

One Bullet

By Spencer Carvalho

“A bullet is the quickest way to solve a problem. It’s also the quickest way to start one.” I’ll never forget that. There’s a good chance that it will be on my tombstone.

Every citizen of Brazil is required to register with the military despite the fact that the country had not had a war since fighting with the Allies in WWII. I find that impressive. All that time without a war. The only thing better than winning a war is finding a way to prevent one.

I learned about the registration process when I turned eighteen. My mom is American and my dad is Brazilian. I was born in Brazil but less than a year later my family moved to America. Because of this I have dual citizenship meaning that I am both an American citizen and a Brazilian citizen, an issue that didn’t really have too big an impact on my life until Brazil went to war.

I received a letter one day notifying me that I could join the Brazilian military because we were going to war. I had no idea what was going on. I checked the news to see if there was anything on about a war in South America. All I found was stuff about celebrity scandals. I did find some stuff online. It seemed that conflicts between Brazil and Colombia had been rising. It had gotten so bad that Brazil was now going to have its first war in decades. Actually it wasn’t really with Colombia as a country. It was more a war with the drug cartels in Colombia who had recently taken over the Colombian government in a violent siege. So yeah, Brazil was going to war with Colombia but it was a war that many Colombian soldiers were refusing to participate in.

I didn't need to go. Since I was an American citizen I could have stayed in America. I was in my final year in college. I had a very successful job as a professional gamer. I got paid to play video games. Everything was great. I can't explain and don't understand what came over me. For some reason I felt I had to go. I wasn't a violent guy. I was even planning on joining the Peace Corps after college. Maybe it was the certainty of the war, a peaceful country versus ruthless drug cartels. America hadn't had a war with such moral certainty since World War II.

Before I left the country I went to talk to some of my Brazilian family members who were also living in America. My father had died a long time ago. He was a firefighter. I went to go see my aunt, my nine year old cousin, and my grandpa. My little cousin wanted to go and fight but clearly was too young to understand the situation. He wanted to fight the soldiers with a "ninja sword." My grandpa used to be a cop and wanted to go too, despite being eighty three. He was filled with so much piss and vinegar they probably could have duct taped a missile to his forehead and he could have head butted the enemy.

The main reason I went to see them was to learn as much as I could about Brazilian culture. Since moving I had only gone back to Brazil a few times. It had been nine years since my last visit. I also wanted to learn more Portuguese. Yes I know, I'm Brazilian but can't really speak Portuguese. I could speak it when I was little but over time I forgot. To make things worse I studied Spanish in high school. The two languages are similar so sometimes when I try to speak one language I accidentally speak the other.

They taught me a few things about Brazil. I learned about the Amazon and Brazilian martial arts. They updated me on what was going on with my family members

still living in Brazil. They told me a lot about the country's history. My cousin gave me his English to Portuguese guidebook to help me learn the language.

On the plane ride down I studied the English to Portuguese guidebook and filled out the paperwork to decide what areas I would train in. I decided to become a sniper because I always liked playing the sniper class in videogames. I'll repeat that, I decided to become a sniper because I always liked playing the sniper class in videogames. Yes, I know that's a stupid reason but a lot of stupid decisions get made during wartime.

After a nine hour plane ride I landed in Rio de Janeiro. Rio is nice. Whenever they show footage of Brazil on TV it's usually of Rio. Often times it's footage of the huge Christ the Redeemer statue that overlooks Rio. My cousin Paulo met me at the airport. He was also in the army. He was a pilot so we didn't see each other much during training. The country wasn't prepared for a war this big so there wasn't enough space at the training grounds. This meant that any soldier that lived driving distance from the training grounds could sleep at home and drive to and from training. Since the training ground was in Rio de Janeiro and Paulo lived there I got to stay with Paulo, his wife, Helena, and his seven year old son, Junior, during my training. I had never met his wife or son before.

My first night there was a lot of fun. Paulo could speak some English so he would translate for me. Paulo told this story about how when I was five I spent the summer with my grandma and grandpa in Brazil. This was before they moved to America and way before grandma got sick and passed away. I liked to feed my grandparents chickens so Paulo would call me galo which meant Rooster. It would make me mad and one time it made me so mad that I head butted him. I must have hit him really hard because he got a bloody nose. Junior thought the story was hilarious.

