THE DISAPPEARANCE OF JACK SHELTON

The Search for Their Son Brought Kathryn and Curtis Shelton Face to Face With Guatemala's Everyday Horrors

***KEVIN McKIERNAN*. Los Angeles Times (Sep 8, 1991. pg. 22)**

"WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOUR CHILD disappears in a foreign country?" Kathryn Shelton asks.

The question has consumed her for a decade, the 10 years since she last saw her eldest son, Jack. Jack was brilliant and introspective, a man who'd graduated from college with honors in philosophy only to join the Marines when jobs were hard to come by. He may have realized quickly after he enlisted that this was his father's path, not his own, and after three uncomfortable years in the military and a few months in Europe as a tourist, he moved to San Francisco from his parents' quiet Knoxville, Tenn., neighborhood and began preparing for a trip to Mexico. He hoped that travel would help offset the "degrading" military experience-"You know," Kathryn says, "the group living and the fact his intelligence wasn't used to the fullest."

She glances around Jack's bedroom, apparently much as he had left it in the spring of 1981. In a closet, his classical guitar sits next to a 3-foot-high stack of National Geographics. A bookshelf is filled with reminders of his studies-the collected works of Rabelais, the 16th-Century French satirist, a volume entitled "The Wisdom of China and India" and another called "The Wisdom of Israel."

Kathryn stands at the desk, rearranging some Cub Scout derby cars. She's been calmly and steadily describing her son to me-his love of classical music, his track competitions, the way he didn't smoke or drink-but when her eyes light on a bundle of letters, she falls silent. * Jack, at 28 a seasoned traveler, had been a systematic, faithful correspondent: His final letter, dated July 9, 1981, was one of three he'd written to Kathryn and his father, Curtis, in only two weeks. "I've picked up a few scraps of Spanish," he had printed in his all-capital-letters writing. "Enough for survival." He had been in southern Mexico touring Mayan Indian ruins, Jack wrote, and although he was running short of money, he hoped to visit one more ancient site in the Yucatan before returning to the States to look for work.

Three days later, according to immigration logs, he crossed into Guatemala. His timing could hardly have been worse. Under the military regime of Fernando Romeo Lucas Garcia-"the Saddam Hussein of Central America," in the words of a local missionary-Guatemala was in the midst of another violent purge. It was the latest bloodletting in 25 years of civil strife that Americas Watch estimates have left 100,000 dead and 40,000 missing.

Jack's parents never heard from him again. * During the next eight years, the search for a son became a search for a body. By early this year, it was simply a search for comfort. "You try to accept that it is over," says Kathryn, 60, a small woman with short, close-cropped hair and large glasses. "Then you see his handwriting, and it just melts you. You'll find out, if you ever lose someone. The most personal part of someone is their handwriting."

THE END OF JACK'S STEADY STREAM OF LETTERS WAS THE SHELTONS' FIRST clue that something was wrong. In August, 1981, when there had been no word from Jack in several weeks, Kathryn and Curtis were worried, but they had no idea where to turn. Four calls to the U.S. Embassy in Mexico proved unproductive. "They told us that when people get down in that climate, they tend to forget about time," Kathryn remembers. So Curtis, now 67, decided to go to Mexico to search for his son himself.

Although he does not speak Spanish and hadn't traveled outside the United States since he was a Marine on Okinawa nearly 40 years before, Curtis took leave from his post as an agricultural engineering professor at the University of Tennessee and made his way to San Cristobal de Las Casas in Mexico, the town where Jack's last letter had been postmarked. A bus station on the last leg of his trip was full of cargo, bustling with passengers and noisy with the rapid speech patterns of the unfamiliar culture. Curtis, dressed in the same brown wool military shirt he'd worn as a young Marine, was relieved when a longhaired stranger emerged, speaking English, offering assistance. But as quickly as the man appeared, he was gone. Curtis checked for his wallet and passport. They were gone, too.

Curtis went home for new funds and credentials, returning two weeks later. When no one at the library or museum where Jack said he had studied in San Cristobal recognized his photograph, Curtis set off on a 10-hour bus ride to the Yucatan, to the Mayan ruins Jack had visited at Palenque. There, he searched out Americans, because they speak English and because he believed they would remember another American better. "I was beginning to see that to Mexicans, we all looked the same," Curtis says. But none of the Americans he met in Palenque remembered Jack. Curtis moved on.

Jack had mentioned in his last letter that he might go to Bonampak, a remote Mayan site in eastern Mexico noted for its colored hieroglyphics. Curtis' car got stuck several times on the way there, and he had to hike in the last five miles over terrain too rough for a vehicle. But when he arrived, the visitor book showed no entry for Jack, and no one in the area could identify him positively from the photograph. A Guatemalan woman seemed to remember a foreigner who looked like Jack standing on a street corner in an obscure village in northern Guatemala some time ago. But she couldn't provide any other information.

At that point, Curtis ran out of clues. So, after more investigation in the San Cristobal area, he posted flyers with Jack's picture and returned to Tennessee.

Several more weeks passed without a word from Jack, and the family was distraught. Kathryn notified the Citizens Emergency Center, a

branch of the U.S. State Department in Washington, that Jack was missing. The family appealed to members of Congress, including then-Sen. Howard M. Baker (R-Tenn.), Sen. Jim Sasser (D-Tenn.) and the late Rep. John J. Duncan (R-Tenn.), to pressure the State Department for information. In October, the State Department called with news: Immigration records had turned up Jack's name at La Mesilla, a small Guatemalan border post on the Pan American Highway, three hours south of San Cristobal. Jack's name had appeared on the July 12 list of travelers who were headed south into the province of Huehuetenango.

Buoyed by the news, the Sheltons telephoned the State Department, asking officials for an on-site investigation in Huehuetenango and for the list of others who had crossed that day, hoping someone-perhaps another foreigner-might remember the tall, dark-haired boy from Tennessee. But the 1974 Privacy Act bars the release of any information from the State Department. And when the family approached American Express for information about where Jack cashed his traveler's checks, they were told that the same law kept those records secret, too.

Undeterred, the Sheltons launched a telephone and letter-writing campaign to push for an investigation of Jack's disappearance. They contacted almost two dozen organizations, including Amnesty International, Americas Watch and the World Council of Churches.

The strains of the search were showing on the family. Jack's brother, Barry, gave up a scholarship in plant and soil science at the University of Tennessee because he could not concentrate on his studies. And Kathryn, being treated for lupus, a painful arthritic condition that attacks the immune system, found that stress aggravated the disease. Easily fatigued, she nonetheless spent hours on the telephone each day while Curtis held down his job at the university. At night, her head ached from the constant pressure of the receiver against her ear.

But the work seemed to be paying off. In November, Baker's office in Washington said it was working to obtain the names of the July 12 travelers, and it succeeded in releasing the information from American Express. Jack's last check had been cashed in Mexico, in

July. But $600 in unused checks was outstanding; no trace of the checks had turned up in Guatemala.

BY DECEMBER, THE SHELTONS WERE FRANTIC. BORDER CHECKS from Belize to Panama indicated that Jack had not left Guatemala, and his 30-day visa, which had expired on Aug. 11, had not been turned in. If Jack had been in an accident, if he had been killed in Guatemala, wouldn't his body have shown up by now? If he were alive, wouldn't someone have responded to the flyers? The Sheltons paid $7,000 to a British mercenary to hunt for Jack, but he found nothing.

Curtis wanted to go to Huehuetenango to resume his search, but U.S. officials dissuaded him from making the trip. Leftist guerrillas were actively fighting the Guatemalan dictatorship, which was supported by $3 million in annual U.S. military aid and $90 million in economic assistance. (In December, 1990, the military aid was suspended because of human-rights violations.) In 1981, with reprisals on both sides, corpses showed up regularly on roads and streets; death squads seemed to be everywhere. Travel on the Pan American Highway between Guatemala City and Huehuetenango, five hours to the north, could be dangerous. So Curtis canceled his trip. "I'm the kind of person who goes along with authority," he says. "I thought they knew-or ought to have known-more than we did."

The Sheltons instead placed ads in four national newspapers in Guatemala and Belize. The advertisements in the "missing" section carried photographs of Jack-including one modified by an artist to show him with long hair-his passport number and a description of him as 6 feet, 2 inches and 145 pounds. The ads began appearing on Christmas Eve, 1981.

All spring, the family received responses to the ads, which later were amended to include a reward for information. The Sheltons hired a translator in Knoxville to sift out the clues that seemed promising. And Curtis flew to Guatemala City.

