

## CHAPTER 1

# THE END AND THE BEGINNING

General Omar Torrijos Herrera died at the age of fifty-two years. In 1968 he and other officers had organized the coup d'état that terminated several decades of oligarchic presidents and rigged elections. That *golpe de Estado* placed Torrijos on the path to dictatorship. Thereafter, he consolidated political control of the nation and held numerous titles: commander of the National Guard, chief of the government, and maximum leader of the Panamanian Revolution. He preferred to call himself the “strongman.” Omar perished after twelve years and ten months in power.

### REQUIEM FOR THE COMMANDER

Just three years after the Panama Canal Treaties went into effect, the news broke throughout Panama and the world: The country's military dictator had died. Panamanians received the news on the first day of August 1981 via television and radio stations. “It is announced to citizens,” the official government bulletin said, “that Panamanian Air Force Plane 205, missing on a flight from Penonomé to Coclesito, has been found by rescue patrols. It has been confirmed that it crashed. The remains of General Omar Torrijos Herrera have been officially identified.”<sup>1</sup>

Reports by the National Guard revealed the six names of those killed in the same air crash, which occurred during a severe thunderstorm. They included Teresa Ferreira, a dentist from Coclesito, four of the plane's crew, and two military escorts.<sup>2</sup> The Panamanian National Guard conducted the recovery and transport of the bodies. Rescue crews found the plane just four meters below the crest of the mountain.

The victims' remains arrived at the Panamanian Air Force Base at Tocumen International Airport in the late afternoon of August 1. The widowed Raquel Pazner de Torrijos rode in the passenger seat of a blue station wagon that carried the remains of her late husband to the capital city. Close behind, President Aristides Royo drove his own automobile with Vice President Ricardo de la Espriella in the passenger seat. Torrijos had appointed both to their positions three years previously.

Hundreds of mourners gathered in a nighttime vigil at the Medical Center in Panama City to await the procession. Some carried torches. A group of men unfurled a large portrait of Omar Torrijos. It was draped with a Panamanian flag, which had become a powerful symbol of the nation's long struggle over the canal.

Television stations broadcast live interviews with arriving dignitaries. TV news anchors read the condolences coming in from foreign leaders and the heads of Panamanian trade unions and professional organizations. A message came from President José Napoleón Duarte of the governing junta of El Salvador. He wrote that, years earlier, Torrijos had been one of his cadet students at the Salvadoran Military Academy. The general's death came as "a real shock," Duarte said.<sup>3</sup>

Forty members of the Salvadoran guerrilla group, known by its acronym, the FMLN, flew in for the ceremonies honoring their friend and confidant, Omar. They arrived on a flight from Managua, Nicaragua, whose revolutionary government was sheltering them from the right-wing death squads back home in El Salvador. They had no speaking opportunities during the funeral, but one of them wrote a poignant tribute that appeared two decades later: "General Torrijos was a man who loved his people. He risked everything as a revolutionary. He dared to visit Cuba, to assist the Sandinistas until they took power, and to support us without asking anything in return."<sup>4</sup>

A radio reporter spoke to a representative of a business group long opposed to the general's dictatorship. It is "a national tragedy," said Dulcideo González, president of the National Council of Private Enterprise (CONEP). "I believe Panama has lost a great man."<sup>5</sup> Though Torrijos had promoted Panama as the Latin American banking emporium, members of some business groups spent years in exile during the dictatorship.

Foreign delegations began to arrive for the official funeral. Among them were ex-president Carlos Andrés Pérez of Venezuela, President Adolfo Suárez of Spain, and Secretary General Alejandro Orfila of the Organization of American States. The former Venezuelan president called his friend "one of the greatest figures in Latin America," a man who "leaves a rich legacy of dignity and nationalism."<sup>6</sup> Sandinista *comandantes*

Sergio Ramírez, Tomás Borge, and Daniel Ortega arrived from Managua, Nicaragua.<sup>7</sup>