Paulo waited until his wife and kid went to bed and then told me a lot about what was going on. The cartels had violently taken over the Colombian government. Brazil spoke out the loudest about the takeover. It's believed that the war either started over Brazil speaking out or that the cartels wanted control of the Amazon jungle, the majority of which belongs to Brazil. The smaller South American countries weren't officially taking a military stance but unofficially they all supported us and secretly sent supplies. If South America was a family then Brazil was the big brother who was expected to keep things under control.

Brazil's population was one hundred and ninety three million while Colombia's population was forty three million so had this been a regular war it would have been an easy win for Brazil. If only. Colombia had drug money so they could afford better weapons and mercenaries. More than half of their army consisted of mercenaries. The amount of money they had from drug sales was ridiculous. Our fellow South American countries were supporting us with supplies but the entire world was financing the cartels through drug sales. Try explaining to a junkie in America that they should quit buying because they were financing criminals in South America and see how well that works.

Many Colombian patriots refused to follow the cartels' rule and wanted their country back. These guys were called the Colombian Rebels and they were on our side. I was really interested in America's involvement. Pablo told me that the United Nations sent sanctions which meant that they would probably get involved the day after the war ended and the United States government declared that they wouldn't get involved in the matters of a foreign war. The fact that Colombia was hiring private U.S. military companies like Blackwater might have had some sway on their decision.

Training was brutal. Apparently everyone in Brazil is in great shape. In America I hadn't gotten use to all the fat people. My first week there I only saw one overweight lady. She might have been pregnant; I couldn't really tell.

I was worn out but it wasn't just the workouts. For a peaceful country there sure are a lot of martial artists. Mixed martial arts actually started in Brazil. Technically, mixed martial arts started a long time ago and were even a game in the early Olympics but the sports of MMA (Mixed Martial Arts) and UFC (Ultimate Fighting Championship) were started in Brazil. It gained popularity through street fighting matches and eventually became popular in America so these people knew how to fight.

They taught over thirty different types of martial arts at the training grounds. You could choose which styles you wanted to learn. I learned Jeet Kune Do, Ninjutsu, and Capoeira. This was in addition to basic training and my sniper classes. My reasons for choosing these styles were somewhat silly. I chose Jeet Kune Do because that was the martial arts style that Bruce Lee created and I think that Bruce Lee was really cool. I chose Ninjutsu because that was the fighting style of the ninja. And I chose Capoeira because Capoeira is a Brazilian martial arts style so there were a lot of Capoeira classes. They actually teach Capoeira in schools like as gym class so there were a lot of instructors. This meant that I could fit one of the classes into a free spot in my schedule.

The sniper classes were the hardest. With basic training I could just copy everyone else. During sniper training the instructor, Mr. Costa, would lean in close and whisper advice to us. It was clearly very important and I had no idea what he was saying. I was learning the language but we didn't have time for me to get fluent. I eventually got

paired up with a guy named Victor. Victor was fluent in English. He would translate for me. We soon became friends.

One day when I showed up for training I couldn't find Victor. I searched for a while. I eventually found him sitting by himself underneath a tree. He was crying. He said he didn't want to kill anyone. He said that he couldn't do it. He kept talking about how he joined to make his family proud but couldn't take a life. He worried about his soul. He said he would rather die than end a life. I was not prepared for this outpouring of emotion. I had never seen an adult man cry like that. I felt pity for him but also understood what he was talking about. He eventually became my spotter. It made sense. Snipers would often pair up with a spotter who would use a spotting scope to help them with distance, angle, and atmosphere and since he spoke English we were an obvious match. This way he could stay in the army and wouldn't have to kill anyone.

We were told to give ourselves call signs, nicknames. Victor chose Victory. I couldn't think of anything in time so my instructor chose a name. He called me Baby Eater. I did not like the name. I still hate that name. I can't understand why he picked such a weird call sign. Maybe it was for intimidation. Maybe he wanted to motivate the others to come up with their own call signs. He wouldn't let me change it either.

Training was strange. I had never fired a gun before training. I had played paintball before and was really good at it but that was my only prior experience with a gun-like weapon. The first time I fired a gun I was shocked. I wasn't prepared for the sound. Gunfire is a lot louder in real life than in the movies. I started off terrible but was holding my own by the time I finished. I really didn't like my gear. My sniper rifle was too old. We used something called a Ghillie suit which is like a camouflage blanket that

goes over you to hide your position. Mine smelled like pee, probably because someone peed in it. It was the best they had to offer.

On the last day of training the instructor walked up to me and pulled out a note card. He read something to me from that note card in English, "A bullet is the quickest way to solve a problem. It's also the quickest way to start one." During my entire time training it was the only thing he said to me that I understood. Of all the things he could have translated he chose that. I guess he thought it was the most important thing he could teach me.