At the U.S. Embassy in Guatemala, an official expressed his belief that Jack had been killed by guerrillas, but there was no supporting evidence. After tracking down more dead-end leads in Guatemala, Curtis received a report that a "gringo youth" had been found barely alive in a park in Tuxtla Gutierrez, the capital of the state of Chiapas in Mexico. Curtis flew to that

city, north of San Cristobal de Las Casas, where the search had begun the previous summer.

The North American in the park was emaciated, unconscious and showed signs of "dreadful" maltreatment. Curtis speculated that the boy had been "drugged and in jail" before he arrived in the park, but he was "too far gone" for Curtis to determine whether he was Jack. The man died the next day. Two weeks later, an FBI fingerprint analysis indicated that the young man was, in fact, an American. But he was not Jack Shelton.

THE GUATEMALAN GOVERNMENT FINALLY RELEASED THE NAMES of the 22 people who entered Guatemala on the Pan American Highway on July 12, 1981. But by then it was October, 1982. A year had passed since the Sheltons first telephoned the State Department to pressure Guatemala for the list. The trail had grown cold.

In December, Baker received a letter from Guatemalan Ambassador Jorge L. Zelaya. At long last there appeared to be some real news-an official response from the government, the conclusion of an inquiry commissioned by the Guatemalan National Police into Jack's disappearance.

Emphasizing "the seriousness with which my government viewed this matter, and the thoroughness with which the investigation was conducted," Zelaya informed Baker that "Mr. Shelton does not appear to have ever been in the country."

"Not ever in the country?" The Sheltons were traumatized. "We were looking for our son in a country that said he didn't exist there," Kathryn says.

As the months passed, the Sheltons clung to the hope that somehow Jack had survived. In March, 1983, they placed more reward advertisements with Jack's picture in Mexican and Guatemalan papers. In June, there was a breakthrough.

The consul general of the U.S. Embassy in Guatemala City, Philip Bates Taylor, finally traveled to Huehuetenango and checked the immigration logs at the border. He immediately found Jack's name and those of the other travelers who crossed on July 12, 1981. Then he backtracked to the provincial capital, taking lunch at the main hotel on the city square. Afterward, he reviewed the hotel's guest registry. Finding nothing there for the date in question, he walked across the street to the El Central, a low-income hotel where the bus from the border stopped. As Taylor recalled

later, the hotel manager removed a "dust-covered book" from the shelf in his office. Turning to July 12, 1981, 23 months before, Taylor read the name Jack Shelton.

August brought more clues and disturbing notes: A body was exhumed in Huehuetenango, and its dental X-rays were compared to Jack's, but they didn't match. A kidnap victim wrote to the family from Guatemala City, saying that he had just escaped from a prison cell set up at a military academy, where "heavily armed men" were holding three others, including one who matched Jack's photo.

Similar letters from others had convinced the Sheltons that Jack was a captive. "You cannot imagine the anguish my family continues to suffer after two years," Barry wrote in a letter to a dozen U.S. officials.

THE FAMILY CONTINUED MAKING CONTACTS, ACQUAINTANCES AND friends ("God's network," Kathryn calls it) in the search for Jack. In July, 1984, Curtis made one more trip to Guatemala. At that time, I joined the search, along with two others: a district attorney from Oregon who is active in assisting Guatemalan refugees and an Episcopal priest from Palo Alto, who has a number of contacts in Guatemala. This time, Curtis did not notify the State Department he was going, nor did he share the information that drove this search: a packet of recent responses to the still-running ads.

One writer claimed to have seen Jack playing with a dog in Guatemala City. "He told me that his name was Shelton." Another remembered seeing a North American man and a Spanish woman near Lake Atitlan. They had been captured by the Guatemalan army and, he vaguely recalled, executed.

We sifted through the clues. The strongest of them led Curtis and me to a neighborhood in Guatemala City where numerous residents, independent of one another, recognized Jack's picture and identified him as a local street person. We set up a stakeout at an intersection where the foreigner was known to pass. During the next two days, a Chevrolet Silverado with blackened windows and no license plates-the type of vehicle associated with Guatemalan death squads-appeared and reappeared near our parked rental car. "It kind of makes you wonder where our taxes go," Curtis said quietly.

When the stranger finally showed up, he was not Jack after all, although his size, hair coloring and physique were similar. His father was American, he related in broken English. The rest of his story as a homeless expatriate trailed off, confused by drugs or amnesia or perhaps both.

Curtis journeyed to Lake Atitlan. It was the Fourth of July, and tourists in the town of Panajachel-"Gringotenango" in the words of one resident-were shooting off fireworks. A waiter there thought he remembered seeing someone who looked like Jack, "but that was years ago."

BUT CURTIS WAS EAGER TO GO NORTH TO THE SECURITY PRISON IN THE city of Quezaltenango. Kathryn had received two calls from Chicago from a woman who had just returned from Guatemala City, where she had seen the ad. At the time, she told Kathryn, she mentioned Jack's disappearance to her son, a Guatemalan soldier. According to the caller, her son responded, "No, Mama, he is not missing. He has been kidnaped by the military service and is held in prison." If this claim was true, Jack could still be alive.

The woman told the Sheltons that she and her son went to the security prison in Quezaltenango, where they saw Jack in a "sub-basement" so dark they "had to use candles to see." Nine people were being held in the area, she said. Jack was "tall, thin, wearing old clothes," and he kept asking why "no one had come for (him)." "I told him," the woman related to Kathryn, "that I would contact his parents."

In Quezaltenango, the California priest planned to use his connections with a Guatemalan friend who was related to an army officer to obtain permission for our group to enter the prison. But en route, an astonishing coincidence occurred when we stopped on a rural highway to pick up a Mayan hitchhiker. Without knowing Jack's story, the Indian picked him out from a family photo, positive he'd seen Jack the year before-though with longer hair-in the Quezaltenango prison when he visited his brother, who was serving time for assault. It was an improbable clue from an improbable source. Curtis was clearly agitated.

But no "sub-basement" could be found at the prison. And after we made a futile tour of the compound, the guards told us it was time to go. Curtis and the priest lingered, calling to Jack in English through the bars of locked cellblocks. At one point, Curtis could see only the midsection of one prisoner, someone who was seated at the end of a locked corridor. The prisoner appeared to be weaving something, perhaps a bag, but his face was out of sight. "That arm seems whiter than the rest of these people!" Curtis exclaimed nervously. Then the man stood up and turned around, bewildered by the North Americans jockeying for a better view at the opposite end of the corridor. He was a Latino.

We drove north to Huehuetenango, where Curtis readily located Jack's name, his signature and handwriting in the registry at the El Central Hotel.

Of all the guests listed for July 12, 1981, only one remembered Jack. Interviewed in Mexico, Antonio Guillen Barrios, a schoolteacher, claimed that he had spent part of that evening in the bar of the El Central Hotel drinking with Jack and a young "South American woman." Jack had introduced her as "his wife," but Barrios thought at the time that she was a prostitute. They each had three Gallos (Guatemalan beers), he said, holding up three fingers. Jack bought two rounds. Then the couple left for a hotel room.

Barrios, who remembered Jack Ross Shelton as "Russell" and correctly recalled his room number despite the passage of three years, said he went to Jack's room about 1 a.m. and knocked on the door. The woman stayed inside, but Jack slipped out into the hallway, where he shared "a couple of drinks" from Barrios' bottle of Mexican vodka. Jack mentioned that he was "from San Francisco." In the morning, Barrios said, he saw the couple once more. The woman said the two were on their way to Panajachel and Lake Atitlan, several hours away.

Throughout the telling of the schoolteacher's story, Curtis leaned forward, arms folded, hanging on every detail. At the mention of the mysterious woman in the El Central Hotel, his fingers dug into his biceps. "It doesn't sound like Jack," he said quietly.

Curtis said he wanted to spend one night in the room where Jack had stayed three years before, "in case there are messages or markings still on the wall." But it was time to go.

FOR THE FAMILY, WRITING LETTERS BECAME A WAY OF LIFE THAT persisted even when hope did not. In early 1985, they again wrote Amnesty International, urging the group not to forget Jack's disappearance. Barry Shelton found the uncertainty unbearable, "almost like having Jack die over and over again."

"We searched and searched for him," Barry says. "The irony is that Jack was the one who was the searcher-his whole life was a search."

Barry, 33, is four years younger than Jack, and almost one-third of his life has been devoted to finding his brother. He is not a tall man, but he stoops a little, almost as if to avoid a weight the world has put on his shoulders.

