

APPEARED  
4 (MAGAZINE)

WASHINGTON POST  
22 December 1985

# SUICIDA'S SECRET WAR

*How one contra got serious  
about the battle to oust  
the Sandinistas*

**BY CHRISTOPHER DICKEY**

**I**N DECEMBER 1981, Ronald Reagan signed a presidential finding that established a force for "paramilitary operations" against Nicaragua. This force became known as the "contras" or "counterrevolutionaries." Originally planned as a 500-man, covert CIA operation aimed at stopping arms traffic from Nicaragua to the rebels in El Salvador, the "secret war" became a catch phrase for Washington's attempts to pressure, harass and destabilize the Nicaraguan government. By 1985, the contra fighting force had grown to an estimated 10,000 men.

The largest contra faction, the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), operated out of Honduras crossing the border into Nicaragua to make raids on villages and Sandinista militia positions. Because U.S. support for the contras was part of a CIA-funded program, little was known initially about the FDN commanders, their forces and their tactics. Washington Post foreign correspondent Christopher Dickey was one of the first reporters to go behind contra lines.

In this excerpt from Dickey's book *With the Contras, we join one FDN force under the command of Pedro Pablo Ortiz Centeno, known to his men as "Suicida."* A former member of dictator Anastasio Somoza-Debayle's National Guard, the most feared of Somoza's security forces, Suicida earned his nom de guerre by taking his men into battles—and winning them—when other commanders and their troops would have died on the

*battlefield. As a result, Suicida earned intense loyalty from his troops and those directly under him, his lieutenants Krill and Cancer, a loyalty surpassing that held by the men for the FDN itself. In their devotion to Suicida, these troops waged their own war, a war out of FDN control and, ultimately, beyond the scope of anything Washington had envisioned. Though the CIA and the FDN supported Suicida's war at first, ultimately Suicida and his men became a matter of international embarrassment for them.*

**B**Y NOVEMBER 1982, Suicida had his men, he had his guns and he felt ready for his kind of war: big attacks looking for big wins. First they would eliminate the Sandinista outposts along the border, then they would push their forces deep inside the narrow northern tip of Nueva Segovia in Nicaragua. They would attack Jalapa itself. If they could take it, they would call in support on the airstrips around the town, and reinforcements overland from Honduras. They would declare a liberated territory. Then the war to oust the communists could get serious.

At FDN headquarters in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, however, there did not seem to be much enthusiasm for this idea. The general staff toyed with it. It sounded good. But the men at the other bases were still in training, and they did not want to act until everyone was ready—if then. In the middle of November, without orders from Tegucigalpa, and on his own account, Suicida began his infiltration and his offensive in the Segovias.

The initial attacks were small. Most of Suicida's new recruits were raw; many could not be relied on to fight. But the Sandinista forces they were up against were often half-trained militiamen as raw as anyone in their own ranks. As Suicida's people gained experience in little ambushes and engagements the scope of the fighting grew. Krill and Cancer were spearheading the operation, and well past Providencia they had yet to encounter major resistance. The only problem was ammunition. The new recruits wasted a lot and they were running out quickly. Suicida started calling to the other bases asking for support, trying to draw them into the fight. But one by one the responses came back over the radio. "Negative." Now he called Tegucigalpa. He had an offensive going. He was giving hell to the Sandinistas, couldn't they tell that? And, however reluctantly, they began diverting supplies to his camp to try to sustain him.

The general staff in Tegucigalpa had not known what to do about Suicida's offensive when it began. But they soon saw that, at least in the short term, it could give them the credibility they wanted as a fighting force. He was inside Nicaragua, he was fighting, and he was holding his own.

**KRILL HAD BEEN AWAY** for months on the coast pursuing his little vendettas, looking for the odd dollar, sulking and drinking and romancing. And then he had shown up in the camp at Pino Uno in Honduras and taken over again as the intimate of Suicida. Krill was a survivor and a killer to be reckoned with. No one could deny his skills in the field. But he brought with him his mix of sullen passions and childish glee at the prospect of slaughter.

"Cancer was not like Krill," commandos from Pino Uno would say later, as if that were Cancer's most important quality. Short and dark, with clear brown eyes and the regular, high-cheekboned features left by a lot of Indian blood, Cancer had a quiet nature, but not a sullen one. And he showed considerations that the men and his women appreciated. He was a fighter but not a killer.

**KRILL'S MEN** moved only as quietly as they had to along the sharp edges of the mountains above the government cooperative at Wuambuco. The rows of dark green bushes up and down the steep hillsides showed the red berries of ripe coffee, and Krill knew the Sandinistas would send somebody to try to pick it. All Krill had to do was wait for word that the pickers were arriving and then deploy his men for the attack.

