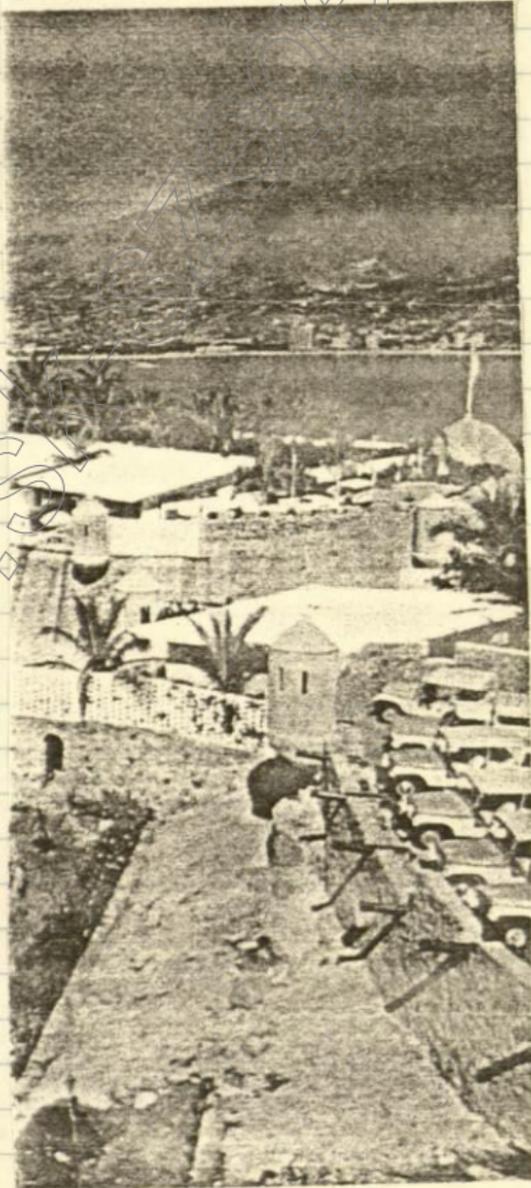


1972

Brandstetter and Las Brisas

The man. The place.

BY JOHN MCPHEE



"Is this not great Babylon that I have built?" asked King Nebuchadnezzar. Colonel Frank Brandstetter (above) has created his version of the hanging gardens—Las Brisas—in Mexico not Mesopotamia. A wonder of the resort world, the complex sprawls across 700 mountainous acres overlooking Acapulco Bay. The hotel itself is composed of a reconstructed 17th-century fort and, below it, a cascade of casitas, each with private or shared pool.

At Las Brisas, Acapulco, there is no tipping. This is not a suggestion. It is house law. Today, a woman was nearly killed by the encroaching ocean. Even the bay was in savage chop, and great anticlinal swells were lifting mountains of water to crash on the peripheral rocks. The woman sat on a seawall, watching the natural spectacle. Behind her was the hotel's saltwater swimming club—a palmy milieu of sun and rum, inches away from the thunder. All at once, an immense arm of water reached high, smashed down, washed the woman from the wall and into the cataracting sea. Unhesitatingly, five employees of the hotel, including three bartenders, jumped in after her. They saved her. Somehow, all six came out alive. Thirty minutes later, a jeep pulled up at the hotel's administration building. A hotel officer stepped out. He was dressed—as all male employees are dressed—in pure white. He went in to report the incident to the managing director. "Colonel?" he said, tapping lightly at the frame of an open door. The managing director—Colonel Frank M. Brandstetter, U.S.A. (Ret.)—looked up from his desk. He was a muscular and heavyset man, bald, with a fringe of short hair and a deep tan. He was chewing an unlighted cigar. He had ceramic eyes, Wedgwood blue eyes, and a long nose and the sidewise glance of the opossum. His accent was strongly Hungarian, and he seemed to like to talk in one-word sentences—one selected word, everything else implied. He too was dressed all in white—white shoes, white slacks, short-sleeved white shirt. His nails were covered with clear polish, his body with piquant cologne. He listened to the story of the heroism of his staff.

