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'Friends' paid for contra flight

Sources say mission flown on U.S. behalf

By ALFONSO CHARDY
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WASHINGTON — A "friendly foreign government" acting on behalf of the United States financed the flight of a cargo plane shot down over Nicaragua on Sunday with a load of weapons for anti-Sandinista rebels, an administration official and a well-briefed contra source said Tuesday.

They did not identify the friendly government but said the plane took off from a military air base in El Salvador and the government of President Jose Napoleon Duarte either was involved or at least knew of the flight in advance.

Eugene Hasenfus of Marinette, Wis., an American who was captured by Nicaraguan troops and appeared to be the only survivor of the plane's four-man crew, is an ex-Marine who once flew for a CIA-operated airline in Vietnam, according to his brother William in Oshkosh, Wis. One of the three crewmen who died in the crash, William J. Cooper, also flew for the CIA in Vietnam, the brother said.

Officials at the White House, the State Department, the Pentagon and the CIA denied Tuesday that Hasenfus, the downed plane and the other crewmen aboard it were connected to the U.S. government.

Secretary of State George Shultz said the aircraft, which Sandinista officials said was a C-123 propeller-driven cargo plane, "was, for all we know, a plane hired by private people, apparently some of them American. . . . They had no connection with the U.S. government at all."

The administration and contra sources said the plane was carrying supplies bought by the contras on credit, in anticipation of the \$100 million aid package that is still pending in Congress. The sources said international arms dealers have resumed shipments to the rebels in recent weeks, charging the equipment against an open account that will be paid out of the \$100 million fund.

The sources said the flight was one of several flights that have originated from Ilopango air base outside El Salvador's capital to supply the contras since the government of neighboring Honduras began blocking the delivery of aid to the rebels through its territory last year.

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Tuesday that Hasenfus, the downed plane or the other crewmen aboard it were connected to the U.S. government.

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Two aviation sources in the United States said Tuesday that the type of plane used, a C-123, is not owned by any commercial firm in the United States but that several of them have been transferred by the Air Force to allied governments in Central America and Asia in the last two years.

The administration official consulted for this article said Hasenfus, the captured American, was aboard the plane as a "load specialist" in charge of readying the supplies for airdrops to the contras.

He had been chosen because of his previous experience in the Marines as a parachute rigger and expert in airdrops with Air America, a so-called CIA proprietary company that flew secret cargo missions in Indochina during the Vietnam War.

William Hasenfus said his brother Eugene served in the Marines from 1960 to 1965 as an air delivery specialist for equipment drops. He said Eugene was stationed at Camp Pendleton, Calif., and never served in combat. Official Pentagon records confirm Hasenfus' Marine service record. William Hasenfus said his brother went to work for Air America after his stint in the Marines.

Parachuted to safety

The Nicaraguan Defense Ministry said in Managua on Monday that Hasenfus parachuted to safety when the plane was shot down by Sandinista army troops with a Soviet-made ground-to-air missile, about 35 miles north of the border with Costa Rica.

The Defense Ministry said the aircraft carried at least 50,000 rounds of ammunition for AK-47 automatic rifles, dozens of rifles, an unspecified number of rocket-propelled grenades and other equipment for the contras.

The CIA and other U.S. government agencies are currently barred from aiding the contras with military supplies, funds or advice. That prohibition will be lifted once Congress clears President Reagan's \$100 million contra aid package. The legislation has been stalled since summer, but its approval was expected before Congress adjourns later this month for the fall congressional elections.

A contra spokesman in Washington, Javier Arguello, said the aircraft did not belong to the contras and that he did not know who those aboard it were.

Officials of the various private groups that have supported the contras also denied any link to the flight. Those included Alabama-based Civilian Material Assistance and retired Maj. Gen. John Singlaub, a principal private adviser to the contras. Singlaub was traveling in the Far East, but the executive director of Singlaub's Arizona-based U.S. Council for World Freedom, Joyce Downey, said "the plane is not ours."

'Very brave people'

Elliott Abrams, assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, told reporters that private relief flights have enabled the Nicaraguan rebels to survive in the

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face of the restrictions on U.S. government assistance.

"Some very brave people ... have been willing to actually bring this material into Nicaragua, as seems to be the case with this flight," Abrams said. "All I can say for the people who were on it ... God bless them, because they were fighting for freedom in Central America and keeping the option alive while Congress made up its mind."

In the small Wisconsin town of Marinette, population 12,000, many residents quickly recognized the name of Eugene Hasenfus, even though the Sandinistas first spelled it as Hafenfuf.

The name is well known in Marinette, a town near Michigan's Upper Peninsula, about 50 miles north of Green Bay. The Hasenfus family is large, has been in the area for almost a century and once owned a popular supper club.

Editors and reporters at the Marinette Eagle Star said they called the Hasenfus house, in a rural area outside the town, as soon as they heard the name on television and radio news.

Hasenfus' wife Sally talked to a few reporters but by Tuesday afternoon she referred all calls to her husband's brother William, a 47-year-old telephone salesman in Oshkosh, about 100 miles south-

west of Marinette.

William Hasenfus said his brother Eugene went into the construction business after leaving the Marines, but then went to work for Air America as a civilian contract employee, along with his friend Cooper.

In the 1970s, the CIA divested itself from Air America but those who monitor American intelligence community affairs say the spy agency and the company continued to maintain informal contacts.

Working as a load master, responsible for weighing and properly balancing any equipment that is put aboard a cargo aircraft, Hasenfus flew missions for the CIA-linked firm throughout Indochina in the late 1960s, William said.

Returning to the United States after "two or three years" with Air America, Eugene Hasenfus went back to work as a construction worker and last summer, landed a job with a Florida air freight company, his brother said. William Hasenfus said he could not remember the name of the company.

He declined to say whether Cooper played a role in helping him get the job, but insisted that the CIA had nothing to do with it.

He said Eugene is probably alive because of a parachute he borrowed before going to Florida for his new job.

"That was my parachute on his back," William said. "He asked for it when he visited a few weeks ago and that's what saved him." William said he and Eugene were both "ardent" skydivers and that while in Florida his brother had joined a skydiving club.