel in the back of San Jose de Gracias. That is how we are going to get out. We will follow the tunnel that was dug last year, and then get out through the ventilation shaft to the west. It is a short shaft, I understand”.

“Yes it is short shaft and not very steep, your Excellency“ added Teniente Cinceros. “It is only about 100 meters long and more than two meters high. We should be able to get the mules and horses through it”.



“That’s good, that’s very good”, continued Don Carlos. “We will leave tonight at about midnight then. Get everything ready. We are taking everything with us. Have the animals watered, fed, saddled and loaded by midnight. Get everything and everyone ready”.

When the meeting was over, Enrique approached him.

“How about the gold and silver your Excellency?

“Damn it Enrique. Certainly, we are not going to leave it here. We are taking it with us, hombre. We are not leaving anything of value here – you hear me. Nothing stays behind for these savages. We will take everything with us”.

“And which route shall we take once we are out, your Excellency? inquired further Enrique.

“We will head northwest towards Rio San Miguel, then follow the trails along the tributaries of Rio Fuerte until we reach the Fort – that is how”.

“And what shall we do if the savages try to cut our route”, continued Enrique.

“Well, if we have to, we will head straight west to El Fuerte across the badlands, or choose an alternate route” responded Don Carlos. “The beasts will not follow us across the badlands. It will take perhaps three days to get back home, but it should be safe”.

\*\*\*\*\*

Enrique knew better than to question Don Carlos on any of his decisions or orders. He had high respect for his superior’s good judgment as he had witnessed it when he served under his command in Boyaca where they had fought the Chipka Indians when they revolted at the Chivor mine. They had killed most of the rebel leaders there and got the mine working again in less than a week.

Hurriedly, Enrique and Lieutenant Cisneros dispatched Don Carlos’ orders for preparation and departure. The natives fed and watered the mules and horses. The soldiers gathered and packed the supplies for the journey. Fires were lit intentionally on the opposite site of the cave to create the illusion that they were going to continue staying there. Guards were posted at the Iron Gate and the soldiers took turns sleeping for the next few hours.

Finally, about an hour after midnight, Don Carlos gave the order to begin saddling the animals with the provisions in preparation of leaving. He took Enrique aside and instructed him to have the bars of silver and gold taken from the vault and to disguise their packing as part of the supplies, before loading them on mules with secret markings on the saddles. A little later when everyone had assembled, orders were given on the sequence in which the convoy would depart. Soldiers were assigned in the front and rear of the column and natives

and animals with supplies in the center. Two men were to lead the way with lit torches. Two more men were also assigned to each animal, one with the lit oil lamp in front and another behind him leading the animal by the reins. Leaders were appointed for each group and soon thereafter the evacuation of the cave begun quietly through the bigger tunnel in the rear of the cave towards the ventilation shaft leading out.

Shortly after, the strange convoy of soldiers, natives, and animals made slowly its way through the main tunnel then reached the ventilation tunnel leading to the west side of the mountain. The tunnel was barely wide and tall enough for the horses and mules to pass through. In some sections it was no more than two meters high and that made the crossing of the loaded mules and horses difficult, as the animals were spooked. Finally, when the group emerged on the other side of the mountain, it was still a pitch dark, moonless night, but it felt good to be out in the open clean air. Better yet, there were no rebels waiting. Under the dark cover of the night they had managed to slip quietly out of Rosario, far from the previous day location of the massacre. Subsequently, they marched in darkness for almost two hours along the steep mountain trails, avoiding the lowlands as much as possible. As dawn was breaking, they were already too tired to continue so Don Carlos allowed an hour rest. The horses and the overloaded mules were also exhausted and needed to be fed and watered.

### **Back on the trail of Cerro Colorado**

“How are the men doing back there?” asked Don Carlos.

“They are tired, your Excellency. They have been without sleep and they are hungry. Perhaps we can take another rest.

“That we will do”, responded Don Carlos. “We all need a brief rest. It was a rough day yesterday for all us. I hope the savages did not see us leave.”

“No, no one saw us, your Excellency. Please let me know what we should take with us back to El Fuerte?”

“The gold and silver, of course”, whispered softly Don Carlos. But we cannot do it now. It will be difficult to ride with such a heavy load back to El Fuerte. We may have problems along the way and we may have to fight these damn savages again. It will be much easier if we hide the gold and silver and come back for it with the reinforcements after the rainy season”.

“And where shall we hide it your Grace, so no one can find it”, commented Enrique.

“We’ll find a place to hide it – don’t you worry. Somewhere where no one would dare venture”, reassured him Don Carlos. “I have a place in mind. But first we need to get to the ventilation shaft leading to Nivel Siete on this side of Cerro Colorado. We will need rope ladders. Make sure we have at least four. We are going to need them.”

“I suppose then that we are heading for "Poso San Eduardo" or "Poso Ricco" continued Enrique.

“Yes, this is where we are going to hide the gold and silver”, responded Don Carlos.

\*\*\*\*\*

In the distance, one of the two riders at the bend of the trail began waving a flag, signaling that the trail was clear and safe to proceed. Enrique, quickened his pace again and came along Don Carlos’ side.

“Everything seems to be fine up ahead your Grace. We are finally here. If I remember correctly, the ventilation shaft opening is right around this bend of the trail”.

“I hope you are right”, responded Don Carlos. “And how steep is this damn ventilation shaft?”

“Not very steep at all and not very long either, your Excellency”, responded Enrique. It will take us straight to Nivel Siete. We will not need to use the rope ladders until we get to "Poso San Eduardo" and "Poso Ricco". I have a map of this section of Rosario that the foreman Armando Miranda prepared last year. It has all the shafts and all their measurements. Do you want to see it?”

“No, not right now. Wait until we reach the ventilation shaft. But how about the water level? What is the water level at Nivel Siete this time of the year?” asked Don Carlos.

“The water level should be way down. Both Poso San Eduardo and Poso Ricco should be completely dry. We did not have much rain this year. When we left, Arroyo de Guadalupe y Calvo was almost dry and so was Arroyo del Soldado. There was hardly any water running. Everything on this side of Rosario should be dry this time of the year, your Excellency. The rains will not come back until July and August”.

“I hope so, I really hope so”, exclaimed Don Carlos. “Make sure we have enough torches, lamps and oil before we go in. Also, make sure that there are no savages around”.

“There should be no problems your Excellency. The savages are on the other side of the mountain. They probably believe that we are still inside San Jose de Gracias. The fires must be still burning and no one saw us or followed us, I am

sure of that. But indeed we have to hide the animals before we go into Rosario from this side. And don't worry about savages coming close to Nivel Siete or Poso Ricco", he added. They believe there are ghosts running in there and they are scared of this section of the mine. None of them would dare to come close".

