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# Three years later, Nicaraguan bombing is still an enigma

By Glenn Garvin  
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SAN JOSE, Costa Rica — When the bomb went off in a flash of blue light, Nelson Murillo, a Costa Rican television cameraman, staggered across the room, clutching a gaping hole in his throat.

"I'm drowning," he gasped over the hideous gurgling from his own chest.

Jose Venegas, a newspaper photographer, reflexively snapped picture after picture while at his feet someone moaned: "Save me, help me, don't leave me here."

And Reid Miller, The Associated Press correspondent, leaned over his friend Linda Frazier, clutching her hand while her life drained away through her severed legs.

Tomorrow is the third anniversary of the bombing that made La Penca — a clutch of huts along the San Juan River just inside Nicaragua, not even big enough to call a village — an international watchword for conspiracy, intrigue, and death.

The bomb was planted at a press conference in an attempt to kill Eden Pastora, the charismatic and controversial Nicaraguan guerrilla leader. He walked away from the blast with a mild burn on his face and a handful of shrapnel fragments embedded in his legs.

But three journalists died and 18 others were wounded. Some are still trying to regain the use of arms and legs shattered by the blast. Others, whose physical injuries healed, have scars on their minds.

La Penca has obsessed one reporter, Tony Avirgan of ABC. He files report after report, spinning plot within plot, in an endless loop of paranoia and conspiracy.

He is not alone. The four pounds of C-4 explosive that went off that night at La Penca are still echoing. In the wake of the bombing, conspiracy theories flew like shrapnel, and because the bomber has never been found, they continue to multiply.

Take your pick; there's a La Penca theory for every ideology. The Sandinistas did it. The Cubans did it. Another Nicaraguan rebel group did it. Qaddafi did it. Costa Rican police did it. The CIA did it.

Last week Robert Owen, former State Department liaison to the Nicaraguan rebels, was forced to deny in front of Congress that he did it. Later this summer, when Oliver North testifies, he will certainly be asked what he knows about La Penca.

Thousands of newspaper stories have been written about the bombing, but three years later there is still nothing that contradicts a single paragraph that ran in the English-language weekly Tico Times two days after La Penca: "Who's to blame may never be known."

Those who were there know who to blame.

He was 6 feet tall, of medium build, with dark red hair and a receding hairline. His eyes were a dark blue-gray. He was in his early-to-

mid-30s and spoke excellent Spanish, although linguists didn't believe he was a native speaker.

He carried a stolen Danish passport, number P3284612, in the name of Per Anker Hansen.

No one knew who "Hansen" was working for. But he apparently wanted to kill Mr. Pastora very badly. He stalked him for weeks, posing as a news photographer for a non-existent photo agency.

His colleagues thought it was odd that he didn't snap photos in the constant, obsessive manner of most news photographers. And they thought it even odder that he insisted on carrying his gear in a heavy, bulky metal case.

But in the quirky, intense world of Central American journalism — where ideological camp followers, rookies toting Instamatics and ex-mercenary stringers for obscure bi-annual magazines often seem to outnumber the legitimate newsmen — no one dwells too long on oddities.

And of course, nobody knew that "Hansen's" camera case contained a false bottom, or that inside was a homemade, radio-activated bomb.

"Hansen" traveled around Latin America for four years, through Panama, Mexico, Honduras, and Peru. He was in all those countries in the few months just before La Penca. He often traveled with a woman who used a stolen French passport in the name of Patricia Anne Boone.

"Boone" also traveled to Nicaragua, and had a multiple-entry visa for that country. "Boone" was in

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Costa Rica the day of the bombing, and like "Hansen," vanished without a trace the next morning.

Just a few days before La Penca, his colleagues recall, "Hansen" was deeply depressed. It didn't look like he would ever be able to catch up with Mr. Pastora to get any pictures.

But on May 29, Mr. Pastora's assistants began calling a few journalists. There would be a press conference the next day in the guerrilla leader's camp at La Penca. He would probably announce that he was quitting the Nicaraguan guerrilla movement — again.

Mr. Pastora was always announcing that he was leaving the war in a quarrel with other rebel leaders or with the CIA. Many of the other leaders hated him. So did the CIA, which thought he did too much talking and not enough fighting.

On the other hand, so did the Sandinistas. Mr. Pastora had been a military hero in the revolution that brought the Sandinistas to power and if there had been elections on the day the Sandinistas marched triumphantly into Managua, he would have been elected president hands-down. The Sandinistas feared Mr. Pastora for his charisma, and for his military skills.

Sandinista newspapers often boasted about winning battles with the rebels in the north of the country, but they never ran a word about Mr. Pastora in the south. They didn't want to remind anyone he was around. On at least three well-documented occasions, the Sandinista tried to kill Mr. Pastora or other officials of his organization with explosives.

As other reporters crowded around Mr. Pastora on that fateful evening in La Penca, "Hansen" put his camera case down, announced in a loud voice that his camera wasn't working and stepped outside. Costa Rican television cameraman Jorge Quiros, who would be dead in a few moments, inadvertently photographed his murderer edging towards the door.

A rebel soldier asked "Hansen" what he was doing. "Looking for a bathroom," he replied.

Then came the flash of blue light, followed by the ghastly moaning Reid Miller of the AP thought the Sandinistas had launched a mortar

attack. He crawled across the floor, paused briefly while he thought about grabbing a rifle, decided against it, and then slid down a two-by-four support beam to the ground and hid in a slit trench.

After a few minutes, when there was no further attack, Mr. Miller returned to the house. There he found his friend Linda Frazier, her heart still pumping blood efficiently out of her legs. She was conscious, and saying something, but Mr. Miller was quite deaf from the explosion. So he held her hand. They stayed there that way for a long time.

Within hours, everyone had a favorite suspect. The president of Costa Rica said that the bomb was planted by Sandinista spies inside Pastora's group. The Nicaraguan ambassador to Costa Rica said it looked like the rebels themselves had decided to do away with Mr. Pastora. Tass said it was the CIA.

One Costa Rican newspaper, without a shred of evidence, even accused Linda Frazier of planting the bomb. All that day, her friends crept around hiding copies of the paper from her family.

After the explosion, "Hansen" was discovered lying in a pile of oil drums, looking dazed. A photographer snapped his picture, and wire services flashed it around the world. Ironically, the murderer himself came to symbolize the horror and confusion of La Penca.

Of course, no one knew he was the murderer yet. The rebels carried him out of La Penca in a boat, and the next day he reached San Jose, packed his bags, and disappeared. It wasn't for several days, until investigators pinpointed the metal camera case as the origin of the explosion, that anyone began to look for him.

A few days later, a nurse came into the hospital room where Mr. Miller was being treated for his wounds. The nurse put him in a wheelchair, and took him down the hall to the room where Mr. Pastora was lying in bed.

Mr. Pastora fixed Miller with a fierce gaze. "All right," he roared. "Who was it?" Mr. Miller just shook his head.

Last year Mr. Pastora announced he was leaving the rebel ranks. He runs a fish cooperative in Costa Rica.

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