The officer finished it, saying, "And now, unfortunately, the woman is so grateful that she would like to give the men who saved her—she insists on giving them—each a hundred dollars, sir."

"Absolutely not," said Brandstetter. "Policy. Policy. Policy. Clear? Absolutely not."

Las Brisas has an unconventional superstructure. Where most hotels have steel I-beam skeletons holding them up, this one has a mountain, rising 1,500 feet from sea to summit.

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at an angle that approaches sheer. I have been here a week now—sent to study Brandstetter. Brandstetter thinks I am a journalist. I think he is a working spy who uses this hotel as a cover. If so, it is some cover. I doubt that there is another hotel like this in the world. Its guests live in individual buildings, little houses, all over the mountainside. There are, naturally, no elevators. The mountain is tiered with Amalfi drives. Dozens and dozens of jeeps—pink and white, candy-striped jeeps—swarm the mountain. Room service comes up in jeeps.

Although the hotel has a dining pavilion, fully half of all meals prepared are delivered by room service, and no wonder, for each little house, each *casita*, each open terrace, is as private as a letter in a sealed envelope and—nonetheless—has a panoramic view. The mountain faces west across the 12-mile curve of Acapulco Bay and beyond to the open ocean and its florid sunsets; at night the mountain surveys the 20,000 lights of the city, which blink like stars in refraction over the water. Acapulco is a crescent of mountains around a crescent of sea, and Las Brisas commands one extremity of the crescent. Its altitude has become more than an aesthetic asset. Acapulco was a village not long ago but is now a choked city, sticky blue with petroleum fumes and tropical heat. A thousand feet up, the air comes in clean and cool over the Pacific, light blanket at night.



Each room has a refrigerator, always full of soft drinks, juices, mineral water, fresh melons, oranges, grapes, bananas, papaya and many different kinds of Mexican beer. Shelves above are stocked with whiskies, rums, gins, tequila, vodka, vermouths and various liqueurs. Hot rolls and hot coffee are left in a basket outside the door in the morning. Hibiscus, oleander and cement walls are the agents of privacy, and there is enough night-blooming jasmine to make any body bloom in the night. All this beggars Sybaris. It was Brandstetter's dream and the sublimation of his collected experience. Most remarkable, technically, are the pools—tiers and tiers and tiers of swimming pools, all over the mountain. Four out of five *casitas* have private pools. The rest share one with the place next door. The hotel has 200 swimming pools. Hibiscus blossoms float in them and are changed each day.

This is where the American astronauts come with their families after they have been to the moon. Brandstetter calls them "the boys." In Houston they debrief. At Las Brisas—as one of them has put it—they "recalibrate the system." They bring him souvenirs. He has a piece of the heat shield of *Gemini 9*, a piece of the *Eagle*, packets of astronaut food. Coffee ice cream cubes. A vacuum-effect electric razor that went to the moon, sucking in and retaining the face hairs of the boys. Brandstetter gave six gold crosses to Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin, who took them to the moon and returned with five. Brandstetter has a photograph of Acapulco Bay made by *Apollo 7* on its first orbit. The flight was supposed to cross Panama, but to get the picture the astronauts deviated

half a degree. After snapping the photograph, they corrected the orbit and were back on course, moments later, over Africa. To the boys, Brandstetter is "Brandy." The crew of *Apollo 15* formally officially, gave the name "Brandy" to a crater off the Hadley Rille. In Brandy's basement is a collection of plaster blocks that contain the handprints of astronauts—Armstrong's, McDivitt's, Lovell's, Aldrin's, Conrad's, Schirra's, others'. Armstrong and Aldrin left a small pink silk Las Brisas flag on the edge of the Sea of Tranquility. "The boys are my kind of people," Brandstetter says, chewing on his cigar. "We talk the same language."