Fidel Castro made himself conspicuous by his absence from the funeral. The longtime communist leader Carlos Rafael Rodríguez led the Cuban delegation. He told a Panamanian TV interviewer that senior advisers in Havana kept Castro from attending. We “believed he should not leave Cuba at this time, because of the circumstances facing Central America, because all that has been said and thought regarding General Torrijos’s death.”<sup>8</sup>

Though Fidel did not attend the Panamanian leader’s funeral, he did express his condolences in writing to the Torrijos family. “I feel great emotion addressing you because of the great admiration and immense affection I have for Omar, because he has not died nor will he ever,” Castro wrote. “To me and to every Cuban, he is one of the most illustrious men that the Continent has given us this century.”<sup>9</sup>

By contrast, the administration of President Ronald Reagan sent a delegation that appeared purposely understated. Barbara Bush, the wife of the vice president, and General David C. Jones, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, headlined the US delegation.<sup>10</sup> The American visitors had a half-hour interview with President Royo. He told them that Panama wanted friendly relations with the United States. The Panamanian head of government offered to act as a bridge between the Reagan administration and a Central America that was beginning to decline into violence and turmoil.<sup>11</sup>

The Panamanian archbishop Marcos McGrath conducted religious services at the Metropolitan Cathedral. This prelate had not always agreed with the regime’s policies except for one: the dictator’s stance on the Panama Canal. The archbishop’s homily was gracious. “How will the vacuum which he left be filled?” Monsignor McGrath asked. “Above all stands . . . concern for those who can do the least in their own interests and defense, for the poor of our Panama.”<sup>12</sup>

From the cathedral, a riderless horse led the funeral procession past the Legislative Assembly to the Headquarters of the National Guard. It was from this location in 1968 that Lieutenant Colonel Torrijos had coordinated the coup d’état that put him into power for nearly thirteen years. Thousands of Panamanians lined the streets as the cortege passed by.

Another farewell ceremony commenced in the early afternoon on Ancon Hill. This lone hilltop inside the US-controlled Canal Zone could be seen from nearly every barrio in Panama City. The US Armed Forces, whose Southern Command headquarters occupied the far side of the mount, had had the good sense not to place the Stars and Stripes in full

view of the residents of Panama City. Nor had they seen the Panamanian flag flying there until 1979. In that year, the Panamanians took over Ancon Hill from the Americans, according to the treaty Torrijos had signed with President Jimmy Carter. It has been the sacred ground of Panamanian nationalism ever since.

Quite naturally, Ancon Hill became part of the farewell ceremonies for its liberator, Omar Torrijos. In the afternoon, a hearse brought the general's casket, covered by a Panamanian flag, to the top of the hill. National Guard pallbearers in dress uniforms deposited the casket at the base of the flagpole. A select group of mourners awaited the procession. Television crews recorded the ceremonies live.

Torrijos's family arrived by automobile and lined up next to President and Mrs. Royo. Next came the National Guard general staff officers led by Omar's cousin, Lieutenant Colonel Roberto Díaz Herrera. In their dress uniforms, they formed a cordon around the base of the huge flagpole. The foreign minister of Panama, Jorge Illeuca, delivered the main address. He called General Torrijos "the builder of the modern state with the abolition of the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty of 1903."<sup>13</sup>

The final ceremony took place at a gravesite in the Panama City slum of El Chorrillo, close to the headquarters of the National Guard. Only later would the family move the remains to a monument in Fort Amador, soon after the US Army abandoned this headquarters post according to the treaty's timetable.<sup>14</sup>

As he spoke directly to the general's casket at the El Chorrillo cemetery, President Royo referred to the future date of Panama's final take-over of the canal according to the treaties. "When 31 December [1999] arrives," he said, "you will descend from the land of the angels and preside over the march of all your people who will completely recover Panamanian sovereignty. [General Torrijos] will be standing at attention with a patriotic salute," President Royo concluded.<sup>15</sup>

The funeral agenda reserved the final words to General Torrijos's chief of staff. Colonel Florencio Flórez addressed the casket before him. "Allow me, colleague, to take a drink from your canteen," he said. "Allow me to take a drink as a tonic and to strengthen our institution." As Flórez took a sip from the canteen, mourners and guardsmen broke into a chant: "The people united will never be defeated." Flórez, the deceased's successor as National Guard chief, concluded with a solemn pledge. "Our rifles will always honor your memory. Farewell, Commander."<sup>16</sup>

Several times during this state funeral, reporters and broadcasters announced without comment a variety of reports about the general's death. One leader of the Latin American socialist movement mentioned Omar's frequent predictions that he would not die in bed. The accident of the

commander's plane "may have been premeditated," he told reporters. Rumors had always circulated in Panama about attempts on the life of its leader.<sup>17</sup> Ambassador Moisés Torrijos, Omar's older brother, also commented on the possibility of sabotage. So did the Cubans.

