Following Guatemala’s long and brutal civil war, members of the military were charged, faced trial and sentenced to jail time. Even some members of a powerful elite unit known as the Kaibil were put behind bars. Among these prisoners, none were more emblematic than Captain Byron Lima Oliva, who, for a time, imposed his rule inside the jails before being swallowed by the same system he helped create.
Byron Lima spent nearly three decades developing ways to protect himself. At first, it was his job. He was an officer in the Guatemalan army who fought against leftist guerrillas for years. Later, he was an intelligence officer, worked with the presidential guard and was a shield for political groups whose secrets he also often protected.

Later, Lima had to protect himself inside prison. Despite his powerful network of friends and colleagues, and a celebrated military career, Lima was prosecuted and sentenced to 20 years in prison in the case of the murder of Bishop Juan José Gerardi, a crime that he would always insist he did not commit. The sentence left him in one of the most dangerous and ruthless penitentiary systems in the world. And while Byron Lima may have had many allies, he had also made many enemies both inside and outside of Guatemala’s prisons.

Drawing from his experience in the army, the former captain developed intelligence networks that infiltrated the inmate community, and the administrative sections of the penitentiary system. He also built an army of loyal and devoted inmates who were ready to die for him if necessary.

Lima’s widespread political connections reached the presidential palace, and he used these connections to eliminate his enemies before they got to him. Sometimes he used force, other times guile. He removed most of his enemies, for example, by getting them transferred to other jails. The local press eventually began referring to him as the “king” of the prison system.

But Lima had a weakness, and an unexpected one at that. Whenever Lima walked the corridors of the Pavón prison -- which would be his last jail -- he was shadowed by a small contingent of bodyguards. At first glance, it was impossible to distinguish this group from the masses of prisoners milling about the prison yard. But a closer look gave away a semicircle of men following a few feet back, in their leader’s footsteps.

These guards were sometimes powerful inmates in their own right, the bosses of some of the 22 prison wings that Lima attempted to control in the Pavón. For logistical and security reasons, he had to rotate his guards. If he assembled a group that was loyal to him, he had nothing to worry about. But if some were susceptible to external pressure or had their own interests that were contrary to his, Lima was vulnerable.

On July 18, 2016, Lima was vulnerable. Pavón is a big, sprawling structure that looks like the campus of an underfunded university. It has basketball courts inmates use to play volleyball and soccer, and a thoroughfare known as “6 Avenida” (6th Avenue) that serves as the de facto cultural and economic center of the prison. It is about 3 meters wide and 60 meters long and has restaurants, stores and workshops. It is flanked by a church that stands above it and a bridge that covers it, creating a short tunnel.
On that day, Lima and an Argentinian woman visiting him were headed to 6 Avenida to have breakfast. His bodyguards were present while he was walking towards the tunnel, but the air was heavy. Lima knew that trouble was brewing. The origins of the attack against him are still unknown, but the former captain was in a state of alert and had obtained a bulletproof vest through his contacts. Lima had reason to worry. He was a combative personality who had launched attacks on some powerful enemies, including other inmates at the Pavón. These struggles had climaxed during the previous administration, a government that had once catered to Lima’s every need. What’s more, Lima was distracted that day: a beautiful young woman from Argentina, who would later be described as his girlfriend, was visiting him.

Authorities have yet to clarify exactly what happened next, but the initial investigation showed that halfway down the stairs leading to the tunnel-like entrance of the 6 Avenida, Lima and his guest were ambushed by several men, possibly some that were part of the contingent of bodyguards meant to protect him. Shots were fired. Lima took at least two bullets to the head and died instantly, according to a high-ranking police officer in charge of the investigation who spoke to InSight Crime on the condition of anonymity. The Argentine guest was also shot dead, along with several of Lima’s men.

The hired-guns and their allies then took advantage of the ensuing chaos and settled various other scores, the official said. In all, 14 prisoners were assassinated, four of which were decapitated. Bullet casings were littered in three different crime scenes along the 6 Avenida, the most important of which contained Lima’s body. The crime rocked the penitentiary system’s status quo and shook the foundation of a nation still dealing with the powerful networks that Lima exploited to become the “king” of the prisons.

The Kaibil and the Bishop

On April 26, 1998, the night Bishop Juan José Gerardi was assassinated, all seemed calm around the San Esteban Parish. The drunks were fast asleep in front of their cars. The bishop’s roommate, Father Mario Orantes, was in his bedroom, and a group of men were
drinking beer at a nearby corner market called Don Mike. The bishop arrived at the parish around 11 p.m., returning from his usual Sunday dinner with his brother.

But according to the investigation that followed -- which would last years and affect not just the penitentiary system but the entire country -- neither the drunk in front of his car, nor the men drinking beer and smoking cigarettes at Don Mike’s (nor Mike himself, in fact), nor Father Orantes were who they seemed to be. All were working with, colluding with or were forced to provide information for the feared Presidential Security Service (Estado Mayor Presidencia - EMP), then the most powerful security unit in Guatemala’s government.

At the time, Capt. Byron Lima Oliva was a member of the EMP. He would later claim that he made only one mistake that night: sleeping at its office near the crime scene. The presidential palace is located in front of the parish where the bishop parked his car for the last time, and where something unfolded that, to this day, no one has been able to fully explain. The only certainty is that Bishop Gerardi was assassinated, most likely by several men who used a cement block to cave in his skull.

