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SUBJECT The CIA and a Secret War Against Nicaragua

GARRICK UTLEY: There were reports this week that the CIA is organizing a paramilitary force to fight a secret war against Nicaragua. The Reagan Administration refuses to confirm or deny whether that is true, but it has happened before.

The CIA's last secret war was in Angola, in Africa. That was seven years ago. There, too, there was fighting among rival political factions, and the side backed by Cuba and the Soviet Union seemed to be heading for victory. Our story tonight is about one American caught up in that secret war. His name is Gary Aker, and his family is still waiting for him to come home.

WOMAN: We'd always go to the zoo, which was always fun. Gary'd wear this hat, and he always -- when he was small, he had a great big hat. All you could see was the big hat walking down the sidewalk and this little bitty kid in it. And when you'd put him up in front of the cage, you know, this cat would just -- all of a sudden, he'd get really wide-eyed and notice Gary. He didn't notice anybody else but Gary in this hat. It really caught his fancy and made him all excited.

UTLEY: For the past six years, the little boy in the white hat has himself been in a cage in Africa, imprisoned by forces he may not yet fully understand. One of them, the Central Intelligence Agency.

JOHN STOCKWELL: It was a suicidal situation.

UTLEY: John Stockwell was in charge of the CIA's Angola task force. He later resigned to protest what the agency did there.

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STOCKWELL: We sent Gary Aker in a month after we pulled out our own people. The Cuban and Angolan force was marching forward with tanks and jets and a modern military machine, and it was being opposed by a force of -- a disorganized, untrained force of about a hundred mercenaries.

UTLEY: Gary Aker was one of those mercenaries. This is the story of a young man from a nice neighborhood with his life out of control, and a government agency that used people like Gary Aker to fight its secret war, then walked away from all responsibility.

So, first, we must get to know Gary Aker. Everyone who knew him agrees about one thing. His teacher:

MAN: I sized him up as a bit of a loner.

UTLEY: His friend:

MAN: He seemed to be a real loner.

UTLEY: His mother:

WOMAN: He was a loner. Very definitely.

UTLEY: Gary grew up here, in Sacramento. His father was a policeman, then a fireman. As you look at the pictures on the mantelpiece and in the family album, you notice one thing: Gary Aker almost never smiled.

His older sister, Cathy, who may have been closer to him than anyone, remembers that he always had strange ideas, dangerous ones.

CATHY: He always said that he was -- he felt he was going to die when he was 21.

UTLEY: When did he first start saying that?

CATHY: I think about 10 or 11.

UTLEY: What do you think it was in your younger brother's life and his makeup that finally led him to make that decision to go to Angola?

CATHY: I think it's a lot of what you'd see on television as the American dream. I saw a lot of war movies and, really, it sounds glamorous to kids, and they make all these war toys and stuff. Plus, he thought he was helping his country, because he doesn't like Communism. And you get kind of an idea that you're either going to die or you're going to come home a hero. Our civilization has shown people, you know, combat,

combat, combat, combat. And this is, I think, what led him there.

UTLEY: While Gary Aker dreamed of wars, there was a war growing in Angola. He many never have heard of the place, probably didn't know in 1975 that the Portugese were being forced out after four centuries of rule. The new country was potentially rich, Africa's second biggest oil producer. And three factions fought for control. In the capital, Luanda, there was the MPLA, the Marxist movement. To the south, UNITA. In the north, the FNLA.

When it appeared the Soviet-backed Marxists would win, the CIA intervened with money and weapons. These pictures show task force commander John Stockwell with Holdin Roberto, the leader of the northern forces, with which the CIA hoped to prevent an easy leftist victory.

STOCKWELL: We escalated the fighting and we lost, ultimately. We discredited the United States, ultimately. We spent \$31 million, all together, in the program. We delivered about \$5 1/2 million in cash to Holdin Roberto. But we were backing the wrong party and the wrong guy.

UTLEY: While all that was going on in Angola, the war expanding, the American involvement deepening, Gary Aker was here in Sacramento. This is where he grew up. And this is where he went to school, McClachey (?) Senior High School. He was a good student. He got A's and B's. And when you look at the yearbook his senior year, you will see his picture and his name, but no mention of any other school activities.

At a high school which values athletic achievement, he was small, not athletic. He never spoke up in class. He had few close friends, no girlfriends. But he found a way to win attention, and it was a shocker. One day he handed his history teacher, George Serlan (?), an essay.

GEORGE SERLAN: It really showed me the bent of his mind. And it was very totalitarian, and someone who, I'd say, found, let's say, a Nazi philosophy very congenial to his way of thinking.

UTLEY: Was Gary Aker a Nazi, or just a mixed-up teenager?

This is the way he left his bedroom when he went to Angola. Bhis picture with that big German battle flag and published reports about his Nazi leanings angered a lot of Americans. But his family believes his Naziism was as unreal as most of his ideas.

MAN: No person wants to go through school without being noticed. And he found, I think, a way of shocking, sur-

prising his classmates and fellow students so that they would remember him.

UTLEY: Right out of high school, Aker, the Gary Aker who could never cope with authority or finish anything he started, joined the Marines.