Barry remembers Jack as a big brother who gently gave him advice, like how to use rubber cement to repair his tennis shoes, and who "reached out his hand and pulled me up" when Barry lost his footing alongside a cable car in San Francisco.

At home, Barry says, Jack was "like a saltwater fish in fresh water." He didn't fit in. Jack loved his family, but he didn't want to cultivate the family vegetable garden (he didn't like the "work ethic"). He didn't like it when his father tried to switch the car radio from a station that was playing a song in a foreign language, and when he was a teen-ager, he started resisting Curtis' haircuts. But most of all, he didn't like Knoxville. It was the wrong environment, "a conflict of aesthetics," in Barry's words, "like suburbia versus a Mayan temple. It was like Jack had been dropped into the wrong place on Earth."

"First he was the black sheep," Barry says warmly. "Then he was the lost sheep."

The last of Jack's Knoxville friends known to have seen him alive was Mark Johnson, a former neighbor, who had left Tennessee to join the Merchant Marines. He had been on ship's liberty in the Bay Area in the late '70s when he and Jack met by chance in a Berkeley bookstore. Thereafter, whenever Johnson was in port, "(we) would pal around together." When he heard that Jack had disappeared, it first occurred to Johnson that "he might have thrown in with the rebels" or perhaps "he got to drinking with some students in a cafe where the army had stool pigeons, and then the military got him." Johnson thinks Jack may have kept part of himself from his family, not telling them that he went to bars. "Jack was close to his family," Johnson says. "He didn't want to hurt them."

IN JULY, 1988, THERE WAS AN ASTONISHING DEVELOPMENT IN THE case.

On his last day in Guatemala, Dr. Michael Brabeck, a Rhode Island physician finishing his annual volunteer work near Panajachel, overheard a conversation about a gringo who'd been killed some time ago by a death squad in the neighboring town of Solola. The speaker, an American who has lived in Guatemala for more than a decade, had been afraid to report the murder, though he guessed it "probably involves that family from Tennessee," the one advertising in the newspapers.

As soon as Brabeck landed at a U.S. airport the next day, he telephoned me in Santa Barbara (by coincidence, we had attended high school together in

the 1960s; we had remained in touch, and he knew of my involvement in the Sheltons' search). I left for Guatemala several days later without telling the Sheltons. They'd been disappointed too many times over the years, and I didn't want to falsely raise their hopes again. But In Solola, I learned this story, which was then more than seven years old:

FRIDAY IS MARKET DAY IN SOLOLA, A SMALL TOWN NESTLED ON A mountainside plateau. On Nov. 27, 1981, Indian traders, descendants of the Mayans, filtered into town to sell their rugs, clothing, vegetables and coffee beans. Dressed in traje, traditional clothing with intricate woven patterns, the walkers moved slowly along the edge of the main roadway that winds steeply through the mountains.

Teresa Hernandez and her 8-year-old daughter made their way to the market with the two platos of beans and rice that they hoped to sell that day. As they walked a dirt side street that leads from the main road to the village square, Teresa heard a noise and looked up with a gasp. Coming toward them was a naked man, a gringo. He was running from house to house, knocking on doors, trying the locks, looking for one that would open. Down the street, someone yelled "Loco! Loco!" Teresa's daughter put down her plato of food and hid behind a tree.

Teresa froze. As the runner passed by, their eyes met for a split second. She thought she heard some words in English. "He was white," she remembers. "Very white."

Just beyond her, the man reached an old shack. The last thing Teresa saw through the open door was the naked man by a pile of old clothes, pulling on a pair of cotton pants and tying them with a cloth belt.

Around the corner, in a dirt-floor house overlooking the lake, Emilio Martin was feeding breakfast to his school-age children. When he answered a knock at the door, he saw bare feet under the crack and opened the latch, assuming that the caller was someone he knew. "That's when the tall gringo came in," Martin says. The stranger wore a pair of pants that were too short for him. He had fresh scrapes and scratches over his back and on his lower legs. His Adam's apple was large.

The man looked hot and indicated in broken Spanish that he was thirsty, so Martin gave him a glass of water. The visitor shook hands with the children in the room, patting some of them on the head. He seemed friendlier than the foreigners who congregated down at the lake, but, judging from his

condition and the overall strangeness of the encounter, Martin thought, he, like many tourists, might be under the influence of drugs.

Suddenly, there was banging at the door. When Martin opened it, he saw two uniformed men armed with rifles. One was from the Policia Hacienda, the feared Treasury Police. He wore the force's distinctive green fatigues and a hat with chin strap, and he carried a U.S.-made M-1 carbine. The other man wore the helmet assigned to BROE (Brigada de Operaciones Especiales), strongman Lucas' notorious anti-riot police unit. He, too, carried a weapon, but Martin could not remember what kind.

"Send him out," they ordered.

Martin hesitated. "I have children-you can't kill him here," he said bluntly.

At this, one of the men pointed his rifle at Martin. "We'll kill you if you get in our way," he said.

Martin stepped away from the pointed gun. Then, inexplicably, the men moved back across the street. Martin closed the door.

The visitor noticed a copy of the Bible lying on a table. He picked it up and walked over to Martin. "Bueno, bueno," he said, placing his palm on the book's cover. "Bueno," Martin repeated, touching the Bible. For a few moments, they stood there together. Then the man handed the Bible to Martin. Opening the door, the gringo walked outside.

When the uniformed men saw the foreigner, they raised their rifles and started toward him. The gringo, Martin now noticed, was hiding something in his hand. The men stopped, afraid he was concealing a weapon, perhaps a grenade. Suddenly he hurled the object in their direction. It hit one of their boots, but there was no explosion; it was just an old lemon. Then the men came at him again, grabbing him by the arms. But the gringo resisted, and he managed to break away.

The gringo was running again, toward the lip of the hill that dropped down to the lake below. The gunmen followed, racing by Martin's house, disappearing into a nearby cornfield. Moments later, there were gunshots.

Before long, the soldiers returned. As they passed the house, one of them said to Martin: "Watch out. We are going to exterminate every one of the pulgas (fleas) in this town."

IN SOLOLA, AS IN MANY VILLAGES IN GUATEMALA, THE JOB OF picking up corpses falls to the bomberos, the firemen. Solola bombero Pedro Ajiquichi, by his own estimate, has picked up "about 3,000 bodies" during the past 10 years. He was matter-of-fact, not often dwelling on individual cases, but Jack's was particularly unforgettable.

"El gringo que iba corriendo?" Yes, of course, he remembered the gringo who was running. Everyone knew about the gringo, he said when he was shown Jack's photo. Before that day in late November, 1981, no one had seen the man around. But today he is well remembered.

The gringo appeared after the guerrillas came through Solola, busy days for the bomberos. Ajiquichi got word of a body soon after the shooting, but then there had been a mix-up. Coming up the street in his fire-department pickup, he had spotted another body by the roadside, and he had collected it instead. Three days later, when he returned to the area, he found Jack's corpse in the cornfield.

The coroner's report said the deceased was an unknown male, between 25 and 30 years of age, dressed in gray pants fastened by a "typical" cord. He had brown eyes, an angular face with several days' growth of beard and a long "Afro" hairstyle. He had been shot twice in the abdomen and once in the back of the head.

"They were bringing a lot of bodies in those days," said Domingo Bixul, a worker at the Solola hospital, identifying Jack's photo. "But he was different." Bixul's job was to wrap the bodies of the unclaimed victims-the "XXs," or unknowns-with blue plastic sheeting, tying each with rope, like a bundle, before loading it on the back of the truck to haul to the cemetery.

The plastic was pre-cut to a standard length, a problem for Bixul because Jack was, by Mayan standards, a tall man. "I remember him," Bixul said. "We had to use more plastic."

IN OCTOBER OF 1988, AFTER OBTAINING JACK'S DEATH CERTIFICATE and speaking once more with Teresa Hernandez and Emilio Martin, I finally was able to write to Curtis and Kathryn and tell them how their son died. Kathryn called me on the telephone, hurt and confused, even angry at new information. "We had tried to heal up," she said later, "even without knowing the truth. When this happened, we didn't know if we could go through it again."

In 1989, all that remained of their quest was to bring Jack's body home. Kathryn and Curtis hired a lawyer in Guatemala to ask a court to order the body exhumed. But the judge estimated that there were 300 to 400 death-squad victims in the cemetery, and there was no record indicating which of several trenches contained Jack's remains. Exhuming them would be a gruesome project requiring the presence of the police, the health department and the judge herself; the judge said no.