At the end of the Second World War, Lieutenant General Matthew B. Ridgway wrote a memorandum to Washington describing Brandstetter. It said, in part: "He is superior in physical activity and endurance, initiative, cooperation, force, judgment and common sense, intelligence and mental alertness, leadership, and the ability to get results; is cool and fearless in battle; is a qualified parachutist; speaks fluent German, Hungarian, and Slavic, and fair French, is intensely and completely loyal to his superiors and the United States; and is an exceedingly high-principled character of breeding and with great charm of manner. In my most recent efficiency report, I gave him the highest numerical rating I recall ever having given an officer." Brandstetter was Ridgway's intelligence officer and aide-de-camp—in the Holland invasion, in the Ardennes, in the airborne assault on the Rhine, in the Ruhr pocket.

Ridgway had under him the 17th, the 82nd and the 101st airborne divisions. When he wanted someone to go behind enemy lines and pick up information, Ridgway sent Brandstetter. Brandstetter was a trained interrogator. In 1942, he had become the first jumping interrogator the army had ever had. In 1944, after 12 German P.O.W.'s escaped from a prison west of London, Brandstetter was detached there to investigate. There was something distinctly odd. All 12 prisoners, after 48 hours, had stolen back into the prison. They told Brandstetter that they had seen the hopelessness of their situation and so had returned. The Wedgwood eyes, the pinpoint pupils, picked up something, so he asked again. "Why did you go? Where did you go? Why did you stay together? Why did all 12 of you decide to return?"

Gradually, Brandstetter and a colleague dismantled the responses of the prisoners, concentrated on the weakest and most nervous one and got through to the unbelievable truth. On Christmas Eve 1944, 75,000 German prisoners were simultaneously going to break out of three English camps and, using arms from prison arsenals, block roads and seize all vehicles at two regional hospitals. They were then going to capture airplanes at local airfields and 2,000 Sherman tanks from the nearby bivouac of the British 11th Armored Division. They were then heading for London in an all-out attack. All this was planned as a spectacular diversion to coincide with the beginnings of Field Marshal von Rundstedt's Ardennes counter-offensive.

Now, toward 30 years later, on his pyramidal mountainside, Brandstetter contemplates his personal pink jeep. "Maybe I got a little soft spot for the old war horse," he says. "They were designed to climb mountains. Jolts. Trails. They are the greatest little animal, if properly taken care of. We have first, second, third, fourth and fifth echelon maintenance here, just like in the army. Tropics. Tropics. Tropics. Corrosion. Corrosion."

He built the hotel himself, with a Mexican backer, Carlos Trouyet, who is now dead. Brandstetter put in his own money, too. He is independent of chains.

"Without military training, I could never have done this. I was raised in

it. I was raised in the Austro-Hungarian army. Engineering. Organization. Logistics. The table of organization here is basically the same as it is in the service. And why does it work? *Esprit de corps.*

"When we started here, many years ago, the staff looked down at my feet. They could not look into my eyes. They were beaten-down people. The idea came to me: they are not servants. There can be no servants in an army. No beggars. I negotiated a union contract that said employees would be dismissed if they accepted tips. Instead, we add a service charge to all bills, and the employees distribute that, by voted shares, among themselves. I created pride. Dignity for human beings. Tipping is licensed begging. It is wrong in today's world.

"We hire green people. I don't want any old dogs. We teach them, in a classroom, body hygiene, mental hygiene and character. Then we start teaching English and hotel management. Our job is to educate, educate, educate. I tell them, 'You may be in civilian uniform, but you are in service to your country. You bring in tourism money, which in turn builds roads and hospitals.' I have no understanding of shirkers. If the country needs serving, I don't care what country it is, you serve it.



"The jet set is not my cup of tea. I hate the jet set. Crazy life. I hate staying up until 5 A.M. With the jet set here, I would lose my bishops. I would lose my bankers. It is necessary to preserve the investment. I am a Republican. I am square and will remain a square. I live today. Possibly tomorrow. Yesterday: gone."