### **The "Nivel Siete" Disaster**

Enrique was referring to the disaster that had occurred the previous year, right after the big rains. A sudden flash flood had raced down Nivel Siete, completely flooding it and killing the native workers. This section of Rosario had been the best producer of silver and gold. A large pocket of high-grade ore had been found at the seventh level and a vertical shaft was sunk to hit an even larger pocket of good sulfide ore, rich in both silver and gold. The vertical shaft was named "Poso San Eduardo", because it was on San Eduardo's day that this rich deposit had been discovered. Poso San Eduardo was the best pocket deposit in Rosario until another richer vein was encountered at the northwestern end of the shaft, right below the seventh level. This was a huge "bolsa", a large pocket deposit; sulfide rocks rich in silver, lead, copper and gold. Poso Ricco turned out to be the greatest find of a major ore-bearing vein in Rosario - and this was the reason for its name. The vein itself was more than two meters wide and got over ten meters wider further in.

Don Carlos had ordered the opening of a ventilation shaft to provide air circulation for the work taking place at Nivel Siete, a good 250 meters below in the guts of the mountain. But even with the ventilation shaft opened on this side of the mine, air circulation was still very bad. The shaft intersected the seventh level of Rosario from the south at a cross-section named "Crucero General". This section of the seventh level was an area that had been always plagued with flooding during the rainy season in July and August. Many of the workers had died from cave-ins and sudden flash flooding in earlier years. The problem was that this section of Rosario was very close to the water table which would greatly rise in height after the summer rains.

Don Carlos had given strict orders to Armando Miranda, the mine supervisor, to put to work at least 100 natives at that well. He called it "Poso Ricco," as several tons of high-grade ore were taken out of the large pocket at the bottom of this shaft. This was the highest-grade ore that had been processed at the Las Gollondrinas smelter in the last two years. A good portion of the gold and silver that had been cast in bars for shipment to Veracruz had come from this section. The bars of gold and silver that the mules were now carrying had come from this

well. But working Poso Ricco during the rainy summer months was extremely dangerous as the lower end of Nivel Siete was frequently flooded. Only during winter, spring, early summer and late fall this section of Rosario could be worked with some degree of safety.

The deeper mine workings in this section of Rosario had created also serious problems with ventilation, lighting, and drainage. Conditions had been deplorable. In addition to the bad air, the deeper shafts were very hot. The heat had forced the natives to work almost naked, wearing only loincloths. There had been many accidents as the work was carried almost in darkness using for lighting only a few oil lamps. Many of the natives had died or had gotten really sick by the foul, full of sulfur air.

There was also the fear of repeat floods in this low section of Rosario. Armando had warned of the possibility of flooding at Nivel Siete, but Don Carlos did not want to hear anything about stopping work at "Poso Ricco". He wanted more natives to work there, but finally agreed to have a drainage shaft dug at the end of the tunnel. The only problem was that there were not enough workers available to complete this task, so he decided to wait. He ordered the work continued through the summer months until one morning, in early September, hell broke loose. After a big rain that lasted nearly three hours, water begun racing down Nivel Siete, flooding everything. Only a few of the Indians managed to escape. More than fifty workers drowned in the dark turbulent waters, most near the bottom of "Poso Ricco", where they were working. The few that survived would not return to recover the bodies of their dead comrades – even when the water retreated. They left the bodies to rot at the bottom of Poso Ricco and all operations had stopped for fear of more flooding. "Poso Ricco" remained flooded until the end of the year.

### **"Poso Ricco" - "Poso de los Muertos"**

After this appalling disaster, the natives would no longer refer to this bolsa of rich ore as Poso Ricco. They renamed it "El Poso de los Muertos" – a graveyard deep inside Cerro Colorado. Some of the workers claimed that it was ghost-ridden and that they could hear screams of drowning comrades echoing from Nivel Siete, even at the higher levels. Some of the Indian workers even claimed that they had encounters with ghosts, even in the far reaches of Rosario. To all natives of the region, Nivel Siete, Poso Eduardo and Poso Ricco were cursed places. All at Rosario, Indians and Spaniards alike, avoided the seventh level. Common sense dictated that work at the mine should not progress below the

fluctuating water table level and this section had to be abandoned. However, Don Carlos would not hear of it – not after the rich bolsa had been discovered. He wanted the water bailed out into drainage adits below the working level and for the work to resume. Since the flow of water up to that time had not been strong and labor was available, bailing could perhaps control the water and keep production going. However, the workers refused to go back and bail the water out – even when beaten up. Fortunately the drainage shaft, even though not fully enlarged and completed, had slowly drained Poso Ricco during the dry season. After the flood and the drowning, that section of Rosario was impossible to mine as the workers simply would not return there – even when threatened with severe punishment and beatings.

As for ghosts, Don Carlos believed nothing of this nonsense of the natives. The night before he had decided that heading for this section of Rosario would be the smartest thing to do under the circumstances. Continuing to El Fuerte with the load of silver and gold would be difficult, particularly if there were skirmishes with the rebels along the way. He decided that it would be best to hide the valuable load in "Poso Ricco", where it would be safe until the end of the rebellion and the resumption of mining at Guadalupe y Calvo. The rebels would not dare to venture into that section of Nivel Siete. He decided to hide the gold and silver at Poso Ricco and then continue towards El Fuerte. The plan had formulated in his head, but he didn't say anything to his men, except Enrique whose help he needed to carry out the task.

\*\*\*\*\*

"How is Francisco doing back there?" the old man asked, referring to Capitan Francisco de Moncada, riding behind with the friars.

"Not too well your Excellency" responded Enrique. "He lost a lot of blood and he is weak. His wound to the shoulder is deep and I don't think he is going to be able to ride back with us to El Fuerte. Not in the condition he is in. Perhaps we should leave him at Chinipas".

"Well, lets hope that he holds up", responded Don Carlos. "Francisco is a good man and I need him. We got to take him to the doctor in El Fuerte".

"I pray to the Lord that he makes it", muttered Enrique. "I pray to the Lord that we all return safely to El Fuerte".

"How many men did we loose at Las Gollondrinas" yesterday?" continued Don Carlos.

"All of them your Excellency. All twenty-three men of the Cordova regiment fell. Capitan de Moncada was the only survivor from yesterday's massacre. More



than five hundred of the savages attacked and some had crossbows, which they got when they overrun our men at the Valencia mine. Our soldiers at Las Gollondrinas were able to reload only once before the savages fell upon them. It was hopeless”.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **The Ventilation Shaft leading to Rosario’s “Nivel Siete”.**

As the convoy turned around the trail’s bend, Enrique addressed Don Carlos one more time.

“We are here your Excellency”.

“I don’t see the ventilation shaft opening. Where is it?” asked Don Carlos.

“It is behind the bushes Don Carlos, right after the small plateau, near the clearing”.