But the Sheltons made one more attempt. Because I used to be an attorney, they asked me to go to the Guatemalan court to appeal the judge's decision. Just before the trip, Kathryn telephoned. "There are some things that weren't in the ad that you ought to know for purposes of confirmation," she said. "Jack had very long, very thin fingers-and he had a big Adam's apple." The use of the word had was a shock. For the first time, she was referring to Jack in the past tense.

I departed for Guatemala, accompanied by Rogelio Trujillo, a Mexican gardener in Santa Barbara who would help with translation. The judge listened to us-and reversed herself. If the father of the boy would come from Tennessee to sign the request, she would grant the order.

It was a condition that alarmed Kathryn. Jack never came back from Solola, and she feared that Curtis might not either. The search was important, but they must not be dragged under by it. Shouldn't they draw the line at their own survival? "Curtis is going to retire next year, and I am going to need him," Kathryn said. "I want something left in my life."

But Curtis had to know more.

AT THE EDGE OF SOLOLA, THE ROAD THAT SNAKES UP THE MOUNTAIN crosses a flat plateau that overlooks a steep, brush-covered ravine several hundred feet deep. Midway down this stretch of road is a guard post-no more than a small shack-where municipal police monitor foot traffic and record bus numbers and sometimes license-plate numbers of automobiles.

"I figure they had Jack here," Curtis said, driving by for the second time. "Maybe they were transferring him from one jail to another-maybe they had drugged him-and they stopped to check with the guard. Anybody falling down that ravine would get pretty scratched up on the way down."

Curtis had just come from the cemetery, which sits on the far side of the ravine, and from the homes of Teresa Hernandez and Emilio Martin. "I have to give Jack the benefit of the doubt," Curtis continued. Part of the pain of

this search had become his realization that there were aspects of Jack he might never know. "I'm not going to think he was on drugs. Not voluntarily. He could have been. I'm not ruling it out. But it doesn't account for his whereabouts those last four months. Without any money. Out of respect for him, I think he was naked and running here because he'd been in captivity."

At Flipper's Cantina, Curtis was having a Coke with us; we were drinking Guatemalan beer. Nearby, several policemen in uniform gathered at a table littered with empty bottles of corn liquor, the kind that sells locally for about 40 cents a pint. They were Policia Hacienda-Treasury Police-just like one of the men who went that day to the home of Emilio Martin. When Curtis had met Martin the day before, Martin described this uniform: the green military cut, the U.S. Army boots, belt and canteen, the chin-strapped hats that are worn cocked a little to one side. Now Curtis saw the men in person. Could one of them be the killer?

The Policia Hacienda got up to leave, lurching by the father of Jack Ross Shelton, swaggering from the bar with the bravado of armed, intoxicated men. Curtis was trembling. "I don't understand a police officer who drinks," he managed to say. "How can he have any respect for himself?"

The next night, Curtis and his companions met the cemetery director at Flipper's. "Machete caido, Indio muerto!" the old Guatemalan exclaimed with a drunken laugh, turning another empty bottle on its side. Machete down, Indian dead. If the gringos wanted more information, now was the time to buy the cemetery director another round. The gringos complied, and the graveyard man described the formidable task that lay ahead.

There were two trenches and many bodies underneath. Graveyard space in Solola had been at a premium in recent years. That could be a problem: Some townspeople had had to bury their kinfolk on top of the XXs' trenches. Disturbing the dead-these dead-could upset the village. But even if the trenches underneath could be unearthed, there was still no system for locating specific corpses, not even tags or dates on the plastic sheets. It all would have to be done by hand.

The excavation would be massive. Bodies stink terribly. Everyone would need a face mask. Some people would get sick. Eight or 10 gravediggers should be hired. That wouldn't cost much, maybe a little more if they brought their own shovels or picks. There should be two teams-one to dig and one to drink. That was a lot of corn liquor. There was no other way to handle it.

During the search, there would be bones "everywhere." Some of them might get mixed up. The gringo's bones should be longer than the others. But it would still be a lot of work.

Machete caido, Indio muerto!

MANY PEOPLE IN SOLOLA HAD seen Jack's "missing" flyers: a local official, an attorney, the American whose conversation Brabeck had overheard, all admitted they thought the murdered gringo was Jack Shelton, but none had tried to contact the Sheltons. "I guess we just got an immunity from our feelings," the American said. Curtis just shook his head.

Curtis, Trujillo and I spent the afternoon in the graveyard, measuring the areas where the cemetery director thought the bodies were buried. Notebook in hand, Curtis paced back and forth, examining the soil, figuring and refiguring distances. About a dozen wooden crosses marked the rocky, weed-covered ground, the sites where shallow burials of known Sololatecos took place on top of the trenches. The prospect of opening these graves made the thought of getting to the others, the ones below, even more odious.

Curtis had a short, restless night, and he awakened while it was still dark. "What happens to a body that lies in the sun for three days?" he wanted to know. "Were there two or three bullet holes?" It was like a bad dream. And there were other thoughts, too. Curtis turned on the light to get something out of his suitcase. It was an old Father's Day card, one that he had carried with him from home. Jack had made the card as a youngster for his daddy. There was very little writing on it. "I'm sorry I fussed about the haircut," it said simply. "Love, Jack."

Just after dawn, Curtis was seated in the darkened lobby of the hotel, alone. Wearing the old Marine shirt, he was studying his little notebook, trying to resolve any contradictions, wringing whatever meaning he could from the last few details of the search. Now he made the decision: There will be no digging. "It weighs heavy on me," he said, "to go in there and disturb the dead." As simple as that. Jack's remains would stay in Guatemala. With the other victims.

Before leaving the country, Curtis wanted a photograph taken of Teresa Hernandez and then one of himself with Teresa, for Kathryn. Afterward, Teresa embraced him like a relative. The goodby was a long one. Nearby, at Emilio Martin's house, the stop was shorter. Martin was sick in bed. No

more details about Jack's visit or the death squad. This was just for thanksgiving.

But in Martin's simple home, Curtis produced one more photo of Jack, a picture Martin had never seen. Emilio remarked on the prominence, in the photograph, of Jack's Adam's apple and how this stirred his memory of the barefoot visitor who came to his door so many years ago. Curtis, standing there in his home, resembled that young man, Martin said.

Curtis wanted to hold the Bible that his son held that day. As it was brought to him, Martin sat up in bed. "It is for you, this Bible is yours," Martin said. Curtis was trembling, almost twitching. Now he placed one palm on the book's cover. "And Jesus said," he blurted out, looking to Rogelio Trujillo for translation, " `I was a stranger, and you took me into your home!' " A long and difficult silence followed. Trujillo was crying and could not translate.

LAST NOVEMBER, NINE years to the day after the murder, Jack Shelton's mother and father went to make peace with his memory, arranging a funeral service at the cemetery at Solola, where they had hired a local contractor to build a large but simple monument set with native stones and flanked by concrete benches. The monument overlooks Lake Atitlan, often called the jewel of Central America. But these western highlands of Guatemala have been-and still are-the scene of gruesome murders, rotting corpses and quiet funerals.

The ceremony at this monument, raised in memory of both Jack and Guatemala's other disappeared, was a remarkable proceeding: Guatemala is hardly ready for a public admission of government murder, certainly not one cast in stone. It was, Americas Watch representative Ann Manuel said later, as though someone had raised a "public memorial to Nazi victims while the Third Reich was still in power."

Noting that they were standing above the bodies of death-squad victims, one of the mourners talked about the "cursed beauty" of Guatemala. Then Brabeck's 12-year-old daughter, Kalina, read a prayer she had written. "Dear God," she said, "please bless the Sheltons. Thank you for giving them courage and strength. Finally, help Guatemala. Help Guatemala to be at peace."

A large marble tablet sits atop the monument. Jack Shelton's epitaph, written by his family, is inscribed there in Spanish:

Dedicated to the glory of God

And to the memory of the hundreds

Who disappeared in Solola

In the dark days of 1981.

The stones represent their eternal lives

And the mortar represents the common

Bond of their loved ones.

Given by his parents in the memory of

JACK ROSS SHELTON

November 22, 1953-November 27, 1981
[Illustration]
PHOTO: Curtis handed out flyers with Jack's description in Guatemala.; PHOTO: COLOR, Curtis and Kathryn at their monument to Jack in the Solola cemetery. / Kevin McKiernan/SIPA; PHOTO: COLOR, Jack Shelton; PHOTO: COLOR, The Shelton family in 1979:Barry, left, Kathryn, Jack and Curtis.

