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BROKAW: Good evening. 'Reckless and unprovoked'--that was just one expression from the White House today on the shooting down of an American Army helicopter on the border between Honduras and Nicaragua. The pilot was killed, and Nicaragua acknowledged today that its troops shot down the chopper, but said they did so only because the helicopter was flying over a battle zone in Nicaragua's territory. Apparently, the helicopter was blown off course. But it did manage to land in Honduras, and that's when the damage was done.

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BROKAW: ~~And~~ Fred Francis at the State Department tonight reports that the administration still will not say publicly that the helicopter violated Nicaragua airspace.

FRANCIS: The secretary of State said the American helicopter was apparently off course. Though, he added, that was still under investigation. However, a spokesman for the Pentagon said this. MICHAEL BURCH (Pentagon spokesman): We have no information of any violations of Nicaraguan airspace.

FRANCIS: But the administration does have information that the helicopter was flying over Nicaragua. Two administration sources have told NBC News that the surviving crewmen spoke of 25-knot winds dragging them over Nicaraguan guns. One source said the helicopter was more than a quarter of a mile inside Nicaragua. The other source confirmed that, saying the poor guy just got lost. The helicopter was hit by gunfire while over Nicaragua. Only then did the pilot realize his error. What has angered the Reagan administration is that the Nicaraguans continued to shoot after the pilot's emergency landing in Honduras. GEORGE SHULTZ (Secretary of State): It's unacceptable to fire from one country into another country at people and wind up killing somebody.

FRANCIS: The Nicaraguans have justified their actions by citing 17 flights by aircraft in that same area since last Sunday, in support of CIA-sponsored rebels. Nicaraguan junta leader Daniel Ortega said most of those flights violated Nicaraguan airspace. However, Ortega says, he regrets the death of the American pilot. DANIEL ORTEGA (Voice of interpreter): We feel the death of this North American citizen just as we do all the deaths of the Central Americans, which are caused by the situation.

FRANCIS: An administration official said there will be nothing more than diplomatic repercussions from our side, but he added there are 8,000 CIA-sponsored rebels in that area, and the fighting will continue. Fred Francis, NBC News, the State Department.

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