In order to establish construction sites on the mountainside, Brandstetter built buttressed granite walls and earth-filled behind them. The walls, belting the mountain, one above another, are 12 to 16 feet thick at the base. They are 40, 50, 60 feet high. Set in them, in places, are grilled windows, dungeon keeps. He built, in short, a fortress. Pinnacled the sky, floodlit at night, Las Brisas is Dunsinane on top of the Tower of London on top of Morro Castle on top of the walled city of Avila—a cake, martial. Torches blaze at night from its parapets. Con-

crete cannon jut from its crenellated battlements, firing, on occasion, pink smoke. From its towers, pennons fly.

"Good merchandising," Brandstetter explains. "And more. The fortress was built with the idea of diplomatic visits, when you have to have security. Presidents have been here. Tito was here. The mountain is granite. The walls were built by hand. We had 2,000 workers here. I mean, they were like bees. God Almighty. They carried boulders on their shoulders, sometimes protected by a bit of newspaper, sometimes not. You can't improve on their methods. They are Aztecs. It is in their blood."

When the walls were complete and earth behind them was filled in and level, Brandstetter went around with a can of crushed chalk and, pouring it out in lines, literally sketched *in situ* his pools, houses and gardens. Aztecs completed the details.

Until 3 A.M. every night Brandstetter cruised around in his jeep, playing a spotlight over his developing works. At the foot of the mountain, he required a beach where there was none. So he blasted the bottom of the mountain into the sea and arranged the rubble into a surprisingly beautiful complex of sea walls and ocean pools. Near the top of the mountain he laid out lots for the building of full-scale houses, a process that is still going on. They are private homes, *residencias*, with hotel services and views that would stagger a Sherpa. Brandstetter sells land up there for \$160,000 an acre. The more modest of the *residencias* have cost as little as \$200,000 more to build. One is at present under construction that will come in for a million dollars. At the apex of the mountain are, reading upward, Brandstetter's house, the house of his late backer and an A-frame interdenominational chapel. The chapel is on the summit, and beside it, visible to every eye in all Acapulco, stands an immense white cross, made of steel and Gunitite. The cross is 150 feet high, floodlit at night, with airplane warning lights blinking.

"The cross implies that there's something more than jet-setting and Acapulco gold in life. It implies normal living. Our whole world is going crazy. It is eight meters higher than the thing in Rio."

Brandstetter, who is married but has no children, is the last in a continuous line of Hungarian militarists that reaches back at least as far as the 12th century. On his right pinky, he wears a family ring, the heraldry of which includes an arrow, a crescent and two stars, symbolic of participation in the Second Crusade. He grew up essentially an orphan. His father had quit the army and emigrated to Wisconsin. Brandstetter was quite young when he lost track of his mother forever. He lived mainly in military schools, including the Hungarian Royal Military

Academy in Kőszeg. In 1928, he made a brief visit to his father, went back east alone to New York and stayed on in the United States. He was 16 years old. With 10 cents in his pocket one morning, he had to make a choice between a Nedick's 10-cent breakfast or a round trip on the nickel subway, looking for work. He took the subway. He washed dishes. He spent a decade working his way through a gallimaufry of clubs and hotels—in New York, New London, Briarcliff Manor, Brooklyn, Miami, Plattsburgh. When war came, he eagerly volunteered.

He would have stayed in the army forever, but in the late 1940s his wife became seriously ill, and he returned to the hotel business so he could look after her more closely. It happened that at the time of the Cuban revolution he was manager of the Havana Hilton. Mobs thronged the streets, destroying hotels, destroying casinos. Inevitably, they invaded the Hilton. Brandstetter stood before them, one against hundreds, and gave no ground. Tommy guns were pressed into his belly. He said in Spanish, "I suppose you think Conrad Hilton owns this hotel? This hotel belongs to you—to the people of Cuba. Conrad Hilton does not own this hotel. Conrad Hilton does not own any hotel. He leases them everywhere. He leases this one from the pension fund of the Cuban Syndicate of Hotel Workers. Why destroy it? Why? Why destroy it? This hotel belongs to Cuban people. It belongs to you." The tommy guns dropped. The mob dissolved. Brandstetter organized the evacuation of Americans from Cuba, seeing 508 to safety. He himself left 10 days later. Hilton sent him to Acapulco, to scout