MAN: When he finished his boot training, he came home and he said, "This -- this is tremendous. This is a good outfit. I can -- maybe someday I'll be a general."

UTLEY: He made it as far as corporal. Then:

WOMAN: He had problems with an officer. A lot of his gear was stolen and they wouldn't replace it. He just could not get his men -- he was a corporal, and he couldn't get them to do what he wanted them to do, and he got heck for it. It just was a bunch of problems piling up.

UTLEY: So Corporal Gary Aker went AWOL, hiding from the FBI in the park where the little boy in the white hat once played. Finally, he surrendered. After a psychiatric examination, he wound up with a general discharge. No job, no career, no goal.

On November 24th, 1975, Aker and Angola met. Gary Aker read a newspaper piece about mercenaries being recruited for Angola by David Bufkin, a shadowy figure who claimed he had links with the CIA.

This was David Bufkin after the disaster in Angola, talking about the mercenaries he'd recruited.

DAVID BUFKIN: As a matter of fact, they were told that they were going to receive \$1200 a month. When I got them into Angola, they -- it was raised to \$2000 a month. And then we -- we got better automatic weapons just before they arrived. We got Uzis and FN's.

UTLEY: Bufkin made a few television appearances, but in recent months he's dropped from sight.

Did you ever meet Bufkin?

WOMAN: Yes. Uh-huh. Several times.

UTLEY: What kind of a person was he?

WOMAN: Well, kind of flaky. He's different. He's not trustworthy at all.

UTLEY: Did Gary sense that?

WOMAN: Not at first. No. Gary was really taken with him. I just think he led him down the garden path.

UTLEY: The CIA denies that it had any connection with Bufkin or Gary Aker. In an official statement, the agency said it, quote, neither paid nor authorized funds to Mr. Aker or to other Americans engaged in armed combat in Angola. Neither Mr. Aker nor other Americans engaged in armed combat in Angola were flown there by or for the CIA.

To John Stockwell, that's just CIA disinformation.

STOCKWELL: He went in on a truck, a CIA truck. We sent a shipload of equipment over there, most of it trucks and vehicles. He went in by truck. He was not signed on a contract by the CIA that, you know, with CIA letterhead. He was hired by Bufkin, who was hired by Roberto with our money and under our supervision. He was armed inside the country with CIA weapons.

UTLEY: Was it a good idea to send mercenaries into Angola?

STOCKWELL: Well, it was the best way you possibly could -- if you had set out to discredit the United States totally, that was the best thing you could possibly do.

UTLEY: Why?

STOCKWELL: You're dealing with the dregs of the earth, in terms of humanity and morality. To hire whites from Europe or the United States to send them into a black African country, particularly with the passions of new independence, to kill blacks in order to implement your policies is no way to advance your standing and credibility in the world of nations in the Third World.

UTLEY: Quite apart from the question of sending white mercenaries to black Africa, the fact is that Gary Aker went in to fight a war that was already lost. By November 1975, when Aker was recruited, the Soviet involvement had gone beyond anything the CIA had dreamed of. Thousands of Cuban troops with hundreds of Russian tanks were grinding up the forces backed by The CIA. Yet, three months later, February 1976, Gary Aker and his fellow mercenaries were sent into the fighting.

STOCKWELL: About a month before then, we had withdrawn all of our own staffers because it was much too dangerous. We sent Gary Aker in a month after we pulled out our own people.

UTLEY: For once, Gary Aker, the lifelong loser, was lucky. Four days after he crossed the border, a Cuban armored car shot his truck to pieces. Gary Aker was captured. He was

unharmred. He hadn't had a chance to kill anyone.

The Marxist government in Luanda held a big trial of Aker and the other mercenaries. One of those recruited with Aker was executed. But during the trial, the prosecutor said one of the mercenaries was only a baby. He meant Aker. He was sentenced to 16 years in prison. That was six years ago.

Should we feel sorry for Gary Aker?

STOCKWELL: I, personally, have mixed emotions. On the one hand, he was trying -- he did go to Africa to kill people, for fame and fortune, for adventure and money. The other side of that is that the CIA had a massive propaganda action going presenting substantially false information about what was happening in Angola, with the objective of creating sympathy and support and getting mercenaries and people to go and fight on our side. And Gary Aker was one young man who got caught in this march off to fight Communism.

UTLEY: Perhaps the final words about Gary Aker should come from Gary Aker himself, a letter he sent to his parents from prison.

WOMAN: "There is only the feeling of total solitude and emptiness, the continued striving and struggling to reach the lights within, the ultimate realization of being lost.

"Where is there understanding and meaning? Where is there truth and knowledge? Where there is there reality and life? Where is the very essence that is men?"

UTLEY: You think he's found the answer?

WOMAN: I don't know. I don't know if he has. I think he's still searching.

UTLEY: The State Department says it can't do much for Gary Aker because the United States does not have diplomatic relations with Angola, because there are still Cuban troops there supporting the Marxist government, which says, "Why should we release this American prisoner as long as the United States opposes us?"

To the Angolans, Aker is a political pawn to be used. To the CIA, he is an embarrassment to be forgotten. It is a vicious circle. And caught in the middle sits Gary Aker, in prison.