The local people and migrant workers who usually picked the delicate berries now refused to go to the coffee estates near the combat zones, especially those run by the government, so militias and students, government employes and members of the Sandinista Front's political apparatus were sent instead. Most had had a little rudimentary military training and about half of them had been handed guns along with their harvest baskets when they went into the groves in the morning. But they did not really know how to fight.

Krill's attack began clumsily. A lookout spotted some of his men and ran shouting down the hillside. "Get down, get down! The contras are coming there!" The workers, even most of those with guns, scattered and scrambled through the bushes. An M60 went into action, raking back and forth near the harvesters; then Krill's men began to follow them along the peaks, dogging the prey from the high slopes, knowing they would try to make it back to the farmhouse. A heavy-set, middle-aged man reached a jeep and was using the radio to call

for help. One of Krill's men raked him with a burst of fire and ran on.

Occasional shooting continued for a couple of hours, but Krill's men were soon rounding up prisoners. Near the bullet-riddled jeep they looked for the man wounded in the initial encounter. They found him in a ditch with a middle-aged woman beside him looking as weak and as bloody as he.

By some accounts the woman had a gun in her hand. Another story suggests that the husband's efforts to call for help over the radio singled him out for abuse. But however that may

have been, Krill began to work on them as soon as they were captured. They were weak already, they were old and soft for this kind of action. Apparently they were vulnerable to

each other's pain and could be made to talk to protect each other. Whether in the long night of marching the woman was raped and just how badly they both suffered in their first interrogations are not matters of any certainty. But by the time Krill got them back to Pino Uno—the man wounded and half-crawling, the woman doubled over in pain, drying blood smeared along the insides of her legs—Krill probably knew he was bringing Suicida a pair of prizes.

Their names were Felipe and Maria Eugenia Barreda. He was 51 years old, she was 49 and people called her Mary. They were from Esteli and they had been Sandinista partisans for a long time. They were the kind of people who had made the revolution possible in the first place: middle middle-class; he was a self-made man, a jeweler and one-time member of the Lions Club, a bit of a drinker and gambler and then a committed Christian. She was an activist who first worked with the Sandinistas because her son worked with them and was jailed, then went on to lead groups of mothers on hunger strikes, fighting for human rights and against Somoza. During the war, their home was a headquarters and safe house for Sandinista leaders.

After the war she was an indefatigable member of Esteli's reconstruction junta. "We won the revolution, but I lost my wife," her husband used to say, only half-joking. They were active in the party, active in the left wing of the church, proselytizers of the revolution. The Barredas went to the coffee plantations to make a political example of their commitment.

When Suicida got hold of them he had called them "*los meros meros*," the essence of the essence.

**SUICIDA** was famous but frustrated in his limited world. In the mountains of the Segovias everyone knew his name. And in Tegucigalpa and Danli he was feared as well as admired. He was the object of pride, envy and anger among the other task force commanders and the general staff in Tegucigalpa. Krill's capture of the Barredas could only build Suicida's reputation more and he called his *parientito* Noel Ortiz at Radio 15 de Septiembre to come down and interview them.

Meanwhile, Suicida had handed the Barredas over to El Muerto, the sallow 22-year-old boy with a gaunt face and heavy lids whom he saw as Tegucigalpa's spy. Maybe he thought he would be flaunting his prize this way, or perhaps he simply wanted the dirtiest jobs under his command to be carried out by his most hated subordinate.

Prisoners were chained to trees at Pino Uno. They were left to sleep half-naked and sometimes unable to lie down in the rains that fell in the evenings and the bitter chill that settled into the mountain forests. What beatings did not do at first, exposure was left to accomplish for a night or two. Nearby was the graveyard of Pino Uno, with scores of mounds visible.

Not all prisoners were treated harshly. Any man captured, especially if he surrendered his weapon, was likely to be encouraged to join the ranks of the FDN. Some did so thinking they would escape later, and some out of conviction, and some because they thought they were going to be on the winning side. Suicida and Krill and the rest, and everyone above them up to the level of the FDN directorate, were certain this war would be won by the summer of 1983 at the latest. After all, that was what the Americans told them.

Several young *milicianos* were caught at Wuambuco with the Barredas and, after interrogation, briefly joined the ranks of the FDN. But when they were taken to an old Masonic lodge in Danli where refugees were housed, they managed to call the Nicaraguan consul from a telephone nearby. He picked them up and they returned to Managua, where they told vivid horror stories. If it were not for what happened later, their stories might be discounted. But as it is, given the events of the spring and summer, their observations at Pino Uno have a certain grim credibility.