Finally, they had arrived at their intended destination. Indeed there was a small plateau and a clearing up ahead along the steep trail. It had been formed by material dumped when the ventilation shaft was excavated. Don Carlos dismounted and waited until the rest of the convoy reached the clearing. Then he ordered all loads to be taken off the animals and stacked near the shaft entrance and for all to take a rest for about an hour. He said nothing more about what they would do afterwards. Everyone assumed that the march would continue towards the lowlands along Rio San Miguel. Enrique in turn ordered that the animals be watered and fed and for guards to be assigned on either side of the trail.

The wild vegetation that had grown in the early spring hid the entrance to the ventilation shaft leading to the seventh level. They had trouble locating it. One of the soldiers began cutting the vegetation with a long blade. Don Carlos cursed him and ordered him to stop. He didn’t want the entrance cleared and visible. Next he ordered Enrique to assign responsibility for the guarding of the horses and mules at some distance away from the plateau and to keep the animals tied out of sight at a higher elevation a few hundred meters away, where the vegetation was thicker. Also he cautioned him that they should keep an eye for the savages and under no circumstances to light any fires as the smoke would be visible. Three soldiers were assigned the task of guarding the supplies, the mules and horses.

Then, Don Carlos walked over where Capitan Francisco de Moncada was now resting next to Padre Ramirez, the Franciscan friar who was examining his wounds and changing his bandages.

How are you doing Francisco”, he asked.

“I am doing well, Your Excellency”, he said, “I am doing well. I have a lot of pain but the bleeding has stopped. Good Padre Ramirez here has been an angel from heavens. I owe him my life”

“No”, intervened Padre Ramirez. “It is God who saved your life”.

“I want you and the padres to wait for us here until we get back”, said Don Carlos. “We will not be long. We need to go to Nivel Siete and we will be back very soon”.

“Nivel Siete? Inquired Francisco.

“Yes, Nivel Siete”, responded Don Carlos. “When we return we will head for El Fuerte. Perhaps tonight we can camp at Chinipas”.

“Chinipas? asked again Francisco. “Is this not out of our way?”

“It is a little out of our way, but it will be safer. Then we can follow Rio Santo Domingo to Rio Placeres, and from there through the mountain pass continue to Rio Petatlan. It will be safe there to spend another night. Then, we will follow Rio Petatlan northwest towards Toharara, where we can rest again, get food, as well as new mules and horses. From Toharara, we will head northwest through the hills to Rio Yekorato, then east to El Fuerte”.

“But this is really a round about way”, commented Francisco. “Really out of the way we came”.

“I know, I know”, said Don Carlos. “We may have to decide on a different route, but we will not make a definite decision until we reach Chinipas, hopefully tonight. We still have a good two hour march ahead of us and hopefully we’ll get there before dark”.

“You know best, your Excellency, you know best”, commented Francisco.

“Yes, you know best, your Excellency”, echoed Padre Ramirez.

\*\*\*\*\*

The soldiers had finished eating and some were now resting while some appeared to be sleeping. But even before the hour of rest was up, Enrique called Teniente Felipe de Cisneros, his second-in-command lieutenant, and ordered: “Felipe, get everyone up on their feet”.

Immediately, Felipe screamed loud the order. Reluctantly, soldiers and natives began to get ready to renew their march. With Felipe following, Enrique walked over to the piles of supplies and pointed to the bags with the secret markings.

“Teniente” he said, “put all bags with the green markings on this side and hide the rest in the bushes, over there, on the other side of the trail”.

Cisneros seemed surprised by the order but passed it on to the soldiers close to him.

“Teniente” addressed him again Enrique. “Have the beasts cut some branches from the trees, make sleds and secure the bags with the green markings. We are going into Rosario”.

“Into Rosario?” Felipe muttered in disbelief.

“Yes into Rosario, through the ventilation shaft”, Enrique responded “and form a line. I want at least six men to lead the way with torches and lamps and to have the beasts pull the sleds with these loads. I want all the native beasts to follow and the rest of us will be in the back end. Make sure we have enough torches and oil for the lamps. We will be in Rosario for at least an hour, may be two”.

## **Nivel Siete**

Felipe could not understand what was going on but did not question the order, so he started barking his own out loud. Soon a convoy was formed with Spaniards in the front and the back and the natives in the middle. The soldiers were surprised by the orders, as they had expected to reload the supplies on the mules and continue the march toward Rio San Miguel, but then Felipe made it clear that they were going into the ventilation shaft.

“We are going to Nivel Siete”, “Nivel Siete”. I want the beasts to pull the sleds”, he went, on pointing at the natives.

The Indians, soon as they saw Enrique pointing towards the shaft opening, became frightened by the prospect of venturing into the mine, particularly in this section. Everyone knew where the shaft was leading. The soldiers did not seem happy either.