The motives behind the murder still divide this country, 20 years after the signing of a peace agreement between leftist guerrillas and the government. For the government investigators and civil society organizations, it is clear that Bishop Gerardi was targeted for his work, specifically for his efforts with the Human Rights Office of the Archdiocese of Guatemala (Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala - ODHAG), and the development of a project called the Recuperation of Historical Memory (Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica - REMHI). This project documented more than 54,000 civilian deaths between the 1970s and the signing of the 1996 peace agreement, almost all of which were committed by the Guatemalan army. The report that followed was titled “Guatemala Nunca Más” (“Guatemala: Never Again”) and was published just two days before the concrete block struck the bishop’s head, leaving his bloody corpse inside the parish garage.

But other sectors of the country -- and in particular those who are part of or are still close to the powerful military -- saw Bishop Gerardi’s death in a different light. They said it was either linked to common crime, or it was a “crime of passion” related to Father Orantes’ troubled homosexual affairs.

Because the murder happened only a short distance from the presidential palace, the EMP ran its own investigation. Lima always claimed that he was not part of the EMP team that first arrived at the crime scene. And the Lima family says that the motive to ensnare him was a political set up; the real culprits, they say, were part of a gang called Valle del Sol that was involved in car theft, and theft and resale of religious icons.
The murder also shook the international community. The last assassination of such a high-ranking religious figure was that of Archbishop Óscar Romero in El Salvador in 1980. The majority of Guatemalans hoped the civil war was behind them, its horrors a thing of the past. But the murder felt like déjà vu and brought with it the deep divisions that remain in this nation of 15 million people.

For years, the investigation into Gerardi’s death stalled and stumbled. Witnesses disappeared. A bomb was discovered hidden in a judge’s house. And as the death threats mounted, several prosecutors absconded, abandoning their careers in the process. The case became so twisted in knots that, for a time, the main suspect was Balú, the parish German Shepard, a point that led to more than a few head-scratching news stories.

In the end, four men were tried and convicted. Captain Byron Lima Oliva, along with his father, Col. Byron Lima Estrada, who had retired in 1993; Sgt. Maj. Obdulio Villanueva and Father Mario Orantes. On top of being a member of the EMP, Lima Oliva was also a member of an elite group of soldiers called the Kaibil. The unit was named after a legendary indigenous leader who had fought Spanish conquerors. In 2001, after the threats, the conspiracy theories, the exiles and the murders, the three soldiers were finally brought to their first jail: the Centro Preventivo of Zona 18 in Guatemala City. The penitentiary system would never be the same.

A Kaibil Behind Bars

The Gerardi verdict divided the country. Part of Guatemala rejoiced, while another part mourned. In the eyes of the human rights community, the army symbolizes all of Guatemala’s wrongs: a militarized political class, the butchering of innocent civilians to maintain a profoundly unjust status quo, and impunity. For those protesting the verdict, the incarceration of three soldiers -- and most of all that of a Lima's father, the retired colonel -- was a clear sign that the guerrillas and the human rights community were seeking vengeance, not only through reports like “Nunca Más” but also through the judicial system.

Within the prison, a few inmates were preparing a vengeance of their own.

“When we got to the [Centro Preventivo], no one wanted us in their area,” Lima told InSight Crime during one of our several visits with him in 2016. “You have to remember that during my work at the EMP, I had arrested several kidnappers and drug traffickers that were there [in the prison]. We were also still wearing our military uniforms when they put us in there. The only chief (prison boss) who took us [into his sector] said that from each of us -- that is my father and me -- he wanted 15,000 quetzals (about $2,000), [or] 30 thousand total”. 
That extortion payment in Guatemala’s prisons is dubbed the “talacha.” It is generally unchallenged and in many cases is condoned by prison authorities, who often get their cut from the fee. Using this system, the prison warden can raise a sort of tax from the boss of each sector. The tax amount is based on the number of inmates living in that sector, and the special privileges that the prison warden gives them. The chief then taxes the inmates in his sector to pay the warden.

The talacha can be paid in cash or in labor.

“La talacha, if you don’t have any money, means cleaning. But not the usual cleaning,” a gang member and former inmate with Lima in the Centro Preventivo of the Zona 18 told InSight Crime. “It means cleaning the floor with a mop in your hands, sometimes squatting, in your underwear or even naked. It also means cleaning the toilets, where everyone has taken a shit, with your hands. After a while you can’t even stand up because your legs have gone numb, and if you try to get up, you’ll fall on your ass. That’s hard, and you have to do it twice a day.”

The former inmate was made a “talachero” -- the equivalent of an indentured servant -- on more than one occasion, since his family could not raise sufficient funds to pay the extortion fee. The prisoners that lack money, do not get visits, or don’t have any products to sell or exchange within the prison are called “rusos” (Russians) and, as a collective, “la Rusia” (Russia).
At first, Byron Lima, his father and Villanueva also had a hard time. The Limas are a military family, which carries deep meaning in Guatemala. The former captain's grandfather was murdered by Guatemalan guerrillas in 1970. His father, Colonel Lima Estrada, was a fearsome officer and later chief of the army's most important intelligence apparatus, the G2, during the 1980s, a period in which the military was responsible for a number of forced disappearances, according to several Guatemalan and US government files unearthed by the National Security Archive.