the scene for an Acapulco Hilton, and while Brandstetter was building the Hilton he found his mountain. With his wife invalided and no children to look after, he poured his energy into the construction of his dream, his walled citadel, his impregnable pleasure dome.

P. L. Thyraud de Vosjoli, the French agent known as Lamia, dedicated his autobiography to his colleague Frank Brandstetter.

"Why?"

"Because I . . . but you cannot say that. You can say nothing."

"Why?"

"Because I want to live. Once you're in this game, you're never out."

Brandstetter keeps the book in his bedroom, near photographs of the three men who have most influenced his life: Trouyet, Ridgway and the Bishop of Nevada. Bookcases line the walls. *A Man Called Lucy*, *The Secret Surrender*, *The Secret War*, *Strangers on a Bridge*.

"Once you are in this game you are never out. That is all I will say. Intelligence work is hard work, that's all it is. Reading. Reading. Research. Research. So you find a diamond. If you find two or three diamonds in a lifetime, you are lucky."

Brandstetter's house, spectacularly beautiful, is set in the fortress walls. Its driveway was cut through the stone and is shut off by 10-foot doors of russet *parote*. They are guarded by a sentinel in white. A sign warns of dogs. Inside, a tall, deadbolted wrought iron gate separates the driveway from the house. The house is quiet. Mrs. Brandstetter sleeps by day.



Brandstetter wakes each morning at six and begins his work. He reads every night into the small hours. *The Weekly Review, The Gallagher President's Report, The F.B.I. Law Enforcement Bulletin, Travel Management Daily, Of Spies and Stratagems, The Defector, Three Thousand Years of Espionage.* He sees me reading the titles.

"Intelligence is a funny word," he says. "What it is is creating goodwill between countries. This I will make perfectly clear. I am not working for the C.I.A."

"If you were working for the C.I.A., you would never tell me."

Wedgwood eyes. Pinpoints. "That," he says, "is the other side of the coin." ■

Apollo 11 Team Said to Leave Cross on Moon

United Press International

The first astronauts on the moon left a small gold cross there for the proprietor of an Acapulco hotel, *Travel & Leisure* magazine reported yesterday.

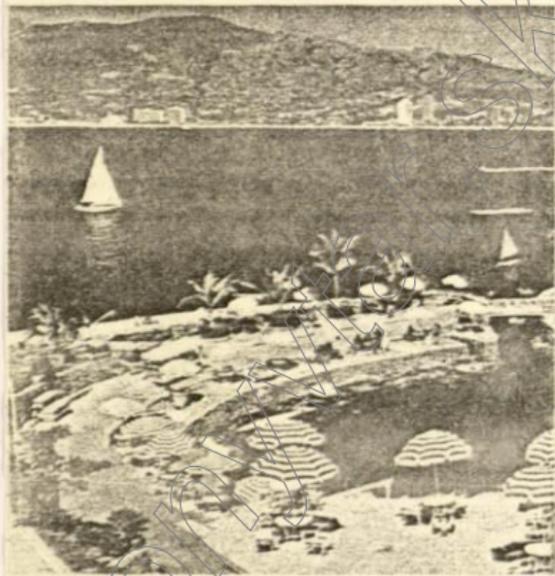
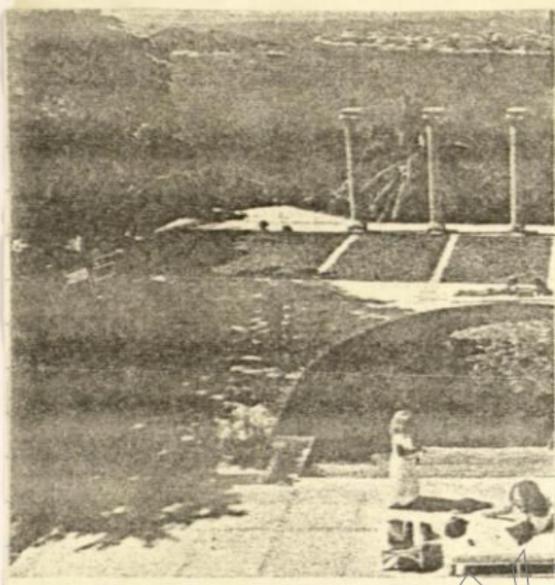
In an article by John McPhee the magazine also said that the Apollo 7 astronauts deviated slightly from their 1968 flight plan to take a picture of Las Brisas Hotel on Acapulco Bay.