****

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF JACK SHELTON The Search for Their Son Brought Kathryn and Curtis Shelton Face to Face With Gautemala's Everyday Horrors; [Home Edition]

KEVIN McKIERNAN. Los Angeles Times (pre-1997 Fulltext). Los Angeles, Calif.: Sep 8, 1991. pg. 22
Full Text (6787 words)

"WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOUR CHILD disappears in a foreign country?" Kathryn Shelton asks.

The question has consumed her for a decade, the 10 years since she last saw her eldest son, Jack. Jack was brilliant and introspective, a man who'd graduated from college with honors in philosophy only to join the Marines when jobs were hard to come by. He may have realized quickly after he enlisted that this was his father's path, not his own, and after three uncomfortable years in the military and a few months in Europe as a tourist, he moved to San Francisco from his parents' quiet Knoxville, Tenn., neighborhood and began preparing for a trip to Mexico. He hoped that travel would help offset the "degrading" military experience-"You know," Kathryn says, "the group living and the fact his intelligence wasn't used to the fullest."

She glances around Jack's bedroom, apparently much as he had left it in the spring of 1981. In a closet, his classical guitar sits next to a 3-foot-high stack of National Geographics. A bookshelf is filled with reminders of his studies-the collected works of Rabelais, the 16th-Century French satirist, a volume entitled "The Wisdom of China and India" and another called "The Wisdom of Israel."

Kathryn stands at the desk, rearranging some Cub Scout derby cars. She's been calmly and steadily describing her son to me-his love of classical music, his track competitions, the way he didn't smoke or drink-but when her eyes light on a bundle of letters, she falls silent. * Jack, at 28 a seasoned traveler, had been a systematic, faithful correspondent: His final letter, dated July 9, 1981, was one of three he'd written to Kathryn and his father, Curtis, in only two weeks. "I've picked up a few scraps of Spanish," he had printed in his all-capital-letters writing. "Enough for survival." He had been in southern Mexico touring Mayan Indian ruins, Jack wrote, and although he was running short of money, he hoped to visit one more ancient site in the Yucatan before returning to the States to look for work.

Three days later, according to immigration logs, he crossed into Guatemala. His timing could hardly have been worse. Under the military regime of Fernando Romeo Lucas Garcia-"the Saddam Hussein of Central America," in the words of a local missionary-Guatemala was in the midst of another violent purge. It was the latest bloodletting in 25 years of civil strife that Americas Watch estimates have left 100,000 dead and 40,000 missing.

Jack's parents never heard from him again. * During the next eight years, the search for a son became a search for a body. By early this year, it was simply a search for comfort. "You try to accept that it is over," says Kathryn, 60, a small woman with short, close-cropped hair and large

glasses. "Then you see his handwriting, and it just melts you. You'll find out, if you ever lose someone. The most personal part of someone is their handwriting."

THE END OF JACK'S STEADY STREAM OF LETTERS WAS THE SHELTONS' FIRST clue that something was wrong. In August, 1981, when there had been no word from Jack in several weeks, Kathryn and Curtis were worried, but they had no idea where to turn. Four calls to the U.S. Embassy in Mexico proved unproductive. "They told us that when people get down in that climate, they tend to forget about time," Kathryn remembers. So Curtis, now 67, decided to go to Mexico to search for his son himself.

Although he does not speak Spanish and hadn't traveled outside the United States since he was a Marine on Okinawa nearly 40 years before, Curtis took leave from his post as an agricultural engineering professor at the University of Tennessee and made his way to San Cristobal de Las Casas in Mexico, the town where Jack's last letter had been postmarked. A bus station on the last leg of his trip was full of cargo, bustling with passengers and noisy with the rapid speech patterns of the unfamiliar culture. Curtis, dressed in the same brown wool military shirt he'd worn as a young Marine, was relieved when a longhaired stranger emerged, speaking English, offering assistance. But as quickly as the man appeared, he was gone. Curtis checked for his wallet and passport. They were gone, too.

Curtis went home for new funds and credentials, returning two weeks later. When no one at the library or museum where Jack said he had studied in San Cristobal recognized his photograph, Curtis set off on a 10-hour bus ride to the Yucatan, to the Mayan ruins Jack had visited at Palenque. There, he searched out Americans, because they speak English and because he believed they would remember another American better. "I was beginning to see that to Mexicans, we all looked the same," Curtis says. But none of the Americans he met in Palenque remembered Jack. Curtis moved on.

Jack had mentioned in his last letter that he might go to Bonampak, a remote Mayan site in eastern Mexico noted for its colored hieroglyphics. Curtis' car got stuck several times on the way there, and he had to hike in the last five miles over terrain too rough for a vehicle. But when he arrived, the visitor book showed no entry for Jack, and no one in the area could identify him positively from the photograph. A Guatemalan woman seemed to remember a foreigner who looked like Jack standing on a street corner in an obscure village in northern Guatemala some time ago. But she couldn't provide any other information.

At that point, Curtis ran out of clues. So, after more investigation in the San Cristobal area, he posted flyers with Jack's picture and returned to Tennessee.

Several more weeks passed without a word from Jack, and the family was distraught. Kathryn notified the Citizens Emergency Center, a branch of the U.S. State Department in Washington, that Jack was missing. The family appealed to members of Congress, including then-Sen. Howard M. Baker (R-Tenn.), Sen. Jim Sasser (D-Tenn.) and the late Rep. John J. Duncan (R-Tenn.), to pressure the State Department for information. In October, the State Department called with news: Immigration records had turned up Jack's name at La Mesilla, a small Guatemalan border post on the Pan American Highway, three hours south of San Cristobal. Jack's name had appeared on the July 12 list of travelers who were headed south into the province of Huehuetenango.

Buoyed by the news, the Sheltons telephoned the State Department, asking officials for an on-site investigation in Huehuetenango and for the list of others who had crossed that day, hoping someone-perhaps another foreigner-might remember the tall, dark-haired boy from Tennessee. But the 1974 Privacy Act bars the release of any information from the State Department. And when the family approached American Express for information about where Jack cashed his traveler's checks, they were told that the same law kept those records secret, too.

Undeterred, the Sheltons launched a telephone and letter-writing campaign to push for an investigation of Jack's disappearance. They contacted almost two dozen organizations, including Amnesty International, Americas Watch and the World Council of Churches.

The strains of the search were showing on the family. Jack's brother, Barry, gave up a scholarship in plant and soil science at the University of Tennessee because he could not concentrate on his studies. And Kathryn, being treated for lupus, a painful arthritic condition that attacks the immune system, found that stress aggravated the disease. Easily fatigued, she nonetheless spent hours on the telephone each day while Curtis held down his job at the university. At night, her head ached from the constant pressure of the receiver against her ear.

But the work seemed to be paying off. In November, Baker's office in Washington said it was working to obtain the names of the July 12 travelers, and it succeeded in releasing the information from American

Express. Jack's last check had been cashed in Mexico, in July. But $600 in unused checks was outstanding; no trace of the checks had turned up in Guatemala.

BY DECEMBER, THE SHELTONS WERE FRANTIC. BORDER CHECKS from Belize to Panama indicated that Jack had not left Guatemala, and his 30-day visa, which had expired on Aug. 11, had not been turned in. If Jack had been in an accident, if he had been killed in Guatemala, wouldn't his body have shown up by now? If he were alive, wouldn't someone have responded to the flyers? The Sheltons paid $7,000 to a British mercenary to hunt for Jack, but he found nothing.

Curtis wanted to go to Huehuetenango to resume his search, but U.S. officials dissuaded him from making the trip. Leftist guerrillas were actively fighting the Guatemalan dictatorship, which was supported by $3 million in annual U.S. military aid and $90 million in economic assistance. (In December, 1990, the military aid was suspended because of human-rights violations.) In 1981, with reprisals on both sides, corpses showed up regularly on roads and streets; death squads seemed to be everywhere. Travel on the Pan American Highway between Guatemala City and Huehuetenango, five hours to the north, could be dangerous. So Curtis canceled his trip. "I'm the kind of person who goes along with authority," he says. "I thought they knew-or ought to have known-more than we did."

The Sheltons instead placed ads in four national newspapers in Guatemala and Belize. The advertisements in the "missing" section carried photographs of Jack-including one modified by an artist to show him with long hair-his passport number and a description of him as 6 feet, 2 inches and 145 pounds. The ads began appearing on Christmas Eve, 1981.

All spring, the family received responses to the ads, which later were amended to include a reward for information. The Sheltons hired a translator in Knoxville to sift out the clues that seemed promising. And Curtis flew to Guatemala City.

