

Excerpt:
Only The Dead (Know the End of War)

He had already made his final wishes known to Portilla: to be shot in the heart not in the face; to be given a Christian burial; and to have all his belongings and wealth sent to his family in Mexico.

Portilla had earlier arranged for Captain de la Garza to carry out the execution. However, when the captain started to give the orders to the firing squad, the general stopped him in mid-word. Somehow, he felt that his brother and friend deserved to have his time on this earth taken not by a relative stranger but rather by family. And to delegate that hated duty was cowardly.

So, he began. “¡Listos!” (Ready!) came out of him strongly, as he tried to live up to his newly bequeathed generalship. He tried to be as direct with the proximate order, but his voice broke in the middle of ¡Apun-ten!” (Aim!) the last syllable barely heard, so that the squad hesitated just a heart-rending second in carrying it out.

Portilla could not keep the tears from welling in his eyes as he stared at the ground before him and tried to give the final order. Those fraternal feelings now banished whatever pride he might have felt at now being in command. The delay was so long that the firing squad looked to their captain and glanced at each other wondering what to do.

Even when the general finally succeeded in mouthing the final order, his voice broke and the sound that came out of him was so tentative as to be inaudible. “Fue...” (Fi...). He tried again, but again the word would just not come above a hoarse whisper. It sorely grieved him that his brother was held in such agonizing suspense, but General Portilla was paralyzed.

José Necahuatl de Arreola, understood, however, and with a final gesture of love and compassion, issued the order himself, still unsure if the act was brave or cowardly: “¡Fuego!” And the deed was consummated.