The space agency denied the Apollo 7 flight purposely deviated from its course, saying this would have been impossible without ground control learning about it. The agency said it had no knowledge of the gold cross being left on the moon on the initial lunar landing.

The magazine said that Col. Frank Brandstetter, the hotel owner, is a frequent host to the astronauts after they have been to the moon. It said that Brandstetter gave six gold crosses to Apollo 11 astronaut's Neil Armstrong and Edwin E. (Buzz) Alrin, who took them to the moon and came back with five. It said they also left a small pink silk Las Brisas flag on the edge of the Sea of Tranquility.

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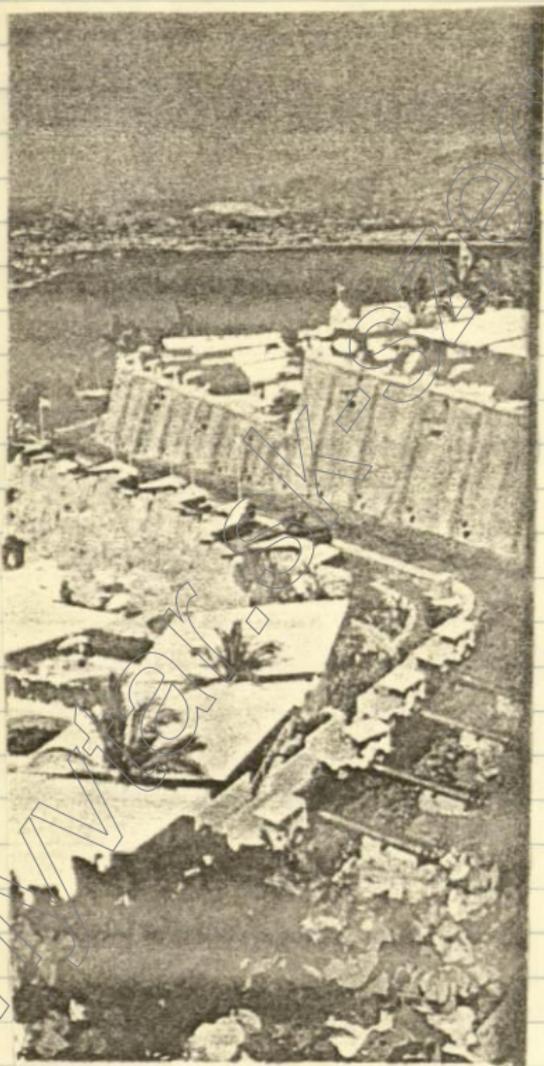
Wealthy vacationers who want to homestead at Las Brisas may build a house like Villa Nirvana (top), complete with colonnaded terrace, owned by Mexican lawyer Oscar Obregon. If like Australian Jenny Hardin (far right), you prefer to swim in solitude, there is the privacy of your own pool. For the more gregarious, La Concha (above), the beach club built exclusively for Las Brisas, has two ocean-fed grotto pools and a bar on wheels.



Brandstetter



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Szabolcsi Könyvtár
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