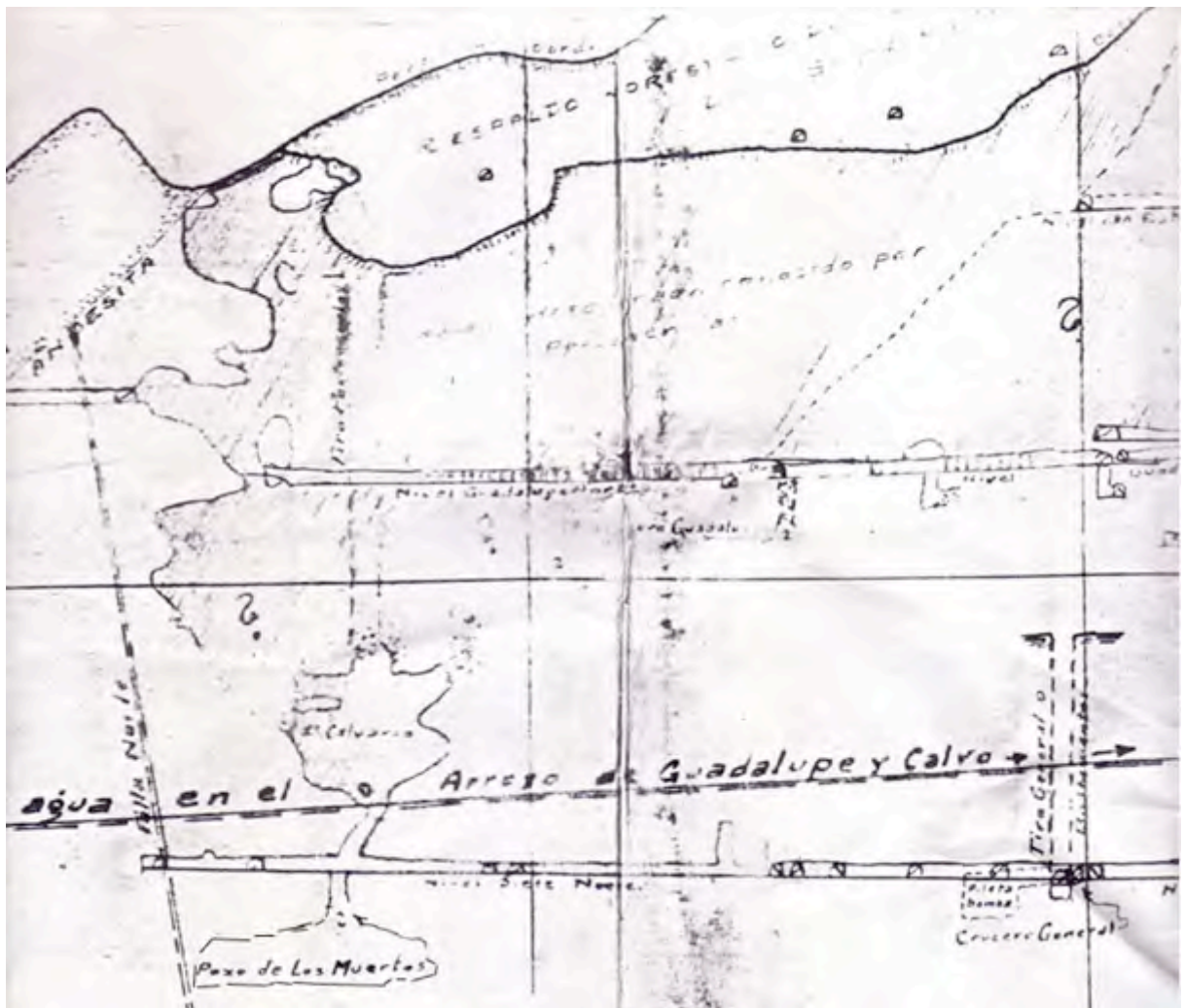
“Nivel Siete, Nivel Siete”, the natives started whispering to each other, with fear in their eyes.

“Poso de los Muertos, Poso de los Muertos”, others added.

Two of the Spanish soldiers echoed, “Poso de los Muertos”. Don Carlos overheard them, got angry and cursed them.

“Cierre sus bocas jijos de putas. Shut your damn mouths. Cierre sus bocas si desean permanecer vivos”, screamed Enrique, pulling his sword and pointing it in their direction.

Frightened the soldiers fell in line, lit a few torches and a dozen or so oil lamps and one by one begun entering and getting lost in the darkness of the ventilation shaft. Reluctantly the natives followed, pulling behind them the sleds with the valuable cargo. The rest of the Indians did not seem eager to follow but with muskets and short lances pointing at them, they also begun entering the darkness of the shaft. Don Carlos and the rest of the soldiers followed behind. Francisco and the two padres joined the soldiers guarding the horses and mules in the wooded area, out of sight. They were going to wait there.



Nivel Siete, Poso Eduardo and Poso de los Muertos

The ventilation shaft was humid and eerie. It was a little more than two meters high but barely wide enough. As they progressed deeper, the temperature became progressively hotter. There was a strong smell of sulfur, ammonia and bat guano in the foul air, which got worse as the strange procession continued the slow descent down the narrow incline. Parts of the shaft had collapsed and piles of fallen earth had partially closed it. The light from the torches and lamps created strange dancing reflections on the walls and ceiling. Progress was slow as the ground was wet and slippery. Suddenly, large field rats appeared out of nowhere, first running towards the procession, then, frightened by the torches, in the opposite direction. It took almost a good fifteen minutes before they reached a big opening at Nivel Siete, approximately 250 meters down the shaft. At the large cavity near the intersection, they came upon hundreds, if not thousands of bats hanging upside down from the ceiling and walls. They looked like rats with wings and some were showing their teeth. Agitated by the torches and the commotion, the bats began flying around the men, never touching them but close enough for them to feel the agitation of air by their wings. The smell of bat guano permeated the air and breathing it began to burn their lungs.

All of a sudden, the natives in front who were pulling the sleds stopped and started saying something in their native language to their tribesmen behind. The Spaniards did not understand, but the words "Poso de los Muertos" were heard again and again, which greatly annoyed Don Carlos. The natives stopped, refusing to go further. Immediately, Enrique ordered one of the soldiers to kill the Indian who had had been the loudest. The soldier lifted his sword and with one swift motion struck down cutting the Indian's head in half. Then, the lifeless body of the Indian was dragged to the side to make room for the procession to continue. Frightened the Indians in front resumed their slow march down slope Nivel Siete now, dragging behind the sleds. The rest of the natives just followed.

Reflecting light from the torches continued to cast strange dancing silhouettes on the walls of the tunnel as the men continued their slow walk through the eerie setting. Drops of water dripping from the ceiling made the tunnel floor wetter and muddier. The stale air got hotter and heavier with horrible smells of both bat guano and of human sweat. The men continued slowly until finally, about two hundred and fifty meters further down Nivel Siete, they reached "Poso San Eduardo", the first of the two vertical shafts. The frightened Indians shone their torches down the square vertical shaft, but its bottom could not be seen.

The shaft was lined with timbers but some seemed completely rotten and had popped out. Carefully they all went around the large opening, checking the

firmness of their footings as they progressed. Reluctantly the soldiers followed behind, just as frightened by the eerie silence and the darkness of the surroundings. A cursed place this was and the smell of imminent death was in the air. Echoes of strange sounds begun to reach them and the frightened natives begun again to murmur words in their language. Were these sounds, the screams of their tribesmen that drowned?

Two of the Spanish foot soldiers carrying torches moved ahead, leading now the way. The group continued its slow advance through the narrow tunnel for another fifty meters until a second vertical shaft was reached. This was "El Poso de los Muertos." The soldiers lifted the torches and shone the light down the walls of the almost vertical pit. Approximately ten to twelve meters below the floor of the first section of El Poso de los Muertos could be seen. There was no water on the bottom but intermingled human bones and skulls could be seen, along with pieces of broken wood ladders.

"El Poso de los Muertos" whispered again the natives, trembling.

The soldiers secured torches and lamps on the walls of the tunnel around the shaft. The whole group now convened around the wider platform of Nivel Siete and around the deep pit. A wooden ladder was seen further down Nivel Siete, and Teniente Cisneros examined it. The wood was rotten and disintegrated when he pulled it. There was no way that any of the wooden ladders could be salvaged to help them descend.

Don Carlos ordered that the rope ladders be unfolded and secured around the deep hole. Iron pegs were quickly nailed into cracks in the rocks of the tunnel to hold the rope ladders in place. For added security, Enrique ordered that four soldiers should hold each of the three rope ladders, in case the pegs gave way when descending. Another thick rope with a wooden ship's pulley was secured on the rocks of the tunnel to use in lowering down the shaft the bags with the green markings.