Our first mission was in the Amazon where most of the fighting took place. A Brazilian arms dealer was supplying the Colombian soldiers with weapons and maps of the Amazon. We were sent to take out the arms dealer.

The Amazon jungle is a strange place. It covers 1.7 billion acres, which makes it the largest jungle in the world. More than half of it is in Brazil but part of it is in Colombia. There are dangerous species like jaguars, piranhas, and vampire bats but what really creeped me out is that there are at least 67 isolated tribes. These were tribes that have had either no contact or very little contact with the outside world. Meaning that if they saw me then they would have no idea what I was and we all know how people react when they encounter scary new things.

There were eight, two man teams. We were all sent on different paths to the target. Whoever got there first was to eliminate the target. Victory led the way through the jungle with his machete. We were the first ones there. The target was waiting with a supply of weapons. We found a hide site and set up our position.

I had my old sniper rifle, my sidearm, a knife, basic survival gear, and my Ghillie suit that smelled like pee. Victory had his spotting scope, a Ghillie suit that didn't smell like pee, basic survival gear, a machete, my extra ammo, and extra water. Often times a spotter carries a weapon too, but since Victory didn't want to kill anyone he carried extra water instead. The extra water might have been why we got there so much quicker than the other sniper teams.

Victory measured the range and altitude. I steadied my rifle and waited for the perfect shot. It was a long wait. I never had to wait this long while playing video games. As I waited I thought about what I was going to do. I was going to legally murder someone. This one bullet in the chamber could end a life. It could make me a murderer and a hero. It could put me on a path that would change me forever. One bullet would end this man's life.

When the target got into position I pushed aside all my thoughts about moral consequences and whispered to myself, "One shot, one kill." I pulled the trigger and nothing. The rifle didn't fire. The old crappy rifle, which I didn't even like, didn't fire. The target was walking towards his jeep. I knew I had to hurry. I pulled out my sidearm and pulled off a shot way better than my skill level at that time. I had just made my first confirmed kill. I had been thinking about the one bullet that would change my life. I was right about my life changing but was wrong about which bullet.

They say the first kill is the hardest and they're right. I didn't feel right about killing him. In movies and video games someone gets shot and just falls down without any blood. This was different. There was a lot of blood. I was not used to blood. I was a

very peaceful person. I didn't even like to go fishing but there I was staring at my first kill. The gore bothered me but what bothered me more was how quickly I got over it.

After my first kill I got brand new equipment. Since my target was a weapons dealer I got some of the weapons we acquired from him. I got a brand new sniper rifle with a silencer and high quality scope. I got a Ghillie suit that didn't smell like pee. I got a silencer for my sidearm. I got a camouflage outfit made out of some kind of fabric that really handled the heat well. The guys back at the base couldn't figure out what the suit was made out of. It must have been some kind of new fabric. Of all the new items the sniper rifle was my favorite. A stinky Ghillie suit is an inconvenience but the new sniper rifle improved my chances at survival. The best part about the new rifle was that instead of my old rifle which could fire a shot and then had to have another bullet loaded into it; my new rifle had a clip so I could fire off multiple rounds. It also had a bipod on the front so I could steady my shots better.

Days turned into weeks which turned into months. My confirmed kills' number reached double digits and was rising. I was getting better at sniping. A lot better. I'm not sure why I was so good at sniping. Possibly my years of video game playing honed my hand eye coordination and taught me strategy. Also I was really patient. When I was a hyper, energetic little kid I could wait for hours in a hiding spot waiting for a chance to scare someone. Patience seemed to be one of the most important skills a sniper could have. The martial arts helped too. I didn't ever get into hand to hand combat but the martial arts helped me with movement. The Ninjutsu helped me with stealthy movement the most. I later found out that some of the earliest snipers were Shinobi ninja in the 16th century. They would fire poisoned blow guns from concealed positions.

I was getting a reputation as a skilled sniper. I was also getting used to killing people. I didn't like that. I would get troubled on occasion. I would remember that all these men were once children with mothers and that those mothers would cry when they found out what happened to their sons. Whenever I had trouble sleeping I would remind myself that these were bad people. All the good Colombian soldiers joined the Colombian rebels and were on our side. The remaining soldiers were so weak that they would rather kill innocents than stand up to an unjust government. And the mercenaries were amoral jerks who would kill anyone for the right price. Although I was ending their lives I was saving all the people that they would kill. What I did was necessary. I was removing evil from the world. That helped me sleep better.