At the U.S. Embassy in Guatemala, an official expressed his belief that Jack had been killed by guerrillas, but there was no supporting evidence. After tracking down more dead-end leads in Guatemala, Curtis received a report that a "gringo youth" had been found barely alive in a park in Tuxtla Gutierrez, the capital of the state of Chiapas in Mexico. Curtis flew to that city, north of San Cristobal de Las Casas, where the search had begun the previous summer.

The North American in the park was emaciated, unconscious and showed signs of "dreadful" maltreatment. Curtis speculated that the boy had been "drugged and in jail" before he arrived in the park, but he was "too far gone" for Curtis to determine whether he was Jack. The man died the next day. Two weeks later, an FBI fingerprint analysis indicated that the young man was, in fact, an American. But he was not Jack Shelton.

THE GUATEMALAN GOVERNMENT FINALLY RELEASED THE NAMES of the 22 people who entered Guatemala on the Pan American Highway on July 12, 1981. But by then it was October, 1982. A year had passed since the Sheltons first telephoned the State Department to pressure Guatemala for the list. The trail had grown cold.

In December, Baker received a letter from Guatemalan Ambassador Jorge L. Zelaya. At long last there appeared to be some real news-an official response from the government, the conclusion of an inquiry commissioned by the Guatemalan National Police into Jack's disappearance.

Emphasizing "the seriousness with which my government viewed this matter, and the thoroughness with which the investigation was conducted," Zelaya informed Baker that "Mr. Shelton does not appear to have ever been in the country."

"Not ever in the country?" The Sheltons were traumatized. "We were looking for our son in a country that said he didn't exist there," Kathryn says.

As the months passed, the Sheltons clung to the hope that somehow Jack had survived. In March, 1983, they placed more reward advertisements with Jack's picture in Mexican and Guatemalan papers. In June, there was a breakthrough.

The consul general of the U.S. Embassy in Guatemala City, Philip Bates Taylor, finally traveled to Huehuetenango and checked the immigration logs at the border. He immediately found Jack's name and those of the other travelers who crossed on July 12, 1981. Then he backtracked to the provincial capital, taking lunch at the main hotel on the city square. Afterward, he reviewed the hotel's guest registry. Finding nothing there for the date in question, he walked across the street to the El Central, a low-income hotel where the bus from the border stopped. As Taylor recalled later, the hotel manager removed a "dust-covered book" from the shelf in his office. Turning to July 12, 1981, 23 months before, Taylor read the name Jack Shelton.

August brought more clues and disturbing notes: A body was exhumed in Huehuetenango, and its dental X-rays were compared to Jack's, but they didn't match. A kidnap victim wrote to the family from Guatemala City, saying that he had just escaped from a prison cell set up at a military academy, where "heavily armed men" were holding three others, including one who matched Jack's photo.

Similar letters from others had convinced the Sheltons that Jack was a captive. "You cannot imagine the anguish my family continues to suffer after two years," Barry wrote in a letter to a dozen U.S. officials.

THE FAMILY CONTINUED MAKING CONTACTS, ACQUAINTANCES AND friends ("God's network," Kathryn calls it) in the search for Jack. In July, 1984, Curtis made one more trip to Guatemala. At that time, I joined the search, along with two others: a district attorney from Oregon who is active in assisting Guatemalan refugees and an Episcopal priest from Palo Alto, who has a number of contacts in Guatemala. This time, Curtis did not notify the State Department he was going, nor did he share the information that drove this search: a packet of recent responses to the still-running ads.

One writer claimed to have seen Jack playing with a dog in Guatemala City. "He told me that his name was Shelton." Another remembered seeing a North American man and a Spanish woman near Lake Atitlan. They had been captured by the Guatemalan army and, he vaguely recalled, executed.

We sifted through the clues. The strongest of them led Curtis and me to a neighborhood in Guatemala City where numerous residents, independent of one another, recognized Jack's picture and identified him as a local street person. We set up a stakeout at an intersection where the foreigner was known to pass. During the next two days, a Chevrolet Silverado with blackened windows and no license plates-the type of vehicle associated with Guatemalan death squads-appeared and reappeared near our parked rental car. "It kind of makes you wonder where our taxes go," Curtis said quietly.

When the stranger finally showed up, he was not Jack after all, although his size, hair coloring and physique were similar. His father was American, he related in broken English. The rest of his story as a homeless expatriate trailed off, confused by drugs or amnesia or perhaps both.

Curtis journeyed to Lake Atitlan. It was the Fourth of July, and tourists in the town of Panajachel-"Gringotenango" in the words of one resident-were

shooting off fireworks. A waiter there thought he remembered seeing someone who looked like Jack, "but that was years ago."

BUT CURTIS WAS EAGER TO GO NORTH TO THE SECURITY PRISON IN THE city of Quezaltenango. Kathryn had received two calls from Chicago from a woman who had just returned from Guatemala City, where she had seen the ad. At the time, she told Kathryn, she mentioned Jack's disappearance to her son, a Guatemalan soldier. According to the caller, her son responded, "No, Mama, he is not missing. He has been kidnaped by the military service and is held in prison." If this claim was true, Jack could still be alive.

The woman told the Sheltons that she and her son went to the security prison in Quezaltenango, where they saw Jack in a "sub-basement" so dark they "had to use candles to see." Nine people were being held in the area, she said. Jack was "tall, thin, wearing old clothes," and he kept asking why "no one had come for (him)." "I told him," the woman related to Kathryn, "that I would contact his parents."

In Quezaltenango, the California priest planned to use his connections with a Guatemalan friend who was related to an army officer to obtain permission for our group to enter the prison. But en route, an astonishing coincidence occurred when we stopped on a rural highway to pick up a Mayan hitchhiker. Without knowing Jack's story, the Indian picked him out from a family photo, positive he'd seen Jack the year before-though with longer hair-in the Quezaltenango prison when he visited his brother, who was serving time for assault. It was an improbable clue from an improbable source. Curtis was clearly agitated.

But no "sub-basement" could be found at the prison. And after we made a futile tour of the compound, the guards told us it was time to go. Curtis and the priest lingered, calling to Jack in English through the bars of locked cellblocks. At one point, Curtis could see only the midsection of one prisoner, someone who was seated at the end of a locked corridor. The prisoner appeared to be weaving something, perhaps a bag, but his face was out of sight. "That arm seems whiter than the rest of these people!" Curtis exclaimed nervously. Then the man stood up and turned around, bewildered by the North Americans jockeying for a better view at the opposite end of the corridor. He was a Latino.

We drove north to Huehuetenango, where Curtis readily located Jack's name, his signature and handwriting in the registry at the El Central Hotel.

Of all the guests listed for July 12, 1981, only one remembered Jack. Interviewed in Mexico, Antonio Guillen Barrios, a schoolteacher, claimed that he had spent part of that evening in the bar of the El Central Hotel drinking with Jack and a young "South American woman." Jack had introduced her as "his wife," but Barrios thought at the time that she was a prostitute. They each had three Gallos (Guatemalan beers), he said, holding up three fingers. Jack bought two rounds. Then the couple left for a hotel room.

Barrios, who remembered Jack Ross Shelton as "Russell" and correctly recalled his room number despite the passage of three years, said he went to Jack's room about 1 a.m. and knocked on the door. The woman stayed inside, but Jack slipped out into the hallway, where he shared "a couple of drinks" from Barrios' bottle of Mexican vodka. Jack mentioned that he was "from San Francisco." In the morning, Barrios said, he saw the couple once more. The woman said the two were on their way to Panajachel and Lake Atitlan, several hours away.

Throughout the telling of the schoolteacher's story, Curtis leaned forward, arms folded, hanging on every detail. At the mention of the mysterious woman in the El Central Hotel, his fingers dug into his biceps. "It doesn't sound like Jack," he said quietly.

Curtis said he wanted to spend one night in the room where Jack had stayed three years before, "in case there are messages or markings still on the wall." But it was time to go.

FOR THE FAMILY, WRITING LETTERS BECAME A WAY OF LIFE THAT persisted even when hope did not. In early 1985, they again wrote Amnesty International, urging the group not to forget Jack's disappearance. Barry Shelton found the uncertainty unbearable, "almost like having Jack die over and over again."

"We searched and searched for him," Barry says. "The irony is that Jack was the one who was the searcher-his whole life was a search."

Barry, 33, is four years younger than Jack, and almost one-third of his life has been devoted to finding his brother. He is not a tall man, but he stoops a little, almost as if to avoid a weight the world has put on his shoulders.