Enrique ordered two of the soldiers to lower themselves down the pit using the rope ladders. When these two reached bottom, they started to push aside some of the bones and skulls and yelled loud that there was no water. Obviously, the rains had not been too bad this year.

"Everyone down", ordered Enrique pointing at the natives. "I want everyone of you down there. Everyone down. We need you down there".

Addressing the rest of the soldiers, he added, "The rest of you wait for us up here and be ready".



The natives did not move until some of the soldiers pulled their swords. Trembling with fear, one by one the Indians began lowering themselves down the knotted ropes. When everyone was down, Enrique screamed at the remaining soldiers.

“Now, I want these bags down and two more of you down there. The rest of you wait here, be ready and keep the torches burning and the lamps lit. We will not be long. We’ll get out of this damn place soon enough”.

Slowly, one by one the soldiers begun to lower the heavy bags using rope and pulley. Each time the natives at the bottom unhooked each load to free the pulley for yet another run, until all eleven bags were down “El Poso de Los Muertos”.

“Now it is our turn Enrique, you and me”, said Don Carlos, as he took off his chainmail vest. “We got to get down there”.

Enrique took off his chainmail vest also and went down a rope ladder first, followed by Don Carlos. Some of the Indians at the bottom of the pit were weeping but appeared relieved when Don Carlos and Enrique joined them.

“What shall we do now your Excellency”, asked Enrique.

“Let’s get these bags to the inside chamber”, he replied, pointing towards the dark horizontal shaft beyond. “Get the beasts to carry the loads in there”, he added, “All others should wait here for our return ”.

Enrique, ordered the soldiers to light their oil lamps and wait. Then, he had the natives open the bags. Inside they were heavy canvas belts with pockets where gold and silver bars had been inserted. He ordered the natives to wrap the heavy belts around their necks and shoulders. Each of the belt bags weighted at least 60 to 70 kilos. The loads were heavy. The natives did what they were told and helped each other strap the belts around their shoulders. When all the belts were loaded, the group was told to begin walking along the twenty-meter long horizontal shaft to the very large cave – further into el Poso de los Muertos. As the group slowly progressed, more scattered bones and skulls could be seen everywhere as the light of the torches and lamps shone. The scene was ghastly.

Enrique and Don Carlos followed behind them on the short tunnel leading to the larger chamber. The ground was also dump but there was no water. In almost total darkness they reached the bigger chamber. That was “la bolsa ricca,” the large pocket deposit of high-grade ore that had been mined, enlarging the size of the cave in the process. Enrique ordered more oil lamps lit, as Don

Carlos begun pacing and exploring the huge cavity. Don Carlos took a lamp in his hands so he could see better, and looked around him in the large cave.

“Put the loads here in this corner,” he ordered “and send the soldiers and the beasts back to the ladders to wait for us there. No one should get back up to Nivel Siete until you and I return. And have them light two more torches”.

Enrique repeated the order and additional torches were lit. When the task was completed, the soldiers and the Indians were told to go back. All were eager to get the hell out of that place and moved out of “bolsa ricca” quickly. Don Carlos was now alone with Enrique in this eerie place.

“What shall we do now your Excellency”, he asked.

“You see that big rock on that corner?” said Don Carlos pointing up to the other side. “I want you to measure exactly 15 paces along the edge of the bolsa and place this other rock. Then measure another 15 paces towards the other side and put another one of the big rocks, at that spot and one more another at another 15 paces”.

Enrique complied, doing exactly what Don Carlos had ordered. They were now four large rocks around the perimeter of the cave.

“What shall we do next?” asked Enrique.

“I want you to measure 10 paces from the last rock towards the second rock and start digging a hole at that point. I will help you. We are going to bury these bags here and come back for them next spring”.

Enrique did exactly that. He took ten steps, and then used a shovel to make a large hole at exactly that spot. It was not difficult. The ground was soft with sediment deposited by the last flood, so digging was easy. When a big hole was ready, Enrique and Don Carlos dragged the bags; one by one into the pit, then buried them stamping afterwards the soil with their feet. The floor of the cave now looked undisturbed.

“Shall I put a marker?” asked Enrique.

“Hell, No; No marker at this spot. We have the four stones and the measured distances. That is enough to find the bags when we return next spring. Besides, who in his right mind would dare to come to this cursed place? We will come back when these damn riots are over. We are going to take care of these beasts that defy the Crown. We will teach them a bitter lesson. Lets get back now”.

Satisfied that everything had gone well, Don Carlos grabbed a torch off the wall of the cave and started back along the same path they came. Enrique followed. When minutes later they reached the outer chamber both natives and soldiers were pleased to see them. There were greetings also from the soldiers above, pleased now that they were done with this cursed place. Back to the fresh air. This is what they all wanted.

“Up we go you and I”, said Don Carlos to Enrique, “then the soldiers. Tell the beasts that they have to wait their turn”.

Slowly Don Carlos ascended first up a dangling rope ladder, followed by Enrique and the four soldiers. The Indians waited patiently their turn at the bottom of the pit, but a couple grabbed the knotted ropes and begun to climb. Soon as Don Carlos, Enrique and the soldiers reached the top, Don Carlos nodded and Enrique gave the order:

“Pull the ladders and ropes up. Fire your muskets at the beasts and reload immediately. Kill the damn beasts”.

Teniente Cisneros repeated the order and the soldiers around the pit fired their muskets at the Indians below. The sounds were deafening and smoke filled the air. There was screaming and yelling at the bottom of the pit. Some of the Indians, who made it near the top on the still dangling ropes, were pierced by the swords of the Spanish soldiers and fell back to the bottom. Others, even though they were wounded, managed to hang on to the ropes, trying to climb.

Enrique ordered the soldiers to reload the muskets and fire again and at anyone on the bottom of the pit that appeared to be alive. A soldier threw a torch down to the pile of quivering bodies and the muskets were fired once more. The sound was deafening and the echoes lasted for several seconds. Then Enrique gave the next order to Teniente Cisneros, “Now light the fuse and throw the gunpowder at the beasts”.

Quickly the fuse was lit and a small container with gunpowder was thrown into the pit. Less than five seconds later there was a big explosion and all torches and lamps were blown out by the blast, leaving the tunnel in total darkness. More screams were heard from below, followed by echoes from the long tunnel, then absolute silence.

“Light the damn torches”, screamed loud Enrique. Soon one after another torches were lit but even with their light nothing could be seen, except for the suspended cloud of dust. The air at Nivel Siete was heavy with smoke and the smell of gunpowder. The dust made breathing very difficult for all in this closed

space. The soldiers were coughing and gasping for air. Some managed to get rags or handkerchiefs and covered their mouths and noses, trying to filter the heavy dust from the air they were breathing. Nothing could now be seen at the bottom of “El Poso de los Muertos”, just the cloud of suspended dust. Minutes later, when the dust finally began to settle and the smoke dispersed at the bottom of the pit, the twisted bodies of dead Indians could be seen laying among the bleached bones of those that had drowned almost a year previously.