During training they taught us different ways of shooting. Shoot to wound, shoot to damage, and shoot to kill. When you shoot to wound, you aim for a limb usually to slow down a squad or to lure out other victims. When you shoot to damage, you aim for the torso. This is one of the most popular ways to shoot because it's the easiest because the torso makes the biggest target. With this type of shooting the bullet causes so much damage that the target eventually dies. The main problem with this type of shooting is that the target sometimes lives and if the target is wearing good enough body armor then they're fine. Then there is shooting to kill. This is when you aim for the head, particularly the kill point. The kill point is a part of the brain in the back of the head near the top of the neck. It's considered to be the only part of the body you can shoot and cause an instantaneous death. They don't have time to realize they are going to die. They don't even have time to feel any pain. It's a painless death. I always shot to kill. Even though

they were the enemy I didn't want to cause any unnecessary pain. Plus I always wanted to be sure that I killed my target.

I was getting better at Portuguese too. I still couldn't speak it very well but I could understand almost all of it. I only needed Victory to translate for me when I wanted to say something. As a sniper there weren't many times when I needed to speak.

They eventually set up a system called Info Net. It was similar to how cops use dispatch or how C.I.A. agents use handlers. Info Net was a base where all the tactics and strategies were being worked out. All the major orders had to go through Info Net first. Any Brazilian soldier with a way of communicating could contact Info Net give them their security code and get information or supply them with intelligence. We could also use them as operators to connect us with other soldiers. When it got set up Victory received a headset so he could contact them easily. I didn't get one but since he was my translator it wouldn't have done me much good. Over time I kept hearing rumors about something called The Big One. I didn't know what it was. When Victory asked Info Net what it was he was told that it was confidential and he needed a larger security clearance. We still didn't know what the Big One was but we knew that it was real. The rumors were that The Big One was some kind of special weapon. I found out what it was during the Battle of Rio.

The state of Rio de Janeiro is more than double the size of Hawaii and had over 15,500,000 residents. It was one of the most population dense states in the country. That made it a good target. At that time most of the fighting had gone on in the Amazon jungle. This meant that there were very few civilian casualties.

Colombian battleships were seen off the coast of Rio approaching the coastline. Brazilian battleships were already in position to protect Rio and all the soldiers who were residents of Rio were ordered to relocate from wherever they were so that they could defend it and help evacuate civilians. Since I trained there and was staying with Paulo I was counted as a resident. I thought it would be a waste of time because I wasn't going to be able to help anyone evacuate.

When Victory and I got there the battleships were engaged in combat. I knew that Helena and Junior were still somewhere in the city but had no idea where. The battleships were out of range of my rifle and there wasn't anything I could do to help people evacuate so I just watched the battle from the beach. What I saw during that battle changed how I think of war. The Brazilian navy was by far the most advanced of all the South American countries. They had more ships and more soldiers. For every Colombian battleship in the water there were two Brazilian battleships. It should have been a simple win. It looked like the Brazilian navy was winning when the jets flew in. They were Colombian jets. There were less than 50 pilots flying fewer than 50 jets with over \$1,000,000,000 worth of explosives. They flew in and dropped their bombs. Within 10 minutes the Brazilian battleships were destroyed. It was a battle that Colombia had won purely by having more money.

As I watched the ships sink into the ocean I realized what was going to happen next. Their ships were going to invade the shore. This was supposed to be a simple battle. The only reason why any ground troops were even called in was to help evacuate civilians and to fight just in case any of the battleships made it through to the shore. We were vastly outnumbered.

It was ominous watching the battleships slowly approach the shore but it gave me enough time to get ready. I went into a nearby home and grabbed a pillow. Then I ran to the beach. I removed the inside of the pillow because all I really needed was the pillow case. I filled it with sand and tied off the end. Then I found Victory, borrowed a car, and started up the mountain. By the time we reached the Christ the Redeemer statue the battleships were pretty close to the shore. From the statue you could see the shore and a lot of the city below. I set the sandbag near the edge of the statue and used it to steady my rifle. Victory realized what I was doing and gave me a look that I will never forget. I don't know what he was thinking but I assume that he was contemplating the moral ramifications of using a Christ statue as a sniper point. He looked to the statue for a few seconds and then looked down at the city below. There were still a lot of people in the city. I'm not sure what went through his mind but he set up his spotting scope without me needing to convince him of anything.