"Soviet radio said today that General Torrijos might have been assassinated by the Central Intelligence Agency and the United States," TV newscasters reported. "The Soviet Radio report said that the plane accident in which Torrijos was killed might have been planned by the CIA, adding that the CIA had been behind several attempts on the life of the late Central American leader."<sup>18</sup> Panamanian news media also relayed messages containing similar speculations from state news agencies in Sandinista Nicaragua and revolutionary Cuba.

The funeral befit the ruler Torrijos had become. His associates shed tears during their orations, though the archbishop did not. The general's family, dressed in black, sat in the front row during the various tributes to the hero. The foreign delegations appeared somber. Most of all, urban laborers and innumerable rural workers and their families considered that they had just lost a loving patron.

His friend, the future Nobel laureate in literature (1982), Gabriel García Márquez, did not attend the funeral but did comment on the airplane crash, "whether accidental or provoked," from his home in Mexico. "The bereaved crowds that went to the funerals were, without a doubt, moved by a secret knowledge: that this kind of impertinent death of greatness is one of the most deserving ways to achieve martyrdom."

"I wasn't there, of course," Gabriel added. "I have never had the heart to bury my friends."<sup>19</sup>

### THE FAMILY TORRIJOS

Born in February 1929, Omar Torrijos Herrera had grown up the seventh of twelve children in the town of Santiago, capital of Veraguas Province. His father José María Torrijos was the Colombian-born school teacher in that city. He married a local girl, Joaquina Herrera, also a teacher. Omar subsequently told friends that they were both "communists."<sup>20</sup>

When José María immigrated, Santiago had two basic social groups. Sons and daughters of Spanish settlers and immigrant Europeans made up the so-called *poblanos*. They owned the cattle ranches, operated rural shops, and married among themselves. The *cholos*, a pejorative term for persons of mixed racial heritage, made up the majority of the province's population. These poorer folks worked for the white families or squatted on marginal lands. As a group, they were less likely to have access to proper housing, education, and health care.

Young Omar attended his father's school in the town of Santiago,

located midway on the Inter-American Highway running west to east along the Pacific coastline and the Panamanian mountains between Costa Rica and Panama City. When he graduated with the equivalent of six years' schooling, Omar stayed on for a while teaching at his father's school.

On the Panamanian social scale, Omar did not belong to the politically active elite families such as the Arias and De la Guardia clans. Nor did he grow up in Panama City, the nation's capital, there to mingle with those urban middle-class youth at the National Institute and the University of Panama.

Omar applied for and gained a scholarship to military school. It was his ticket to get out Santiago, Veraguas Province. He set off in 1948 to attend the military academy of El Salvador. The Republic of Panama did not have an officers' training school at the time.<sup>21</sup>

Omar Torrijos returned as a second lieutenant in 1952 at a time when the Panamanian police officially became known as the National Guard. "Government was a marriage between armed forces, oligarchy and bad priests," Torrijos wrote later, "and since ecclesiastical marriages don't admit divorce, that anti-patriotic triad appeared to be indissoluble."<sup>22</sup> Thereafter, the guard collaborated with oligarchs of the Liberal Party to keep at bay the populist firebrand Arnulfo Arias. Vote rigging became the order of the day among the oligarchy.

These were good days for newly minted officers, some still in their teens. They strutted through the streets in their National Guard uniforms and flirted with the girls. Torrijos's younger colleague, Rubén Darío Paredes, who attended the military academy of General Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua, tells of the joys of military school—the emancipation from home, the camaraderie among cadets, the handsome uniforms, and the amorous adventures of cadets and junior officers.<sup>23</sup> Anyone who could approach young ladies the way Omar Torrijos did garnered the respect of his peers.

