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# The Carlos File

MARTHA HONEY AND TONY AVIRGAN

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For the past eighteen months we have been investigating the explosion of a bomb at a May 30, 1984, press conference called by Edén Pastora Gómez, head of the Democratic Revolutionary Alliance (ARDE), which operates along the border between Costa Rica and Nicaragua. Three journalists and five *contras* died in the blast, which took place in the Nicaraguan border town of La Penca, and twenty-six others, including Tony Avirgan, were injured. Propelled by our personal link to the tragedy and by the growing realization that no government or police agency was seriously investigating the bombing, we sought to uncover the identity of the bomber—a man who, journalists at the press conference say, posed as a Danish photographer, planted a metal box containing the bomb and vanished, uninjured, shortly after the explosion. Our research was supported in part by the Newspaper Guild and the Committee to Protect Journalists.

A year's worth of interviews with more than one hundred people in Central and South America, the United States and Europe failed to uncover the bomber's name or many of the details of the plot. We did, however, gather proof that U.S. officials and Costa Rican security officers planted stories in the press, pinning the blame on the Sandinistas and the Basque separatist organization, Euzkadi Ta. Azkatasuna (E.T.A.). A number of leads also pointed to Central Intelligence Agency participation in the bombing. Several current or former C.I.A. agents and informants—including a high-ranking Uruguayan police officer and a Cuban from Miami—told us that the agency was behind it. And in the course of our investigation, several names recurred: John Hull, an American who owns and manages a ranch and other extensive properties in northern Costa Rica; a high-ranking official in the Costa Rican Ministry of Public Security; and an anti-Castro Cuban named Felipe Vidal Santiago. Many of our sources implicated these three men in the bombing and said that they all have ties to the C.I.A. (In an interview with us, Vidal denied he had a C.I.A. connection, and Hull told other reporters that he was not involved with the agency.) Despite all our efforts, we were still no closer to discovering the identity of the bomber.

Then, in March, a young Nicaraguan walked into a San José bar and sat down next to a Costa Rican carpenter named Carlos, the neighbor of a North American woman who works in our office. The Nicaraguan, who called himself David, told Carlos about the existence of a dirty tricks squad working for the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (F.D.N.), the leading *contra* group, and said he knew the identity of the La Penca bomber. Through his neighbor, Carlos contacted us, and in the months that followed we

supplied him with questions to ask David as well as with approximately \$50 for David's cab fare, to facilitate their meetings. David's story raises numerous questions, and some of it cannot be verified. But as long as there is a chance that he was telling the truth, his story must be published so that journalists and members of the U.S. Congress can investigate his charges.

David's story opens with a string of coincidences that strain North American credulity but are plausible in the overheated, factionalized atmosphere of Central America. On Friday, March 29, 1985, Carlos was sipping a beer in the Rendezvous Bar near the U.S. Embassy in downtown San José. Three men came in; from their accents Carlos judged them to be Nicaraguans. Two of them then left, telling the other to wait for them. This man, described as short, dark-skinned and young, with a smooth round face and straight black hair, immediately turned to Carlos. "You must help me," he whispered. "Hide me. I want to get away. I don't want to be involved anymore in their things. They are going to dynamite the U.S. Embassy and many innocent people will die. I want to get out."

For the next ten minutes, David poured out his story. He claimed to be part of a right-wing group composed of anti-Castro Cubans, Nicaraguan *contras*, Costa Ricans and North Americans with ties to the C.I.A. They operated from safe houses and *contra* camps in Honduras, Costa Rica, Panama, Nicaragua and Miami, he said, moving "in and out of Costa Rica like a dog from its own house." He said the group was responsible for the La Penca bombing and was planning a series of terrorist attacks which would be blamed on the Sandinistas. These include bombing the U.S. Embassy in Costa Rica and in Honduras, attacking the offices of Costa Rican President Luis Alberto Monge Alvarez and assassinating the U.S. Ambassador to Costa Rica, Lewis Tambs; Miskito leader Brooklyn Rivera; and Urbina Lara, a well-known *contra*.

David trembled as he spoke and seemed near tears. "I'm an anti-Sandinista," he told Carlos. "But these people are much more evil than the Sandinistas." He also claimed they trafficked in cocaine, marijuana and arms. "They are making money off the blood of my brothers and using our cause to get rich." When Carlos asked why he didn't tell his story to the Costa Rican authorities, David replied that a number of government and security officials were collaborating with his group. Out of desperation, he had chosen to confide in a sympathetic-looking stranger. Carlos explained that he could not hide David in his house. As the other two men entered the bar, David urged the carpenter to keep in touch.

Carlos mulled over David's story for several weeks. On three separate occasions he saw David's companions near the U.S. Embassy. Once they got into a gray limousine without license plates. But what overcame Carlos's reluctance to get involved was the announcement, on April 25, that Costa Rican Rural Guardsmen had arrested nine