It was close to dusk when the battleships reached the shore. When the soldiers emerged I could see that they were mainly mercenaries. You could always tell the difference by the uniforms. They shot at everything that moved. Maybe they got paid per kill or maybe they just wanted to kill. I've often wondered about the type of person who chooses a job where they kill for profit. Then again, I was fighting for free.

The light was gone by the time they were in range which was perfect. I destroyed all the lights that shone on the statue at night. I didn't want anyone to see where we were. The street lights showed me where they were. I aimed for the leaders. You could usually tell who they were because they were the ones yelling at the other soldiers. I wanted to

slow them down so I could give the civilians a chance to escape and provide time for reinforcements.

I was shooting for hours. It was the perfect sniper point. With my silencer they couldn't hear me and they couldn't see me so I never had to relocate to a new position. I lost track of how many I killed. As morning approached the reinforcements arrived. I continued shooting and I only stopped when I ran out of bullets. With the exception of my sidearm I had used every single bullet I had. I even used up all the spare ammo that Victory carried. Before the Battle of Rio I had 33 confirmed kills. I asked Victory how many kills I made that night. It took him a while to answer me. Maybe he thought it would be better if I didn't know or maybe he wanted some time to double check the numbers. I grew impatient so I asked him again and he told me. 91 confirmed kills. The U.S. record for confirmed sniper kills was 109. My new total was 124.

When the light came we could clearly see the city below. Bodies were everywhere. Soldiers and civilians were intermingled. I wasn't sure how many lives I saved but I could see how many I failed to save. Victory walked to the foot of the statue and said a prayer. I just stared in shocked horror at all the bodies. This was a massacre.

Before Victory could finish praying we got a call from Info Net. He put his head near mine so I could hear the message too. It was a message sent out to all the soldiers in Rio. They finally told us what the Big One was. The Big One was a missile, a very big missile, an old Soviet missile. It was aboard a jet that was headed our way. It would be at our location within 2 minutes. We had jets in the air to stop it but if the missile was released then the explosion would be so big that it would probably kill most of the survivors from the Battle of Rio. We were informed that the jet carrying the Big One was

a high altitude jet so if the missile was released we would have some time before it hit the ground to take cover but if it was released then it couldn't be stopped. The missile had an anti-targeting system that would derail any missiles fired at it. It also had a bulletproof protective casing. If we had Predator drones in the area we could manually fly one into the missile but we weren't prepared for this so none were available. The message ended and Victory continued praying.

I looked at the mountain I was on. If the missile was released it would probably get released inland to do the most damage. We could go down the side of the mountain facing the Atlantic Ocean and the mountain would act as a giant shield. It wasn't a great plan but I was improvising.

Victory stopped praying and looked at me. He told me that the Big One was released. I looked up to the sky to try and see if I could see anything. It was too high up. I couldn't see anything. I slung my rifle over my shoulder, grabbed Victory, and ran. Victory was running beside me when he grabbed my shoulder and stopped. He didn't say a word when he took off his headset and handed it to me. I put it on.

"Hello?" I asked.

"Promise me you'll take care of Helena and Junior," said Paulo.

"Of course but..."

I then realized what was happening and looked up. Paulo crashed his jet into the missile. Fire filled the sky. I later found out that if the missile had hit the ground his family would have been in the blast radius along with thousands of others. He had saved thousands of lives. He was a hero. To sacrifice one's life for the greater good is one of the noblest acts a human being can commit.

The next day I went to my training grounds. I found my sniper teacher and told him that I wanted to change my call sign. I explained in Portuguese all that I had been through. I told him about the Battle of Rio. He agreed to let me change it. I was no longer known as Baby Eater. From that point on I was known as Rooster.

A lot of people attended Paulo's funeral. There were the people he saved and their families but also fellow soldiers. There wasn't a body to bury so they buried his medals instead. I had also received medals for my involvement in the Battle of Rio but couldn't help feeling that he deserved them more. They placed a memorial over his grave.

I made sure that Helena and Junior were safely aboard a plane to America and that they were granted American citizenship. They stayed with my aunt, grandpa and cousin. I promised Paulo I would take care of them and wasn't going to break that promise for anything. I wasn't able to join them in America though. I couldn't leave the war until it was over. There was still much left to do.

After I returned to duty Victory asked me what was next. I told him that the world record for most confirmed sniper kills was 505. I had a new goal. When Paulo died something in me died too. I no longer had compassion for the enemy. With every new kill I became a better soldier but lost more of my humanity.

I fear that this war is going to turn me into something I don't like. Until this war ends I'll continue fighting. I'll keep trying to survive. No one has managed to kill me yet.