The colonel also took part in the 1983 military coup against the then-head of state Gen. Efraín Ríos Montt. And before the end of the decade, he was linked to yet another attempted coup, this time against Guatemala's first civilian government in 30 years. Byron Lima said that this coup was partly motivated by the first lady's request for military honors at the army base under his father's command. The colonel refused since he viewed the first lady as a “communist.” But the coup failed and the colonel was never awarded the rank of general because of his involvement in the conspiracy.

“My father was involved not for political motives, but because my father did not agree with [the fact that there was] a former guerrilla who was president,” said Lima, erroneously referring to the then-president as an insurgent sympathizer.

Byron Lima grew up in this environment, one loaded with conspiracies, anti-communism and naked displays of male power. He was never a top student, but he stood out during physical training, which allowed him to swiftly climb the military ladder: first as a Kaibil, then as a paratrooper (Guatemala’s special forces) and later in various intelligence services. He was an instructor at the military school, while the famous Gen. Otto Pérez Molina was there.

Pérez Molina would later become the army's representative during the peace agreement in the 1990s, and Lima would serve under him at various junctures. When Pérez Molina was in charge of protecting the presidential family of Ramiro de León Carpio -- who took office following another attempted coup instigated by some of colonel Lima Estrada's old friends in 1993 -- Lima worked with him. And then again when Pérez Molina took over the EMP towards the end of the 1990s.

The army captain was also integrated into the so-called “crisis committee,” the anti-kidnapping and anti-bank robbery task force. The post put him in direct contact with the victims of kidnapping -- which had proliferated after the war -- including some of the most powerful elites in the country: the current or soon-to-be ministers, and titans of finance and industry.
The third soldier incarcerated in his military fatigues with Lima and his father was Sgt. Maj. Obdulio Villanueva. He was well-built and well-trained, and he had already served time in prison following a strange incident when he was working with the presidential guard. On January 14, 1996, President Álvaro Arzú was horseback riding along with his joint chiefs of staff when a milkman named Pedro Sas Rompich came driving towards them. The car, which was packed with goods, could not brake in time and hit a horse, sending a guard flying to the ground. Another guard took out his weapon and fired at the milkman, killing him. The injured rider was Capt. Byron Lima; the man who killed Rompich was Villanueva.

Villanueva received a light sentence, and witnesses claimed they saw him leaving his prison the night of the murder of Bishop Gerardi. Various prosecutors on the case also said he threatened them during the investigation.

While the three soldiers were war veterans who had gone through combat multiple times, the situation in prison was different. They were at a disadvantage. Lima said that even after they paid the talacha, the prison bosses were not happy that former EMP were in their jail. They viewed the presence of military tenants as an insult and began harassing them relentlessly. Lima said the leaders of his sector tried to attack him because he had spent too much time in the shower. The young Kaibil made use of his military training and his black belt in karate to give them a beating. During the fight, they found out that Lima was both fearless and resourceful, using a five-pound weight from the gym to keep them at bay.

While narrating his story, Lima stood up and showed off his wounds, not from the war but from staying alive in jail and later taking command of his sector. He eventually got enough power to kick the drug dealers out of his area. He had particular ire against those selling crack, a potent derivative of cocaine. Then he went after those extorting the other prisoners. Those he banished from his sector were all sent to sectors where no one wanted to live.

Meanwhile, Lima reportedly started treating the prisoners in his sector like he had treated the soldiers in the army. They had to wake up at five in the morning, exercise and then do something productive for the rest of the day such as build something, work or do exercise. Things took an even more military twist when he ordered that graffiti be replaced by the Kaibil emblem, a skull gripping a knife with his teeth. Underneath they wrote the Kaibil motto: “If I go forward, follow me. If I stop, push me. If I retreat, kill me.” He also did something unheard of in Guatemala’s penitentiary system: he stopped collecting the talacha, which was a huge relief for the rusos in his sector. While the other prison bosses were looking the other way, Lima was creating his own army.
“Those men that everyone looks at as if they were shit, that don’t have any shoes, those are the warriors [you want] when the riot breaks out,” he told InSight Crime.

While he was creating his personal army, Lima was also using his experience in intelligence gathering and counterinsurgency to study his adversaries’ weaknesses. Inmates from other sectors secretly came to him to complain, asking the former soldier to take control of their sectors and liberate them from their bosses’ rule.

“They would talk to me about other sectors and tell me stories,” said Lima. “They told me that a leader of a sector had beaten an inmate, used his blood to make a brew and then forced the others to drink it.”

A long list of horrifying anecdotes followed. There was talk of a dog that inmates were forced to copulate; of punishments, like flooded cells for those who did not pay the talacha. If there was a genius in Lima, it resided in his capacity to understand that to win a war, you need to win the masses. And to get the masses, you need to understand their pain.

The rusos “know very well that when you do good, and if you do bad, they will come back to haunt you,” Lima explained. “It’s kind of like enemy that’s called the masses, or should I say, comes in a mass”.
Lima said this was how he had invaded the other sectors and, motivated by what he called a humanitarian impulse, took control of almost the whole jail. But there was one sector that he could not take in the Centro Preventivo of the Zona 18, a wing where they kept the worst of the worst of the jail, a group with whom nobody wanted any trouble and that not even Lima could subjugate: they were the “pandilleros,” or gang members.