Addressing Don Carlos, Enrique said:

“They are all dead your Excellency. No one is moving. We got them all with the gunpowder”.

“But they were Christians”, whispered one of the soldiers to one next to him. “They adopted our faith”.

Teniente Cisneros heard him, got angry and cursed him.

“These were not real Christians, these were savages, cavron. They were just waiting for an opportunity to join the rest of their tribesmen and cut our throats. Don’t feel sorry for them. They were only beasts”.

The dust had now settled enough and the soldiers began breathing easier. Satisfied that now all the natives were dead, Don Carlos gave the order for the return up Nivel Siete to the ventilation shaft. Rejoiced by the prospect of leaving this hell's hole, the soldiers hastily started up the tunnel in single file. Teniente Cisneros had taken the lead. There were only three more torches left, but there was enough light from the oil lamps. The return up Nivel Siete was much easier now without the loads and with fewer people. Don Carlos and Enrique stayed at the rear of the column with a soldier in front of them carrying a torch.

\*\*\*\*\*

“What shall we do your Excellency when we get out”, asked Enrique. “Shall we give the men a rest?”

“No more than half an hour”, responded Don Carlos. “We need to re-saddle the mules and reach Chinipas before dark”. Apparently he already formulated a plan for the return to El Fuerte.

“As you command, your Excellency. We will still have at least three to four hours of daylight”.

“Yes Chinipas tonight and tomorrow we can march to Toharara for another night, before we march towards Rio Yekorato or one of the tributaries of Rio

Fuerte”, continued Don Carlos and sighted. “We will get home at last. The Viceroy promised reinforcements. They are all waiting for us at El Fuerte”.

\*\*\*\*\*

Soon the first soldiers in the column reached "Poso San Eduardo" and waited for the rest to catch up with them, then continued with Teniente Cisneros taking again the lead. Without the loads, the column advanced faster now and without delay reached the intersection of Nivel Siete with the ventilation shaft. Still the smell of bat guano permeated the air. They were now advancing on the narrower ventilation shaft and as fresh, cooler air struck their faces, breathing became easier. They knew they were closer to the entrance. Finally a little speck of light appeared in the distance. It was a good thing to be able to see the speck of daylight again, as one more of the three remaining torches went out. Those in the back of the column had trouble seeing, but they followed the light of the torch in front, feeling the walls of the tunnel with their hands but uncertain of their foot steps. The column continued slowly the ascend, with Don Carlos and Enrique at the back end of the procession. As they slowly progressed, the light got brighter and brighter, marking clearly now the entrance of the tunnel. All rejoiced at the prospect of getting out of this hell. Enrique screamed an order that none should exit the tunnel and cautioned the soldiers to be careful, once they got closer. When they finally got near the entrance, Teniente Cisneros ordered two soldiers to get out first and scout the area outside. After a couple of minutes the soldiers returned reporting that everything looked fine but they could not see the mules and the rest of the people that had been left behind.

“They are probably hidden in the bushes further down the trail as told”, concluded loud Teniente Cisneros.

“You are probably right”, responded Enrique.

“Lets get out of this damn place then”, ordered Don Carlos.

One by one the Spaniards exited the tunnel, happy to be out in the open again. They were almost blinded by the light of the bright afternoon sun, as their eyes were trying to get used to daylight again. Some of the soldiers begun stretching, others sat on rocks around the entrance to the ventilation shaft, while others reached for their water canteens. The sun was shining bright on their sweaty faces and they did not immediately see the hundreds of natives who suddenly jumped out of the bushes along the mountain trail, waving spears, knives, axes and clubs. Most of the soldiers did not even have a chance to reach for their muskets, when the human wave fell upon them like locusts in the desert. What followed in the next few minutes was an absolute massacre, as most of the

soldiers were butchered before they even had a chance to get on their feet. Some of the soldiers managed to draw their swords and tried to stay a formation, as they attempted to retreat back to the relative safety of the ventilation shaft where they had just come out. Some run towards Don Carlos and Enrique, forming a circle around them. Still a couple of others who had loaded muskets managed to fire a couple of shots. But it was no use. They were hundreds of rebels around them and the retreat to the shaft had been almost cut off.

Quickly some of the soldiers grabbed their lances and stood in formation and so did the rest with Teniente Cisneros leading and urging them to retreat back towards the ventilation shaft. But carving a path through the human waves of the rebel Indians to get back to the safety of the shaft became impossible. One by one the Spaniards fell struck by arrows of longbow or crossbow bearing Indians. Teniente Cisneros was one of the first to go down. He was finished with a hard blow to the head by a club-swinging rebel. The still standing soldiers fought valiantly for a few more minutes inflicting damage to the Indians, but their formation fell apart and the odds were overwhelming as more of Indians surrounded them. One by one the soldiers fell, mortally wounded, some stabbed, others pierced by arrows and still others with heads smashed by club and ax bearing Indians.

Don Carlos, Enrique and a foot soldier were practically at the entrance of the ventilation tunnel when the foot soldier fighting next to Don Carlos was struck on the head by a rebel. The soldier fell, his face twisted by pain and the agony of imminent death. Another one finished him off with a second blow. Enrique was keeping half a dozen Indians at bay with his sword, with his back protected by a large rock near the entrance to the ventilation shaft. He had been cut badly on his left arm by a spear and was bleeding. Slowly he managed to back his way toward the opening of the ventilation shaft, as did Don Carlos and a still standing soldier on the other side. Gathering whatever strength he had left, Enrique tried to get closer to Don Carlos and help, but there was no use. He was still too far away and Indians blocked his way. He kept on fighting and managed to kill two more Indians, but half a dozen more were now upon him, swinging heavy clubs, knives and axes. There was no way he could get closer to help Don Carlos. He slowly retreated, swinging his sword in all directions, backing slowly into the ventilation shaft, then disappeared in its darkness. None of the rebels dared to follow him.