One of the *milicianos*, for instance, said he was present when "the greens," as the Honduran soldiers were called, turned over three FDN deserters, one of them 13, another 17 and one 20 years old. "They had tried to escape to Nicaragua. They were all torn up, naked, their bodies black and blue all over from the blows, as if from whips. When they were going to be executed, the 13-year-old kid screamed to El Muerto, 'Boss, I won't do it again. Don't kill me, boss.' El Muerto shut him up and kicked

him. And he cut his throat there. And the others who were tied up to some stakes then also had their throats cut."

El Muerto did most of his work in a little house set a short distance from the rest of the camp. His room, as described by some of his prisoners, had a military cot, an electric generator, even a coffee maker. He had a little television and a big tape recorder on which he used to listen to "that music from Manhattan Island, modern music from New York" to drown out the screams.

The Barredas were kept apart in the open and interrogated individually. By some accounts El Muerto beat Felipe Barreda with the butt of his pistol, reopening Barreda's wounds. There were differences in the stories the Barredas told about who they were and what they did. Then El Muerto brought them together and confronted each with the other's "lies," his voice and the beatings and the threats of death growing more savage as the interrogation went on.

Noel Ortiz arrived from Radio 15 four days after the Barredas were captured. Suicida took him proudly to where the Barredas were being held. They looked weak, in pain, as they lay bound, filthy and exhausted on the ground.

"Why are they like that?" Ortiz asked Suicida.

"They're *los meros meros*," said Suicida smiling.

Ortiz wanted to talk to the Barredas for the radio and he had brought a television camera to make a propaganda film. These prisoners, it was hoped, could be made defectors. But they were not presentable. The Barredas had urinated on themselves from fear.

Mary Barreda spoke to Ortiz as someone who might, at last, bring relief. Could she have something, she asked, to help the pain? Ortiz ordered an injection for her. Mary and Felipe Barreda were taken to a stream to bathe, and they washed the blood and dirt from each other, delicately, painfully.

"Excuse the abuses of the war," Ortiz said lamely as he took the woman aside. "We understand you're directors of the Sandinistas. We don't want to commit abuses." He asked Mary Barreda what she did, exactly, and he understood her to say she was the political chief of Esteli.

"Look," she said, "really we were fooled into coming to this area. I thought we were going to pick coffee." But they were moved from one farm to another, ever closer to the border and combat, and they were getting rifles and training and when she asked about this the *responsables* had said only that "the dogs were near." She was fooled, she said. She was fooled.

She was taped for Radio 15 the next day, saying that she was tired, naturally, but not mistreated and that she had a bad conscience for bringing people to pick coffee when really they were taken into combat. But she did not denounce the revolution.

It may be that Ortiz told Suicida he did not want the Barredas hurt, and that when he went back to Tegucigalpa he met with the representative of the International Red Cross at the Hotel Maya to try to arrange a prisoner exchange. As late as May, the fate of the Barredas was one of Pino Uno's unspoken secrets.

Ortiz said afterward that they were left in the hands of El Muerto and he was responsible for what happened to them. In the summer of 1983, after El Muerto was a prisoner of the Sandinistas, he first denied that he was responsible, then said that the order came from Suicida, then that it came from Tegucigalpa.

One of the FDN officers who looked into the case later said that Suicida had been ordered to turn the Barredas over to the commander in Tegucigalpa. And Suicida refused.

In El Muerto's words, always in the passive voice, "They were eliminated."

"You buried them there?"

"Correct. They made a hole. They lay down. And they were killed there."

**SALVADOR ICAZA** kept his diary hidden and worried constantly that Krill or Cancer would come across the notes he had taken since his arrival at Pino Uno.

Suicida had made Icaza, an erstwhile judge from Esteli, his S5, in charge of communication and psychological operations and morale. Icaza took his assignment seriously: to talk about morality, religion, common sense. He felt those elements were important to winning the war. Icaza saw the side of Suicida that made many of his men love him.

"There was a man sick. He asked him what was wrong. And he said, Well, I'm sick. And he gave him \$50."

But Icaza did not know what to make of Suicida's macho games in the field, or the way that Krill and Cancer and Caramalo acted in the camp.

They drank a lot. They were "universal carburetors," said Icaza. They drank "anything from unleaded to Flor de Caña." They emptied their guns in the air, raising hell all over the place. There were fights over women, and over who was the braver and the better soldier and there were fights, as well, over power. "You see," said Icaza, "power made the people drunk."

And when Icaza was alone he wrote down what Cancer told him in his little book.

Icaza was told about Suicida and Krill and the Barreda couple, whom he had known in Esteli.

One night during the assaults against El Porvenir, Icaza heard that new prisoners had been brought in and that Krill was going to interrogate them.

"I had been hearing rumors," as Icaza put it in his usual understatement, "that Krill was not a good guy."