**The Dark History of Captain Byron Lima**

According to the anthropologist Abner Cohen, in any given prison, power resides in controlling the resources that others need the most. Lima would very quickly learn to apply this philosophy.

“Lima’s power resides in his monopolies. He controls the contraband of everything you consume in prison. It’s always been that way,” a gang member who was jailed for nearly a decade under the former captain’s rule told InSight Crime. As he sat on a bench in the Pavón prison, he whispered. Lima’s spies were all around, collecting information for their leader.

Lima always denied he had anything to do with contraband, but others -- prisoners and local investigators -- constantly contradicted his claims. They said Lima used his political and military contacts to smuggle everything into the prisons where he has been an inmate and even in some places where he was not an inmate. He started with mobile phones -- dubbed “brujos” (wizards) -- which had unlimited calls. He would sell the calls to the other inmates by the minute. It was a gold mine. Hundreds of prisoners lined up to call their families, relatives, friends, and business associates.

He soon asked his contacts to pull some strings and got the inmate in charge of the alcohol contraband transferred to another prison. Lima then took over that business as well. Rum, vodka and tequila were smuggled in water bottles, while whiskey was brought in as apple juice using fake labels. They smuggled other alcohol in paint cans any time the administration decided to touch up an area.

Lastly, he cleaned out the drug dealers, using a combination of high taxes and violence. The competition was gone. Because of his contacts outside the prison, Lima could also obtain goods at far lower prices than his competitors. And if any of his competitors resisted, Lima could make use of his Kaibil fighting skills, or use his connections that he had made while at the EMP. Using these contacts, Lima could get an inmate transferred to another prison with worse conditions, or to one where that inmate had enemies. These contacts may have been Lima’s most powerful weapon.
Outside the walls of the prison, Lima enjoyed another kind of power. His military connections started with his classmates from the military academy but eventually stretched to his colleagues in the intelligence community and the special forces. For the Guatemalan military, the military academy class holds a very high value. Lima Oliva was Class 108 of 1984. As the years went by, Class 108 members climbed the echelons of power within the military and the government, including in the penitentiary system and the police.

Indeed, even though civilian rule was restored in Guatemala in 1985, the military is still present within the state bureaucracies. To be sure, there has been a de facto militarization of various, traditionally civilian-led branches of government such as the customs office, the tax administration service and the healthcare system. Some of these military officials were civil servants, but many were part of criminal enterprises.

Byron Lima, center, at age 18, in the Kaibil training camp (source: Facebook)
These military-criminal networks eventually took on a name: the Illegal Security Corps and Clandestine Apparatus (Cuerpos Ilegales y Aparatos Clandestinos de Seguridad - CIACS). The CIACS were crime facilitators more than criminal organizations. They were linked to everything from false passports to drug trafficking to large kickback schemes.

The most potent among them were dubbed “La Cofradía” (The Brotherhood) and “La Montaña” (The Mountain). Initially, they were networks that were frequently made up of members of one or two military academy classes. So powerful were they that the United Nations-backed International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (Comisión Internacional Contra la Impunidad en Guatemala - CICIG) was established in 2007 to counter them. (The CICIG later played a central role in the resignation of President Pérez Molina and that of his Vice President Roxana Baldetti in 2015, whose private secretary Juan Carlos Monzón was also former military).

For a time, monikers like Cofradía and La Montaña helped sort through who was who within the networks. Over the years, however, the CIACS evolved into a mixture of military, political and economic elites whose alliances were based on circumstances and were short-lived. They also often disregarded the class promotion system from the military academies.

Lima Oliva enjoyed another, more subtle power that he exploited to establish control of the jails. A former Attorney General’s Office investigator called it, “the silence.” According to the investigator, and other independent researchers such as journalists Francisco Goldman and Julie López -- both of whom delved into the Gerardi case for years while writing well-regarded books on the subject -- there were many more people involved in the murder than were sentenced, including some from President Arzú’s inner circle, as well as Kaibiles and EMP. In return for his silence on the case, Lima obtained privileges and protection within the prison system. Whenever he felt that his interests were in danger, he did not hesitate to threaten to break this silence. Shortly after his arrest in 2001, for example, he gave an interview to journalist Claudia Méndez Arriaza in which he issued such a threat.

“Military officials got me involved in all this, but you listen to me, because I have information to give: don’t ask me for names, because I’m referring to high-ranking colonels,” Lima said. “I won’t give their names, because I fear them, but I point towards them and send them this message: why did you get me into this mess?”

In later years, Lima refused to clear up what he meant by those threats, and he denied that this form of blackmail had any influence on the power he amassed in prison.
“I like to speak frankly because nothing can be concealed from God, but you shouldn’t let yourself be misled by rumors,” he told InSight Crime.

‘Bring Us Lima’

Lima’s war inside the penitentiary system has been mainly against the Mara Salvatrucha (MS13) and the Barrio 18, the two most formidable gangs in the region. For years, the prison bosses marginalized the gang members, and confined them to the worst areas because they were deemed too violent, filthy and troublesome to be mixed in with the general population. In other words, they were considered a plague. Eventually, this abuse would fuel their rise.

The gangs’ built-up resentment exploded in a jail called Pavoncito, against the man in charge of the jail, Julio César Beteta, alias “Negro Beteta.” Beteta had maintained control by torturing prisoners, in particular gang members.