Don Carlos was now alone and only three meters away from the shaft's entrance. He fought bravely but he was exhausted. An Indian, swinging a club, jumped behind him cutting his retreat. With the corner of his eye Don Carlos saw



him and managed to turn around in time to pierce him with his sword, but half a dozen more rebel Indians were now upon him from all sides. One threw a spear that grazed his arm but Don Carlos managed to hold on to his doubled edged Toledo sword and kill his attacker. Still another Indian rebel stepped forward and threw his spear, which this time pierced the lacing holding his protective breastplate, penetrating deeply into his body. Don Carlos felt a terrible pain as the spear pierced between his seventh and eighth rib on the left side, missing his heart but severing the lower aorta and penetrating his liver. With face twisted with pain, the old warrior fell to his knees, still clenching his Toledo sword on his right hand. His last thoughts of life were of Isabella and his son who he would never see again. Another rebel fell on top of him, grabbed him by the hair and with a sharp knife cut his throat from ear to ear, severing both his internal and external jugular veins, as well as his carotid artery. Blood spurted out soaking his white beard, turning it red. But Don Carlos felt no more pain. For a brief moment of life remaining, his last vision went back to his young days at Castille-La Mancha. He was lying under a tree on a hill, surrounded by an open field full of spring daisies and red poppies, the spring air smelling of wild thyme. Beautiful young Isabella was next to him, holding his hand, smiling. But the vision immediately left when he exhaled his last breath and entered a tunnel with a bright shining white light at the end. Don Carlos, the ruler of the Northern Territories, the Earl de Osuna, was dead; his glassy eyes now wide open, glaring up at the afternoon sky. Isabella and Spain were far away now - his treasure was lost forever at the bottom of "Poso de los Muertos".

---

## **AUTHOR'S EPILOG**

### **The Search for "El Poso de los Muertos" and the Treasure of Sierra Madre – A Modern Day Sequel (to be added)**

Historical events as well as real and fictional characters are described in my story above in an attempt to provide the background that led me to a foolish search for this lost, Spanish treasure, allegedly buried at "El Poso de los Muertos" - a death pit at the Rosario mine near Guadalupe y Calvo, in Mexico's Sierra Madre Occidental. A version of the Spanish treasure story was relayed to me by a disabled Viet Nam war veteran who lived at a small village near El Fuerte in Sinaloa, where I had taken residence and used as my headquarters

when I was mining mercury, silver, copper and a little gold in the mountains of Mexico in the late 60's. The name of the fellow was Jim McCord, a kind soul who died a few months after our meeting, not from the wounds he had sustained in Viet Nam but from severe damage to his liver by excessive drinking of the local tequila, alternating with equally excessive consumption of "Bohemia" – his favorite beer. The sequel which I will add to the story has to do with the account of how the story of the treasure was eventually brought to my attention and how I got a copy of the Rosario mine map where the alleged treasure was buried at "El Poso de los Muertos" and how I begun my search for it. For time being, I will include only a few photos which illustrate the ordeal and dangers which I subjected myself in searching for "El Poso De Los Muertos" and its alleged treasure.



At my renovated home in El Fuerte, in Sinaloa - the old headquarters of the Spanish governor a few centuries earlier.





My own private bathtub on a mountain stream near Rosario. However, if you want to take a bath in a stream pool such as this, make sure there are no blood sucking leeches in it, and if you are unlucky and have a dozen or so attached to your body when you get out, have a lit cigarette ready to burn them off, as pulling them leaves their head attached to your skin. It happened and it was absolutely disgusting. Also drinking the water will always be a problem no matter how pristine a stream may look. Further up upstream there may be natives doing laundry, taking a bath or going to the bathroom. It is a good idea to strain the water through some kind of cloth to get rid of the bigger stuff – particularly if you are taking it from a container where cows water themselves, then boiling it before drinking it – that is if you are not desperate from thirst and can wait even though your mouth is dry and frothing. One more thing I learned from experience, that if you are not a professional matador, never challenge a bull in an open field in trying to impress the natives with matador skills you don't have. And always make sure you are close to a tree so you can put that between your self and the bull – at least until the bull's temper is diminished or rightfully decides you are an idiot and leaves you alone.



In Chihuahua airport getting ready to fly to the mountains of the Western Cordillera. Landing a tail dragger on a mountain clearing was not an easy task. Flying and landing a Cessna 172 was easier. Taking off was twice as difficult.



Searching inside an old abandoned Spanish silver mine



Swollen feet after hours of walking and climbing always needed a good bath.





Lunch of tortillas and frijoles at the Four Seasons open garden restaurant – the best in the region, highly recommended for its ambiance and its chef (in the foreground)



Off to an honest day's work in the mountains, being fully ready for any ambush by bandits along the trail or some damn animal wanting to make a meal out of me and my horse.



Getting ready to continue with new horses after a night's rest at a local village.



Crossing a flooded river with ropes and pulleys. Navigating with the help of air photo.



Taking a brief rest



Continuing on towards Guadeloupe y Calvo with a new horse and a new guide on a donkey. Mules with supplies followed.





Equipped with water, canned food, ropes, a 30/30 riffle, a Smith Wesson 38 special, a Spanish Eibar GZ .22 caliber on a leg harness, boxfuls of ammunition and two dozen dynamite sticks, primers and friction fuses, the author with his Yaqui Indian guide Miguel on the way to Rosario in Guadalupe y Calvo in search of the ventilation shaft leading to “Nivel Siete” and “El Poso de los Muertos”.





My camp near Guadalupe y Calvo offered some protection from the mountain lions that would visit at night trying to steal our goat meat – our only source of protein. Lacking refrigeration we had to hang our butchered goats high up between two trees, but in the morning the meat would be often missing. I did not realize at the time how high the damn pumas could really jump up to steal our food – thus we lost two goats and had no proper food other than damn beans and tortillas de mais (corn tortillas).



One of the goats the mountain lions stole at night depriving me of a descent meal.



I felt bad about killing the little deer but we needed some meat. I had hoped that I would miss shooting it with a .22 pistol from very far away. Unfortunately for the little deer, I did not miss.



It is amazing how quickly one can become uncivilized and distrustful when confronted with survival issues. I learned that in the boondocks where I was, you don't allow anyone you don't know approach you, and need to be ready behind a cover with gun drawn, informing them that you are fully armed and yelling to identify themselves from far away and let you know what they want. Also, sleeping with a gun under the pillow, an automatic 30/30 rifle and better yet a 12-gauge shotgun next to you, is always a good idea as well as taking turns sleeping - with someone staying guard for both mountain lions and greedy night bandits that may be attracted by the fire. Yes it was like the old west, but perhaps even worse - because there were no saloons and no fancy dames to dance with.



Walking on the trail and giving the horse a rest period



Clearing the entrance to the ventilation shaft





The bandits in these mountains were even more cunning than the jackals, hyenas, wolverines or the mountain lions. They were sneaky and ruthless, but when confronted, cowardly. I learned that one had to act tough, be ready and never trust anyone – no matter how innocent they may appear. From experience I learned that even people working in the fields in this lawless part of the country could turn into potential bandits - if given the opportunity. Often the appearance of innocence could be just a disguise – since in the absence of law and punishment, they could cut your throat from ear to ear or shoot you in the back for 300 pesos may be 30 dollars then. That was the going price for life then. For thirty dollars they could have you killed and no one would even miss you or look for you, since not only they wouldn't know where you were in the first place, or that you were missing – or because they simply didn't give a damn.