Barry remembers Jack as a big brother who gently gave him advice, like how to use rubber cement to repair his tennis shoes, and who "reached out

his hand and pulled me up" when Barry lost his footing alongside a cable car in San Francisco.

At home, Barry says, Jack was "like a saltwater fish in fresh water." He didn't fit in. Jack loved his family, but he didn't want to cultivate the family vegetable garden (he didn't like the "work ethic"). He didn't like it when his father tried to switch the car radio from a station that was playing a song in a foreign language, and when he was a teen-ager, he started resisting Curtis' haircuts. But most of all, he didn't like Knoxville. It was the wrong environment, "a conflict of aesthetics," in Barry's words, "like suburbia versus a Mayan temple. It was like Jack had been dropped into the wrong place on Earth."

"First he was the black sheep," Barry says warmly. "Then he was the lost sheep."

The last of Jack's Knoxville friends known to have seen him alive was Mark Johnson, a former neighbor, who had left Tennessee to join the Merchant Marines. He had been on ship's liberty in the Bay Area in the late '70s when he and Jack met by chance in a Berkeley bookstore. Thereafter, whenever Johnson was in port, "(we) would pal around together." When he heard that Jack had disappeared, it first occurred to Johnson that "he might have thrown in with the rebels" or perhaps "he got to drinking with some students in a cafe where the army had stool pigeons, and then the military got him." Johnson thinks Jack may have kept part of himself from his family, not telling them that he went to bars. "Jack was close to his family," Johnson says. "He didn't want to hurt them."

IN JULY, 1988, THERE WAS AN ASTONISHING DEVELOPMENT IN THE case.

On his last day in Guatemala, Dr. Michael Brabeck, a Rhode Island physician finishing his annual volunteer work near Panajachel, overheard a conversation about a gringo who'd been killed some time ago by a death squad in the neighboring town of Solola. The speaker, an American who has lived in Guatemala for more than a decade, had been afraid to report the murder, though he guessed it "probably involves that family from Tennessee," the one advertising in the newspapers.

As soon as Brabeck landed at a U.S. airport the next day, he telephoned me in Santa Barbara (by coincidence, we had attended high school together in the 1960s; we had remained in touch, and he knew of my involvement in the Sheltons' search). I left for Guatemala several days later without telling

the Sheltons. They'd been disappointed too many times over the years, and I didn't want to falsely raise their hopes again. But In Solola, I learned this story, which was then more than seven years old:

FRIDAY IS MARKET DAY IN SOLOLA, A SMALL TOWN NESTLED ON A mountainside plateau. On Nov. 27, 1981, Indian traders, descendants of the Mayans, filtered into town to sell their rugs, clothing, vegetables and coffee beans. Dressed in traje, traditional clothing with intricate woven patterns, the walkers moved slowly along the edge of the main roadway that winds steeply through the mountains.

Teresa Hernandez and her 8-year-old daughter made their way to the market with the two platos of beans and rice that they hoped to sell that day. As they walked a dirt side street that leads from the main road to the village square, Teresa heard a noise and looked up with a gasp. Coming toward them was a naked man, a gringo. He was running from house to house, knocking on doors, trying the locks, looking for one that would open. Down the street, someone yelled "Loco! Loco!" Teresa's daughter put down her plato of food and hid behind a tree.

Teresa froze. As the runner passed by, their eyes met for a split second. She thought she heard some words in English. "He was white," she remembers. "Very white."

Just beyond her, the man reached an old shack. The last thing Teresa saw through the open door was the naked man by a pile of old clothes, pulling on a pair of cotton pants and tying them with a cloth belt.

Around the corner, in a dirt-floor house overlooking the lake, Emilio Martin was feeding breakfast to his school-age children. When he answered a knock at the door, he saw bare feet under the crack and opened the latch, assuming that the caller was someone he knew. "That's when the tall gringo came in," Martin says. The stranger wore a pair of pants that were too short for him. He had fresh scrapes and scratches over his back and on his lower legs. His Adam's apple was large.

The man looked hot and indicated in broken Spanish that he was thirsty, so Martin gave him a glass of water. The visitor shook hands with the children in the room, patting some of them on the head. He seemed friendlier than the foreigners who congregated down at the lake, but, judging from his condition and the overall strangeness of the encounter, Martin thought, he, like many tourists, might be under the influence of drugs.

Suddenly, there was banging at the door. When Martin opened it, he saw two uniformed men armed with rifles. One was from the Policia Hacienda, the feared Treasury Police. He wore the force's distinctive green fatigues and a hat with chin strap, and he carried a U.S.-made M-1 carbine. The other man wore the helmet assigned to BROE (Brigada de Operaciones Especiales), strongman Lucas' notorious anti-riot police unit. He, too, carried a weapon, but Martin could not remember what kind.

"Send him out," they ordered.

Martin hesitated. "I have children-you can't kill him here," he said bluntly.

At this, one of the men pointed his rifle at Martin. "We'll kill you if you get in our way," he said.

Martin stepped away from the pointed gun. Then, inexplicably, the men moved back across the street. Martin closed the door.

The visitor noticed a copy of the Bible lying on a table. He picked it up and walked over to Martin. "Bueno, bueno," he said, placing his palm on the book's cover. "Bueno," Martin repeated, touching the Bible. For a few moments, they stood there together. Then the man handed the Bible to Martin. Opening the door, the gringo walked outside.

When the uniformed men saw the foreigner, they raised their rifles and started toward him. The gringo, Martin now noticed, was hiding something in his hand. The men stopped, afraid he was concealing a weapon, perhaps a grenade. Suddenly he hurled the object in their direction. It hit one of their boots, but there was no explosion; it was just an old lemon. Then the men came at him again, grabbing him by the arms. But the gringo resisted, and he managed to break away.

The gringo was running again, toward the lip of the hill that dropped down to the lake below. The gunmen followed, racing by Martin's house, disappearing into a nearby cornfield. Moments later, there were gunshots.

Before long, the soldiers returned. As they passed the house, one of them said to Martin: "Watch out. We are going to exterminate every one of the pulgas (fleas) in this town."

IN SOLOLA, AS IN MANY VILLAGES IN GUATEMALA, THE JOB OF picking up corpses falls to the bomberos, the firemen. Solola bombero Pedro Ajiquichi, by his own estimate, has picked up "about 3,000 bodies" during

the past 10 years. He was matter-of-fact, not often dwelling on individual cases, but Jack's was particularly unforgettable.

"El gringo que iba corriendo?" Yes, of course, he remembered the gringo who was running. Everyone knew about the gringo, he said when he was shown Jack's photo. Before that day in late November, 1981, no one had seen the man around. But today he is well remembered.

The gringo appeared after the guerrillas came through Solola, busy days for the bomberos. Ajiquichi got word of a body soon after the shooting, but then there had been a mix-up. Coming up the street in his fire-department pickup, he had spotted another body by the roadside, and he had collected it instead. Three days later, when he returned to the area, he found Jack's corpse in the cornfield.

The coroner's report said the deceased was an unknown male, between 25 and 30 years of age, dressed in gray pants fastened by a "typical" cord. He had brown eyes, an angular face with several days' growth of beard and a long "Afro" hairstyle. He had been shot twice in the abdomen and once in the back of the head.

"They were bringing a lot of bodies in those days," said Domingo Bixul, a worker at the Solola hospital, identifying Jack's photo. "But he was different." Bixul's job was to wrap the bodies of the unclaimed victims-the "XXs," or unknowns-with blue plastic sheeting, tying each with rope, like a bundle, before loading it on the back of the truck to haul to the cemetery.

The plastic was pre-cut to a standard length, a problem for Bixul because Jack was, by Mayan standards, a tall man. "I remember him," Bixul said. "We had to use more plastic."

IN OCTOBER OF 1988, AFTER OBTAINING JACK'S DEATH CERTIFICATE and speaking once more with Teresa Hernandez and Emilio Martin, I finally was able to write to Curtis and Kathryn and tell them how their son died. Kathryn called me on the telephone, hurt and confused, even angry at new information. "We had tried to heal up," she said later, "even without knowing the truth. When this happened, we didn't know if we could go through it again."

In 1989, all that remained of their quest was to bring Jack's body home. Kathryn and Curtis hired a lawyer in Guatemala to ask a court to order the body exhumed. But the judge estimated that there were 300 to 400 death-squad victims in the cemetery, and there was no record indicating which of

several trenches contained Jack's remains. Exhuming them would be a gruesome project requiring the presence of the police, the health department and the judge herself; the judge said no.