“The truth is that that dude had given the homies so much shit,” one gang member told InSight Crime. “He abused and humiliated them. He kept them as talacheros and would hit them with a rod”.

The gang members say that the abuses led the two gangs to temporarily set aside their bloody feud and form an alliance inside Guatemala’s prisons. It was not as hard as it sounds. In fact, these prison pacts are frequent in southern California, where many gang members are from. They call them “southern pacts” or “southern blood” (“correr el sur”). The gangs are also part of the same umbrella organization, known as the Sureños, giving them some common ground. After the accord, the gangs obtained knives, grenades and munitions, and waited.

On December 23, 2002, they launched their offensive in what would later be termed a “kill or be killed” attack. Beteta was neither Kaibil nor military, but he had the support of his uncle, the former Sgt. Maj. Noel Beteta. The latter had been one of the first soldiers to be sentenced for crimes against civilians, specifically for the murder of the anthropologist Myrna Mack, who had been working in the conflict-ridden Quiché department. And Noel Beteta’s resources and training, which had enabled him to protect his nephew, were in many ways similar to that of Byron Lima’s.

But Noel Beteta was not incarcerated in the Pavoncito prison, and his power did not reach far enough to protect his nephew from the horde of gang members bent on invading sector after sector until they collected payment in blood from Julio César Beteta for the numerous talachas and abuses he had committed. Beteta’s army of rusos may have outnumbered the gang members, but they were unprepared and unarmed for the most part, whereas the gangs were fueled by weapons and hatred.
In a matter of hours, they had taken over the prison and cornered Beteta in a small sector. He was well-armed, and at first, they could not dislodge him. So they pierced a hole in the roof, poured flammable liquid through the hole and set the place on fire. Julio Beteta was forced to come out, and half an hour later, the gang members were posing for pictures holding his decapitated head.

At one point, a young gang member grabbed a puppet that he had found during the fighting that resembled a soldier and ripped the head off with his teeth. He then placed the decapitated figure next to Beteta’s head and screamed: “We want Lima! We want Lima! These heads are proof of our power. We are sureños. We want Lima! Bring us Lima!”

A Kaibil’s Survival

Luis Lima was 19 when they put his father, Col. Byron Lima Estrada, and his brother, Capt. Byron Lima Oliva, in jail. He was readying himself to leave for Belgium to study, but he quickly realized that the event had changed his path forever. From that point forward, he dedicated his life to the legal fight to get his family out of prison, and to the survival of his family while they were still behind bars.

While studying political science in a Guatemala City university, Luis helped smuggle the first mobile phones into the Centro Preventivo, initially to communicate with his incarcerated kin and later to help establish the lucrative phone business. He also worked on the transfer of rival prisoners so his brother could take over the alcohol contraband. But his most important task was the creation of a legal and judicial network to protect his father and brother.

“We had to learn how to lobby the right judges, the prosecutors and how to handle information to put all the pieces in place. It’s like chess,” the 35-year old political scientist explained. “These became mixed networks because, first you meet a criminal, then you meet lawyers, then prosecutors, after that politicians. You start meeting the whole world”.

Like his brother, Luis denied Lima’s silence was at the heart of his power. Instead, he argued that Lima was protected because from inside the prison, he collected valuable information about kidnappings, car thefts and arms trafficking, which helped authorities resolve other cases. “In the end, you could say that we were undercover because it wasn’t really our world. I mean, we ended up there because the devil willed it, or God, or whoever. And we had to adapt”.
Byron Lima, for instance, once told military intelligence that a group of bank robbers were planning on escaping from jail. Lima knew them and knew exactly what area they would use to escape. He knew where they were keeping their weapons -- including one that could shoot down a police helicopter -- and on what day they would make their move. To prove to the authorities the utter trust the bank robbers had in Lima, Lima sold them several bulletproof vests. The night before their escape, authorities grabbed them and transferred them to another prison, from which they would eventually escape anyway. This is how, according to Lima’s family, Byron Lima maintained his influence, his network and his control over the system.

“So you accumulate all this. Because at some point it will be useful to exchange for favors, for information. Here, as they say, the one who holds the information holds the power. Information is power,” Luis Lima explained.

In early 2003, that information would save Byron Lima’s life. The captain had seen how the gang members had taken control of Pavoncito and how they had challenged him directly, so he, his father and Villanueva prepared for what they knew was coming. Like good soldiers they knew when to fight and when to retreat. This was not the time to confront an alliance of angry gang members who were furious with the incarcerated military elite.
The three began their preparation by getting Colonel Lima Estrada to a hospital under the pretext that he was ill. They then created escape hatches from their sectors for both Lima and Villanueva should the gangs attack.

The gangs coordinated throughout the jails and had a good intelligence system. But on the day of the attack, February 12, Lima was in the administration offices. His military companion, however, did not have the same luck. As the story goes, Villanueva tried to wedge his way through a hole in the wall, but he was heavyset, got stuck and was cut to pieces by the gangs’ machetes.

“Contacts are to protect yourself … to shield yourself,” Luis Lima told InSight Crime. “It’s about survival. It is survival”.

