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# Salvadoran Air Base Is Called Center for C.I.A. Operations

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SAN SALVADOR, Oct. 14 — Behind the high concrete-block walls that keep the Ilopango air base here from the public's view is a drab two-story building. Over the last three years, the building has served as the waiting room for agents working for the Central Intelligence Agency, leaders of the Nicaraguan rebels, mercenaries and American military advisers, according to American officials and Nicaraguan rebel sources.

Now more than ever the base is the center of C.I.A.-supported operations to supply Nicaraguan rebel forces, according to an American shot down in a supply plane over Nicaragua.

American men in civilian clothes often pass through the base's gates and American officials say privately that it is the center of C.I.A. and other clandestine operations here.

Many American visitors to the base, on the eastern edge of San Salvador, are never "officially" in the country. The honor code of silence prevails.

The base is run by the politically conservative and staunchly independent Gen. Juan Rafael Bustillo. One of the general's most recent phantom guests was the longtime C.I.A. agent, known by the alias Max Gomez, who directed the contra supply flight shot down by Nicaraguan soldiers last week, according to two highly reliable sources with close C.I.A. contracts here and Eugene Hasenfus, the American captured in Nicaragua.

Vice President Bush said this week that he had met Mr. Gomez three times. He said Mr. Gomez was an adviser in counterinsurgency who worked in El Salvador with the approval of President José Napoleón Duarte and the armed forces.

Despite Mr. Bush's statements, both Mr. Duarte and the armed forces chief, Gen. Aldolfo O. Blandón, deny knowing Mr. Gomez or approving his work.

"The air force is very jealous of its

independence," said Mauricio Salvador Hernández, a spokesman for the armed forces, in trying to explain why Vice President Bush and not the Salvadoran high command might be ready to acknowledge that Mr. Gomez was an air force adviser.

Although the other branches of the armed forces have often baffled American officials, the air force has always been considered closer to the American way of operating. Nearly all of its pilots have trained in the United States and most speak fluent English. In addition, the air force has never been accused of lacking discipline.

The air force's military and political importance, as well as its key role in supplying the Nicaraguan rebels, have made it a favorite of the C.I.A. station here, according to Western diplomats.

"The agency loves the air force," one diplomat said.

On a recent afternoon at the air base, an American who identified himself as an adviser sat behind his desk watching a pet parrot jump from the edge of a coffee cup to the desk.

## 'I Have Nothing to Say'

An American sitting with him, dressed in levis and a T-shirt and carrying a radio, declined to identify himself. A third American who walked into the office dressed in an olive-green flight suit and a U.S.S. Iowa cap turned and left when he saw there was a visitor.

"I have nothing to say about what is going on," the adviser said, and quickly invited the reporter to leave his office.

Many men who claim to have no direct link to the American Embassy and little reason for being in El Salvador can be seen in Salvadoran restaurants and hotels. Americans who refuse to identify themselves are among them.

They are not counted among the 55 American advisers based permanently in the country or the more than 100 who are generally here on any one day on temporary assignments. These will readily identify themselves as advisers attached to the United States Embassy. The others will simply say they are passing through or are here "on business."

At a news conference in Managua after his capture, Mr. Hasenfus said that at least 25 people were working with him to supply rebels out of the Ilopango air base. Flight logs from the downed plane list more than 30 crew members who do not have Latin names.

## Flights Began in 1983

Mr. Hasenfus and the two American crew members killed when the plane was shot down in southern Nicaragua on Oct. 5 carried Salvadoran Air Force cards signed by General Bustillo identifying them as American military advisers here. The American Embassy denied they were advisers.

The tight security around the base and the discipline within made it the perfect place to run covert American operations, American officials who have lived in El Salvador said.

The supply flights to the contras in Nicaragua began in the spring of 1983 with at least seven C.I.A. agents, a private propeller-driven plane and the loan of some of the Salvadoran C-47's bought with American military aid, according to two American officials living in El Salvador at the time.

The spring of 1983 was a busy time at Ilopango and the activity underscored both the power and the independence of General Bustillo.

The longtime air force commander, who likes fast cars and generally dresses in a flight suit, threatened mutiny unless Alvaro Magaña, the provisional President at the time, dismissed Defense Minister José Guillermo García. The Defense Minister was quickly replaced, confirming General Bustillo's position as one of the most powerful men in the armed forces.

## Air Force Buildup Begins

The spring of 1983 also marked the beginning of an air force buildup that has made it the most crucial service in fighting the war against the leftist insurgents, according to American officials.

At the time it had 10 helicopters, several C-47's and a few propeller planes in 1983; now it has more than 60 helicopters, 12 helicopter gunships, at least five AC-47 gunships and more than 10 combat jets.

In using the air base to run supply flights to the contras in Nicaragua in 1983, the C.I.A. was operating without the Congressional restrictions imposed in August of 1984 that prohibit any help to military or paramilitary groups fighting the Nicaraguan Government.

When news of the flights were leaked to the press in October 1983, General Bustillo, a colonel at the time, dismissed a chief aide, but the flights continued until the Congressional restrictions were imposed, American officials said.

Sometime in 1984, the air force also began to permit contra forces to launch air and sea attacks from Ilopango. At the time, Edén Pastora Gómez, a contra leader who has since retired from the battle, was a frequent visitor at the base, according to American and contra sources.