At the site of the purported massacre of the Spaniards. High boots offered some protection from unexpected encounters with rattle snakes but when I would put them on in the morning I had to shake them well to make sure that any scorpions or centipedes that had taken refuge in them at night were properly evicted.



At the entrance of the ventilation shaft getting ready for “Nivel Siete” and the descend to the pits of “Poso San Eduardo and “Poso de Los Muertos”





At the entrance of the ventilation shaft which I finally cleared of vegetation and debris for safer entry. There were further tunnel collapses inside which I could only clear enough to crawl through on the way to the main shaft at “Nivel Siete”.

Here I am at the opening of a hole that leads to a dark wet tunnel that leads to a cave with hardly any air, in the guts of a mountain where death can occur in at least hundred different ways – and hopefully fast if you are lucky. Scorpions, centipedes and poisonous salamanguesas and snakes abound. Avoiding a bite in the face as you crawl through rubble of the tunnel is the challenge. Making lots of noise to herald your entry is the best defense. Hopefully the crawling creatures will get scared and get out of your way. Shaking your boots before putting them on in the morning – provided you even took them off the night before – is always a good idea. Wrapping a rope with horsehair around the place that you sleep is a good first defense for snakes that want to share with you the warmth of your blanket during the cold nights. Sleeping off the ground is always a better alternative and using a folding cot is by far better. As for keeping away the mountain lions at night, a good fire is always a good defense provided you sleep close enough to it, but having a riffle ready – shotgun better - a strong flashlight is also a good idea. As for the vampire bats or the big field rats, taking one or two of my dogs to bed with me was a good necessary precaution when in town, but I had left the dogs behind. For the snakes, a long machete was always better than a gun as they would be hard to shoot. High boots and a snake kit were a necessity as well as something to tie quickly a tourniquet. Another thing I learned was never to shoot a leopard while riding a horse. The horse may get so spooked by the leopard or the gunshot that it may throw you off the saddle or start running like crazy. If you fall off the horse try not to lose your gun, as you may still have to deal with the leopard – it happened.

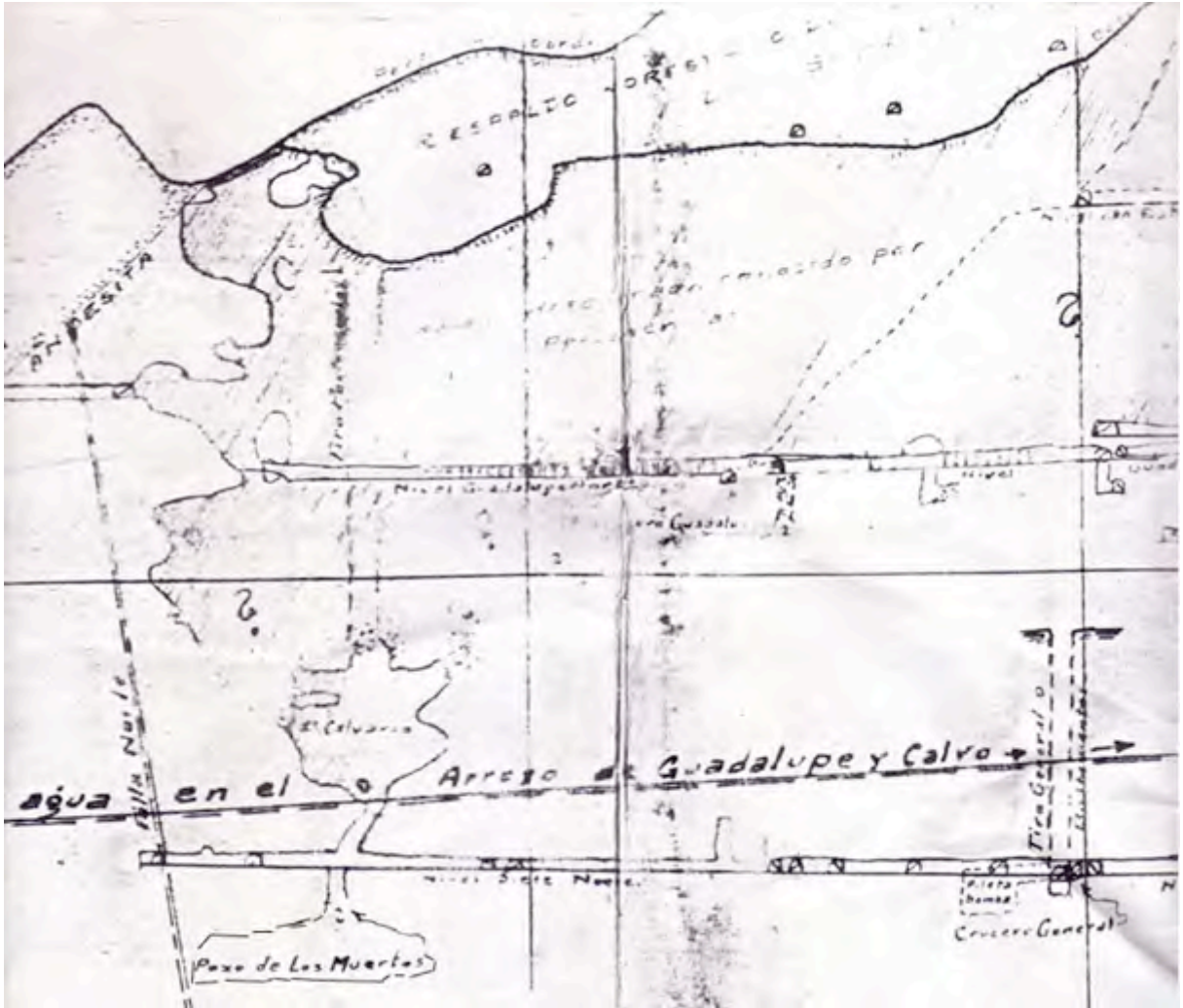




Old Maps of Underground Tunnels (most collapsed) I needed to decipher and navigate through. Nivel Siete is at the bottom.

NOTAS: El Nivel Siete, y todos sus labrados hasta la altura de 2270. Mts., están inundados desde a fines.

Warning of Nivel Siete being flooded to the end.



Cross section Map showing Nivel Siete, Pozo San Eduardo and Pozo De Los Muertos. Cruceiro General is the point where the ventilation shaft meets Nivel Siete. The Ventilation shaft is not shown. During wet season most of Nivel Siete and Pozo de los Muertos are flooded. The water drains slowly and there is a window of time of almost five months when there is no flooding. The bed of the stream Arroyo de Guadalupe y Calvo is higher than the level of Nivel Siete.