The Kaibil Empire

In 2011, Lima’s former EMP boss and the ex-Gen. Otto Pérez Molina was elected president of Guatemala. Shortly after the election, Lima Oliva sent an email to another former military officer, retired Lt. Col. Mauricio López Bonilla. López Bonilla had headed up Pérez Molina’s campaign and his Patriot Party (Partido Patriota - PP). As a reward to López Bonilla for his work on the campaign, the new president named him as the interior minister. The post gave López Bonilla the power to determine who administered the prison system, which is what led to Lima’s email.

By the time Lima sent this email to the newly named interior minister, Lima was already the most powerful prisoner in the system. After the murder of Villanueva in February 2003, he had been transferred to a prison known as Boquerón, but not before exacting a little vengeance of his own against the gangs by poisoning their food in the Centro Preventivo. None of them died, but more than a hundred gang members got seriously ill.

Lima was later moved to Pavoncito, Beteta’s former fiefdom, where there were no gangs, since they were moved to Escuintla. In Pavoncito, Lima was free to set the rules and establish a monopoly on contraband. He also got his full revenge on the gangs. In 2008, authorities transferred four high-profile MS13 leaders to Pavoncito, two of which were involved in the murder of Villanueva. The gang members were killed, decapitated and their heads were put on display -- just like Beteta’s had been in that same prison, as Villanueva’s had in the Centro Preventivo, and as Lima’s almost was.

The murders allowed Lima to close the loop in his fight with the gangs, imposing his will over them for good. Numerous sources -- some of them government investigators, others former and current prisoners -- told InSight Crime that they believe the
authorities had sent the gang members there to die, as a kind of blood offering to Lima for the 2003 attack against him.

With Pérez Molina as president, Lima’s military colleagues also took over the core of the government. Estuardo Galdámez (Class 108) became a congressman. Juan de Dios Rodríguez (Class 108) became the head of the most important state-owned company in the country, the Guatemalan Social Security Institute (Instituto Guatemalteco de Seguridad Social -- IGSS). And Luis Lima was appointed as the intermediary between the executive branch and Congress, after having managed the PP’s campaign in the Quiché department.

Byron Lima also took part in the campaign. Inside Pavoncito, he established a clothing cooperative where they made orange T-shirts, baseball hats, and other paraphernalia for the PP. This was one of Lima’s many businesses inside jail. More recently, he had a company that built workout machines, which he sold to local governments, and another that made clocks and paintings bearing Kaibil and paratrooper insignias. Still, Lima insisted that he knew how to separate business from ideology. In 2011, his cooperative made paraphernalia for Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega’s presidential re-election campaign, which the Sandinista leader won.

When Pérez Molina won the presidency in 2011, Lima began setting the table for another type of business. According to CICIG investigators, the email sent by Byron Lima to the Interior Minister López Bonilla contained names of some of his “candidates”
for high ranking offices: Eddy Fisher Arbizú and Édgar Hernández from Class 108; Col. Luis Alberto González as well as his father-in-law, Samuel Reyes Samayoa. López Bonilla chose González to be the director, Fisher as an assistant director, Hernández as the head of transfers and Reyes Samayoa as the administrative technical advisor.

SEE ALSO: Guatemala’s Mafia State and the Case of Mauricio López Bonilla

With his network in place, Lima’s empire became more evident. According to a CICIG investigation, the former army captain used his colleagues to arrange prisoner transfers (see CICIG organizational chart below). The price ranged from $7,000 to $20,000, depending on the prisoner’s resources. Investigators from Guatemala and the United States, as well as three US attorneys defending drug traffickers, said that Lima also extorted criminals, including some of the most prominent drug traffickers who were awaiting extradition to the United States. Those who refused to pay were tortured or humiliated. In one case, Lima’s men allegedly beat a trafficker named Walter Montejo, before dumping a sack of feces on his head. Montejo allegedly paid Lima $800,000.

Lima’s transgressions became too much, even for the Pérez Molina administration, when he began regularly leaving the prison to visit his family or his friends. According to investigators, it wasn’t unusual for Lima to leave the prison and go to a nightclub on a weekend. They said he traveled in a two-car convoy of bulletproof vehicles owned by the interior ministry, accompanied by prison guards.
In 2013, police intercepted Lima’s convoy as he returned from one of his many forays into Guatemala City and accused him of leaving the jail without proper authorization. The director of Pavoncito, as well as numerous guards, were with him when he was stopped. Lima was furious, though, especially with Interior Minister López Bonilla whom he called “a traitor to the nation”.

The accusations against Lima would lead nowhere, but his arrest was authorities’ first effort to slow him down, and it started the process whereby the CICIG could collect information on his scheme to monetize prison transfers. The CICIG later formally accused Lima and upended his network of intimate cohorts inside the prison administration. CICIG’s charges were much more serious than the earlier ones about unauthorized visits to Guatemala City: they increased the likelihood Lima would remain in prison and jeopardized his political aspirations.

‘Byron Lima for President’

It was 9 a.m. on April 5, 2016, and inside Guatemala City’s Pavón prison, the corpse of Marcelo Noj Ajau hung from a nylon cord in a bathroom. His body hovered about a foot from the ground and had turned deep purple. One of his hands was still in his pocket.

The sector boss, nicknamed “El Oso” (The Bear), told Lima that Noj Ajau had gotten up in the middle of the night and had hung himself. Lima, visibly irritated, did not believe El Oso’s account.

“Each sector leader is responsible for what occurs or what is allowed to happen in his sector,” the former army captain shouted.