But the Sheltons made one more attempt. Because I used to be an attorney, they asked me to go to the Guatemalan court to appeal the judge's decision. Just before the trip, Kathryn telephoned. "There are some things that weren't in the ad that you ought to know for purposes of confirmation," she said. "Jack had very long, very thin fingers-and he had a big Adam's apple." The use of the word had was a shock. For the first time, she was referring to Jack in the past tense.

I departed for Guatemala, accompanied by Rogelio Trujillo, a Mexican gardener in Santa Barbara who would help with translation. The judge listened to us-and reversed herself. If the father of the boy would come from Tennessee to sign the request, she would grant the order.

It was a condition that alarmed Kathryn. Jack never came back from Solola, and she feared that Curtis might not either. The search was important, but they must not be dragged under by it. Shouldn't they draw the line at their own survival? "Curtis is going to retire next year, and I am going to need him," Kathryn said. "I want something left in my life."

But Curtis had to know more.

AT THE EDGE OF SOLOLA, THE ROAD THAT SNAKES UP THE MOUNTAIN crosses a flat plateau that overlooks a steep, brush-covered ravine several hundred feet deep. Midway down this stretch of road is a guard post-no more than a small shack-where municipal police monitor foot traffic and record bus numbers and sometimes license-plate numbers of automobiles.

"I figure they had Jack here," Curtis said, driving by for the second time. "Maybe they were transferring him from one jail to another-maybe they had drugged him-and they stopped to check with the guard. Anybody falling down that ravine would get pretty scratched up on the way down."

Curtis had just come from the cemetery, which sits on the far side of the ravine, and from the homes of Teresa Hernandez and Emilio Martin. "I have to give Jack the benefit of the doubt," Curtis continued. Part of the pain of this search had become his realization that there were aspects of Jack he might never know. "I'm not going to think he was on drugs. Not voluntarily. He could have been. I'm not ruling it out. But it doesn't account for his

whereabouts those last four months. Without any money. Out of respect for him, I think he was naked and running here because he'd been in captivity."

At Flipper's Cantina, Curtis was having a Coke with us; we were drinking Guatemalan beer. Nearby, several policemen in uniform gathered at a table littered with empty bottles of corn liquor, the kind that sells locally for about 40 cents a pint. They were Policia Hacienda-Treasury Police-just like one of the men who went that day to the home of Emilio Martin. When Curtis had met Martin the day before, Martin described this uniform: the green military cut, the U.S. Army boots, belt and canteen, the chin-strapped hats that are worn cocked a little to one side. Now Curtis saw the men in person. Could one of them be the killer?

The Policia Hacienda got up to leave, lurching by the father of Jack Ross Shelton, swaggering from the bar with the bravado of armed, intoxicated men. Curtis was trembling. "I don't understand a police officer who drinks," he managed to say. "How can he have any respect for himself?"

The next night, Curtis and his companions met the cemetery director at Flipper's. "Machete caido, Indio muerto!" the old Guatemalan exclaimed with a drunken laugh, turning another empty bottle on its side. Machete down, Indian dead. If the gringos wanted more information, now was the time to buy the cemetery director another round. The gringos complied, and the graveyard man described the formidable task that lay ahead.

There were two trenches and many bodies underneath. Graveyard space in Solola had been at a premium in recent years. That could be a problem: Some townspeople had had to bury their kinfolk on top of the XXs' trenches. Disturbing the dead-these dead-could upset the village. But even if the trenches underneath could be unearthed, there was still no system for locating specific corpses, not even tags or dates on the plastic sheets. It all would have to be done by hand.

The excavation would be massive. Bodies stink terribly. Everyone would need a face mask. Some people would get sick. Eight or 10 gravediggers should be hired. That wouldn't cost much, maybe a little more if they brought their own shovels or picks. There should be two teams-one to dig and one to drink. That was a lot of corn liquor. There was no other way to handle it.

During the search, there would be bones "everywhere." Some of them might get mixed up. The gringo's bones should be longer than the others. But it would still be a lot of work.

Machete caido, Indio muerto!

MANY PEOPLE IN SOLOLA HAD seen Jack's "missing" flyers: a local official, an attorney, the American whose conversation Brabeck had overheard, all admitted they thought the murdered gringo was Jack Shelton, but none had tried to contact the Sheltons. "I guess we just got an immunity from our feelings," the American said. Curtis just shook his head.

Curtis, Trujillo and I spent the afternoon in the graveyard, measuring the areas where the cemetery director thought the bodies were buried. Notebook in hand, Curtis paced back and forth, examining the soil, figuring and refiguring distances. About a dozen wooden crosses marked the rocky, weed-covered ground, the sites where shallow burials of known Sololatecos took place on top of the trenches. The prospect of opening these graves made the thought of getting to the others, the ones below, even more odious.

Curtis had a short, restless night, and he awakened while it was still dark. "What happens to a body that lies in the sun for three days?" he wanted to know. "Were there two or three bullet holes?" It was like a bad dream. And there were other thoughts, too. Curtis turned on the light to get something out of his suitcase. It was an old Father's Day card, one that he had carried with him from home. Jack had made the card as a youngster for his daddy. There was very little writing on it. "I'm sorry I fussed about the haircut," it said simply. "Love, Jack."

Just after dawn, Curtis was seated in the darkened lobby of the hotel, alone. Wearing the old Marine shirt, he was studying his little notebook, trying to resolve any contradictions, wringing whatever meaning he could from the last few details of the search. Now he made the decision: There will be no digging. "It weighs heavy on me," he said, "to go in there and disturb the dead." As simple as that. Jack's remains would stay in Guatemala. With the other victims.

Before leaving the country, Curtis wanted a photograph taken of Teresa Hernandez and then one of himself with Teresa, for Kathryn. Afterward, Teresa embraced him like a relative. The goodby was a long one. Nearby, at Emilio Martin's house, the stop was shorter. Martin was sick in bed. No more details about Jack's visit or the death squad. This was just for thanksgiving.

But in Martin's simple home, Curtis produced one more photo of Jack, a picture Martin had never seen. Emilio remarked on the prominence, in the photograph, of Jack's Adam's apple and how this stirred his memory of the barefoot visitor who came to his door so many years ago. Curtis, standing there in his home, resembled that young man, Martin said.

Curtis wanted to hold the Bible that his son held that day. As it was brought to him, Martin sat up in bed. "It is for you, this Bible is yours," Martin said. Curtis was trembling, almost twitching. Now he placed one palm on the book's cover. "And Jesus said," he blurted out, looking to Rogelio Trujillo for translation, " `I was a stranger, and you took me into your home!' " A long and difficult silence followed. Trujillo was crying and could not translate.

LAST NOVEMBER, NINE years to the day after the murder, Jack Shelton's mother and father went to make peace with his memory, arranging a funeral service at the cemetery at Solola, where they had hired a local contractor to build a large but simple monument set with native stones and flanked by concrete benches. The monument overlooks Lake Atitlan, often called the jewel of Central America. But these western highlands of Guatemala have been-and still are-the scene of gruesome murders, rotting corpses and quiet funerals.

The ceremony at this monument, raised in memory of both Jack and Guatemala's other disappeared, was a remarkable proceeding: Guatemala is hardly ready for a public admission of government murder, certainly not one cast in stone. It was, Americas Watch representative Ann Manuel said later, as though someone had raised a "public memorial to Nazi victims while the Third Reich was still in power."

Noting that they were standing above the bodies of death-squad victims, one of the mourners talked about the "cursed beauty" of Guatemala. Then Brabeck's 12-year-old daughter, Kalina, read a prayer she had written. "Dear God," she said, "please bless the Sheltons. Thank you for giving them courage and strength. Finally, help Guatemala. Help Guatemala to be at peace."

A large marble tablet sits atop the monument. Jack Shelton's epitaph, written by his family, is inscribed there in Spanish:

Dedicated to the glory of God

And to the memory of the hundreds

Who disappeared in Solola

In the dark days of 1981.

The stones represent their eternal lives

And the mortar represents the common

Bond of their loved ones.

Given by his parents in the memory of

JACK ROSS SHELTON

November 22, 1953-November 27, 1981

****

PHOTO: Curtis handed out flyers with Jack's description in Guatemala.; PHOTO: COLOR, Curtis and Kathryn at their monument to Jack in the Solola cemetery. / Kevin McKiernan/SIPA; PHOTO: COLOR, Jack Shelton;

PHOTO: COLOR, The Shelton family in 1979:Barry, left, Kathryn, Jack and Curtis.