Omar's good looks and charm obviously turned the heads of women in Colón, the Atlantic port on the northern entrance to the Panama Canal. He assumed command there in 1955. Having a free trade zone, Colón attracted merchants engaged in international business. One was the Jewish family of Puzner, whose daughter Raquel fell under the spell of Captain Omar Torrijos, a Catholic and a mere policeman. She accepted his offer of marriage. Her father did not. When Omar and Raquel eloped, Señor Puzner shunned his daughter and eventually moved the rest of his family to New York City.

Raquel felt distraught for many years thereafter, especially as she brought up two sons and a daughter who did not know their maternal grandparents. Later, as the undisputed leader of Panama, Torrijos asked

to meet a vacationing Israeli Mossad agent who was in town. Mike Harari had gained a certain notoriety. He had led the Mossad hit squad that avenged Israeli athletes killed by the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) during the 1972 Munich Olympics. Harari was also involved in the rescue of Jewish passengers on one El Al flight. The PLO had hijacked the plane and flown it to the Entebbe Airport of Uganda's dictator Idi Amin.

Torrijos requested that Harari intercede with the Pauzner family to reconcile father and daughter.<sup>24</sup> It worked, much to the relief of Raquel Pauzner de Torrijos.

Omar explained to the British novelist Graham Greene what happened on their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. "It has been very hard for my wife all these years, for she loves her father dearly," Torrijos told Greene. "Panama had voted at the United Nations in support of Israel over the Entebbe affair," Torrijos continued. "We were the only state in Latin America to do so, and afterward the Israelis were grateful and they offered me all sorts of help, but I told them that I had asked [General Moishe] Dayan for the only thing I needed and he couldn't help me. Then suddenly, yesterday, my father-in-law telephoned from New York and asked to speak to my wife. Today she has gone off to see him—after twenty-five years. I said to the old man on the telephone that he had a wonderful daughter and that I owed everything to her."<sup>25</sup>

Raquel and Omar eventually brought up three children together, though they lived apart most of the time. They had an upper-middle-class residence on Calle 50, the main road heading east out of Panama City. It became his "office" when meeting with visitors and subordinates in the capital. On these occasions, Raquel acted as hostess and organized meals and refreshments for guests. Once in power, the general spent most of his time close to the expansive military base at Río Hato.

In his lifetime, Omar Torrijos made many well-known friends. He met two of them while assigned as district commander in Colón. Stationed there in the mid-1950s, he met the former president of Argentina, Juan Domingo Perón, together with his personal secretary and companion, María Estela Martínez. She too was Argentinean, better known as Isabelita. In fact, Perón and Martínez first met each other in Panama, where she been touring with a dance troop. The affable, relaxed Perón made a great impression on the young Panamanian officer. Torrijos thereafter considered him "America's great leader."<sup>26</sup>

Ex-president Perón had become one the world's most famous exiles. In September 1955, his own military overthrew the onetime army colonel and twice-elected president. He escaped to Paraguay and ended up in Panama City on the Pacific side of the Isthmus. There Juan Perón

encountered opposition to his residency. By May 1956, he had moved to Colón with Isabelita.<sup>27</sup>

The Panamanian press indicated that Perón may have been in residence for about one year without obtaining final permission to stay. He left in 1957 for brief stays in Venezuela and the Dominican Republic before he and Isabel finally settled in Spain. Eventually, Juan and Isabel married and returned home in 1973 to become the president and vice president of Argentina. There they would invite Omar and Raquel for a state visit to Buenos Aires.

But for Fidel Castro, Omar Torrijos might not have been able to receive an invitation for a state visit to Argentina or anywhere else. The Cuban Revolution of 1959 contained such disruptive power that it challenged existing governments throughout Latin America as well as the traditional dominion of the United States over inter-American affairs. Within months of their triumphant entry into Havana, Fidel and his guerrilla revolutionaries would be creating the conditions in Panama for the rise of Captain Torrijos.