It was a cold Tuesday morning, and the men’s breath was visible in the heavy mountain air. No one knew what Lima might say or do next. Dozens of prisoners quietly mingled in the prison courtyard, burying their faces in their jackets. Others stayed out of sight, remaining in their sectors until the storm had passed.

“This body doesn’t look like someone who hung himself,” Lima said confidently. “I’ve seen many in my life, and the tongue sticks out. This guy’s tongue isn’t sticking out, not at all. He’s been beaten. And on top of that, I saw another man with a black eye in this very sector. Bring him to me!”

A group of men hurried to find the inmate. A few minutes later, a young man who could barely walk was brought to Lima. His face was swollen, and he had blood stains around his mouth.
Lima started to ask him questions, but the inmate hesitated: “I'm not going to get in trouble for snitching?”

“Nothing will happen to you,” Lima reassured him.

“Are you sure?”

The inmate’s tone had obviously been forged by years of living in a world where silence meant survival. Lima did not answer him. He simply stared straight into the inmate’s eyes, and the bruised man started talking.

He told Lima that the sector chiefs had beaten him all morning and forced him to give them 300 quetzals ($40).

“Bring me those in charge,” Lima ordered.

An overweight white man appeared almost immediately, carrying the money. Lima told him to return it to the beaten inmate.

“Here it is”, the overweight man said. “Here is exactly what I took from him that I’m handing back. We did it because he broke the rules and was extorting one of our family members by phone”.

“That’s not the way we do things”, Lima replied.

Lima had softened his tone, but the boss had spoken. The issue was settled. Lima then dismissed El Oso as leader of the sector and replaced him with an inmate they called “Tortillero”. For Lima, the motives for Marcelo Noj Ajau’s murder were clear, and the case was closed.

Lima settled dozens of cases like this during his eight months in Pavón. These were situations the prison administration did not want to handle, so they relied on Lima. And Lima understood that by filling this vacuum, he gained power.

Shortly after resolving the leadership issue, Lima gave InSight Crime a tour of the prison. The commotion surrounding the murder of Ajau had already dissipated.

Lima stopped in front of a passing prisoner and with a strong voice told him to come closer.

“You, come here. Tell my friend here who arrested you”.

The prisoner looked into Lima’s eyes and answered meekly: “You, you arrested me captain”.

Lima said the prisoner had kidnapped his cousin when he was a member of the “crisis committee.” During the rescue, Lima shot the man. They were now in the same prison, but Lima wanted to show his visitors that he was not a tyrant like Beteta had been.

“Did I ever hurt you?” the former army captain asked.

“Yes. You, you shot me in the back, captain,” the inmate answered, seemingly confused by the question.

“No, no, I mean since then”.

The man shook his head. We continued with the tour.

As we walked, we passed prisoners making hammocks, toys and hats along the 6 Avenida. The inmates who passed us stopped and saluted Lima, “Good morning, captain”.

Soon we entered what is called Genesis, a school where inmates get classes in English, German, graphic design, geography and other subjects. Lima taught Portuguese, which he spoke fluently. Toward the rear of the prison, prisoners were raising pigs, ducks and chickens. As we waded through this mass of men, Lima called out to one and ordered him to tell us what happened to him the month before.

“I had an appendicitis”, he told us. “The infirmary wouldn’t let me in, but the captain busted the door down with an axe”.

Later, an elderly man approached us. His face was wrinkled and arthritis had curled his fingers. He told us that his wife was also an inmate, and she, along with other elderly female inmates, had grown tired of asking for help from the prison authorities without getting any response, so they had turned to Lima.

So did younger women and even the director of the female prison who, right in front of us, thanked Lima for sending food, blankets and other things to the female inmates. She also thanked him for the chicken sandwiches the former captain had sent the previous Christmas.

The sense we got that Lima was campaigning was not a coincidence: the former army officer’s ambitions extended well beyond the prison’s walls. By early 2016, Lima and his
brother Luis were creating the National Refoundation Party (Partido de Refundación Nacional). Its slogan, according to Luis Lima: “Take back the Constitution.” Byron Lima was also working on a different project called “Love for Guatemala” (“Amor por Guatemala,” or AGUA), which Luis emphasized would be inclusive.

“We have former guerrilla fighters. We have war veterans. We have environmentalists. We have magistrates. We have union members. We have indigenous people. We have farmers. We have groups of women. We even have homosexuals,” Luis Lima, the self-proclaimed progressive member of the Lima family, explained.

Byron Lima did not talk openly about these political projects, but he was not shy when it came to discussing his own ambitions. His Facebook page was entitled “Byron Lima for President,” and it showed pictures of those who visited him in jail, including congressmen, diplomats, and the now-President Jimmy Morales who was then a comedian and TV personality. The next step, Lima insisted, was his own bid for the presidency.

“I’m going to be president, don’t you ever doubt it,” Lima told InSight Crime without hesitation. “I’m going to be president of all Guatemalans, not just the civil society. And I’m not going to accept that any -- forgive me -- son of a bitch talks shit about Guatemala, because I will put him in jail … I’ve been a prisoner. So you think I’m gonna be afraid of gang-bangers? I’m not gonna be afraid of them. You think I’m gonna be afraid of those murderers who are killing the bus [drivers]? I’m not afraid of them. You think I’m afraid of shooting down an airplane carrying drugs? I’m not afraid of that.”

