

Old soldiers supply Central America

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FORT WALTON BEACH, Fla. — Harry Aderholt, the brassy brigadier general, was running an import shop full of wicker and vases. Mac McCoskrie, the colonel, had a falling furniture store down the street. Doc Fitzpatrick, the medic, was living idly off his pension.

Then they came up with an idea. "We decided we wanted to get involved in Central America," said Aderholt, who at 65 has gained some girth but has lost none of his tough-talking style from combat days. "We're not afraid to be patriots."

That was how the Air Commandos were reborn and a group of aging, retired soldiers from Florida's Panhandle found one more battle to join. So far, they say, they've shipped millions of dollars in medical supplies, clothes and food to El Salvador and Guatemala, and they hope to start supplying the Nicaraguan anti-government contras.

Along the way, they've attracted some worried glances from Washington, where Congress and the president are at odds over Central America and critics are troubled by the private flow.

But down in this Gulf Coast town, inside their tiny, paneled office on motel-lined Miracle Strip, between walls coated with photos of old planes and commendations for



Aderholt

wartime heroics, the Air Commandos have no such doubts.

"Our government has opted out, is what it is," said McCoskrie, 63, who fought from Pearl Harbor to Southeast Asia and ran the Air Force Special Operations training school before retiring. "It means the private sector is going to have to pick up with it."

The Air Commandos' mission is more peaceable than some in its members' pasts.

Gen. Aderholt, known as "Hienie" to his friends, is a former Central Intelligence Agency staff member and commanded covert air operations in Vietnam. Two years ago, he says, he spent a week flying with the Salvadoran Air Force to test its readiness. For their part, most of his fellow commandos fought in two or three wars and a few conflicts in between.

When Aderholt became president of Air Commando Association Inc. a little over a year ago, the group was nothing more than a social club for about 1,500 soldiers who had served in the defunct combat unit of the same name.

"We were just sitting around drinking whiskey," the general said. "So I told them I'd serve, but we were going to have to get out there and do something."

Supplies to Miami

These days, six or seven commandos meet each morning at their office. They work over the phone, arranging donations of antibiotics, vitamins, needles, skin ointment, blankets, soap, clothes and food to be sent to Miami. From there, the goods are flown to Central America, usually for free



McCoskrie

by one of the countries' airlines. The members take turns traveling south, they say, to make sure the supplies arrive.

"We're not talking about going out and fighting. That's not for us," said Aderholt, a short, alternately stern and wise-cracking man who still wears his graying hair in a close, military crop. "We're talking about coming up with programs that can make a difference in the way these people look at their governments."

Not everybody is convinced of the group's modest motives. With his CIA background, Aderholt is constantly asked about — and denies — any connection with his old intelligence contacts.

When Congress was debating the Nicaraguan contras aid package that was voted down two weeks ago, the Congressional Arms Control and Foreign Policy Caucus termed the Air Commandos one of a dozen key private supporters of the rebels.

It was a flattering, but overstated, assessment. The commandos are balding — many wear bifocals and most of them are long out of uniform — and their moves are not all that crisp these days.

At times, transportation has been limited to Mac McCoskrie's Chevette, lugging and a U-Haul trailer filled with supplies to Miami. "And that car wasn't built to do that," conceded the lieutenant colonel.

Swindled for \$2,000

In their enthusiasm, the commandos gave \$2,000 to a man named Alan Goetsch, who told them he was an army captain from Alabama working to build a hospital in the jungles of Central America. It turned out that Goetsch, who's now in jail, was a fake, and their money is gone.

Soon after they opened three clinics in Guatemala earlier this year, medical supplies — most of which go to refugee Indians left homeless by the conflicts of the region — ran out.

The bulk of what they've shipped to El Salvador and Guatemala, with a value they estimated at about \$7 million, has been donated by the Detroit-based

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