Towards the end of the tour, we came upon a small shack made of wood. Inside was a middle-aged black man with piles of papers, microphones and headphones around him. This was “Pavón’s Voice,” a community radio station that broadcasts music, religious messages and announcements via the prison’s loudspeakers. The Voice also
issues a series of rules that Lima had decreed: no spitting or littering, no gangs, and no threatening other prisoners. Lima told InSight Crime that he had the DJs read the rules every hour, so they would be permanently inscribed in the inmates’ minds.

**Death of a Kaibil**

While Lima might not have feared the gang members, there were others who gave him pause, including a drug trafficker named Marvin Montiel Marín, alias “El Taquero.” Marín had been jailed for the murder of 16 bus passengers coming from Nicaragua in 2008, whom he had burned alive when he did not find a cocaine shipment he thought was in the bus.

El Taquero did not care if Lima resolved disputes between prisoners or sent chicken sandwiches to the female inmates on Christmas. But he did care that the former army captain was trying to stop his crack dealing within the jail. Crack is not just a lucrative business, it is a destructive one because of the theft and violence it engenders.

“The worst of the cancers, that’s called the rock,” Lima told InSight Crime. “It’s called crack. That is the worst thing there can be within a prison.”

However, Lima could never get rid of this business easily. In the case of the Pavón, for instance, he said he had only managed to take charge of half of the jail’s 22 sectors because of crack, and that he was waiting to transfer the roughly 20 or 30 dealers like Marín who still operated to other jails.

“They will go down or they will go free, or they will be transferred,” he said, speaking of the offending drug peddlers. “But what I am trying to do is make sure that no one else picks up where they left off.”

A few days after Lima’s death, InSight Crime obtained a report from the Office of Civilian Intelligence (Dirección General de la Inteligencia Civil - DIGICI). The report said that a convicted drug trafficker named Eduardo Francisco Villatoro Cano, alias “Guayo Cano,” had paid Marín a million quetzals ($132,000) to kill Lima. The alleged motive, according to the report, was Lima’s theft of more than “2,000 packages of cocaine” from Guayo Cano, who was incarcerated in another prison. The report also cited Lima’s efforts to prohibit the sale of crack.

“The information obtained suggests that the confrontation could have originated from Byron Lima’s alleged prohibition with regards to the sale of drugs within the penitentiary, which directly affected the businesses run by inmate Marvin Montiel Marín, alias ‘El Taquero,’ [who was] responsible for the sale of narcotics within the prison,” read the DIGICI memorandum.
But something did not fit. Officials from the interior ministry confirmed the authenticity of the document, but it was too simplistic, and there were parts that were simply incorrect. For example, the DIGICI described Lima as a criminal involved in theft and resale of drugs, something neither US antinarcotics agents or any Guatemalan investigators have said about Lima. And a high-ranking police officer told InSight Crime that Marín had isolated himself during the attack, and suggested that El Taquero was more of a scapegoat than the actual intellectual author of Lima’s assassination.

What’s more, Lima’s enemies were not limited to Pavón. Following his brother’s murder, Luis Lima made a short video in which he said it was “a crime of the state.” Specifically, he pointed towards people inside the current government whom he said were fearful Lima might revive the Valle del Sol theory of the Gerardi murder. Others thought Lima was killed for the opposite reason, namely that he could have incriminated some of his former EMP bosses and political figures, that his famous “silence” would end and that he could bring down whatever was left of the various CIACS and their political allies.

If Lima broke his “silence,” it could have impacted others as well. Lima’s former allies Otto Pérez Molina and Mauricio López Bonilla, as well as several graduates of Class 108, were also in jail facing corruption, money laundering and other charges. López Bonilla and Lima’s fight was particularly public and playing out via the media and social networks. Lima’s closely held secrets could have also extended to cases against these former officials. And the former captain had insinuated more than once that he was sick of the cynicism and the lack of respect former soldiers showed to the institution he most revered: the military. The fact that Pérez Molina never wore his military uniform while he held office, for example, never ceased to irritate Lima.

However, the Byron Lima case was about more than murder. It touched on the ongoing battle for Guatemala’s soul. Like Lima, the country’s efforts to project an image of stability quickly dissolved into corruption and crime. Lima’s short-lived empire embodied this dichotomy as well; the order, control, security and progress he sought to create inside the jails clashed with the chaos he himself engendered and his own efforts to enrich himself at the expense of others.
“In every Guatemalan jail, there is a Byron Lima,” Luis Lima told InSight Crime shortly before his brother’s death. “But there are good Byron Limas and bad Byron Limas. There’s the Byron Lima that helps with the prison’s healthcare system, with the prison’s education system, with the prison’s work programs. And there’s the bad Byron Lima who can extort, who can beat people up, who promotes vice.”

Depending on who you ask, Lima was a protector or an aggressor, an honorable soldier or an extortionist, a military leader or a smuggler, a future president or a fearsome “king” of the prisons. At the end of day, Lima’s murderers were neither the drug dealers, nor his former companions. What killed Byron Lima was the eternal paradox called Guatemala.

*Reporting and writing by Juan José Martínez d’Aubuisson and Steven Dudley. The original version of this story was written in Spanish. It was translated by Tristan Clavel and edited by Mike LaSusa. Top photo of Byron Lima by Moises Castillo, Associated Press.

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