The prisoners were taken to the stand of trees outside the camp where interrogations were conducted, probably the same area where the Barredas were held and tortured. The captives were boys, 17, 18 years old, "your kids like my son," thought Icaza. They were barefoot and bound and had been thrown down on the dirt. Krill was half-drunk, asking

questions. He got an answer he didn't like. His black-cleated jungle boot caught one of the kids under the chin and the head bobbed back on the dirt. And Icaza, who would claim later that he witnessed no murders firsthand at Pino Uno, did not want to see what would happen next. He grabbed Krill. The muscles of the commander's arm were as taut as an animal's.

"Krill, please, quit messing with this guy."

"Mr. Icaza, it is not your business."

"It is my business," said Icaza. He had been made S5, and prisoners were part of his responsibility and they had to be treated like prisoners of war.

"... Are you crazy, man?" Icaza continued. "There is no way you are going to get away with that stuff."

Krill said nothing, then suddenly arrived at a decision, said "Hey, go ahead. You can do what you want with him."

By late June, Icaza said he had compiled a report of 26 handwritten pages about "what I had heard and noticed in Pino Uno. Rumors. And I investigated more than that." By his count, Krill alone was said to have murdered more than 30 commandos, prisoners and civilians.

Finally Icaza took his report to

Echaverry, the FDN chief of staff in Tegucigalpa. "And they said, you know, 'Forget it. You know what happens in this revolution. Everybody gets wild. We'll take care of it,'" Icaza recalled. What they did, he said, was nothing.

**DIRECTOR** of Central Intelligence William Casey, along with his deputy, his national intelligence officer, the head of his international affairs division and Duane R. Clarridge, "Dewey," a trusted aide, dropped in on Central America for a couple of days in late June 1983: one day for El Salvador, where Casey wanted to talk to the locals about toning down their death squads, and one day in Honduras to check up on the war. Central Americans who met with Casey's crew remember a flying circus of aging men in tropical shirts, looking like insurance executives at a convention in Hawaii. Confident, energetic and abrupt as ever, Casey gave the impression that he thought everything was under control.

The problem of Suicida apparently did not come up.

Maybe there was too much information to sort through, one agent suggested, too many details. The reports on what was happening at Pino Uno were "very fuzzy," he recalled. It seemed Suicida "had been totally enraged by something that had happened to some of his people and he went in and massacred a whole bunch of people. As I remember it, it was pretty cold-blooded. Not something he did just in a rage, but he stood them up and killed them."

Another CIA man remembered "there was a little ripple of shock in the agency when it turned up he was shooting prisoners."

At least one member of the congressional intelligence committees, a supporter of the paramilitary program, heard stories of atrocities from friends in the agency. There was an account that said Suicida had taken several captives, as many as 30, and killed them all. There were rumors, as well, circulating among the civilians in Tegucigalpa; rumors they did not want to believe about men buried alive, about mutilations.

One agency veteran explained the low level of attention given Suicida's actions by the authors of the secret war as a matter mainly of bureaucratic discretion: "I think they kept it as quiet as they could as long as they could within the agency."

The CIA station chief in Tegucigalpa and Dewey, at Langley, were still big on the idea of command and control as the solution to their worst problems with the FDN. They had worked out a system to sidestep the FDN general command. The idea was to have a single officer running operations from a camp either on the frontier or, preferably, inside Nicaragua. He would be called a "theater commander" and he would see to the needs and the strategies of the various task forces. He would clear up any confusion about objectives, disbursements, discipline. He would take away the need for insubordination and clean up.

The FDN command was wary. It rejected the first name suggested by the Americans and countered with one of its own: the bright young ex-Guardia Nacional captain Hugo Villagra, who went by the code name Visage. A protégé of Somoza's son. A terrorist in Costa Rica. An airplane hijacker. A close friend of the men who sponsored El Salvador's death squads. This was the man who was supposed to clean up the operations of the FDN.

The agency accepted him.

One of his first assignments was to get Krill.

VISAGE waited on the green hillside for Krill. For almost two months Suicida and his men had been "in rebellion." Troops under one of his group commanders or another—hundreds of troops, some of them the best fighters in the contra army—were wandering all over the place. And nothing had been done.

Visage could say he had seen this coming. Suicida's

loss of control had been gradual and Visage had tried to warn the general staff months before. But then Suicida's men were fighting a lot. All the patrols were operating fairly well; they were ambushing all over the place. They inflicted a lot of casualties on the Sandinistas. Pino Uno was the force that gave the greatest results.

Still, Visage considered Krill and Caramalo complete thugs. With Krill there was this thing of killing his own commandos for the least cause. There were a great quantity of them, not just two or three. It could be for any reason at all: say, for example, that one was very late bringing some information. Visage knew that kind of thing had been common on the southern front during the war of '78 and '79. But here in the FDN they had said they weren't going to do that. You can punish a person by demanding his attention, putting him on watch or sending him on a hike, because you have to take disciplinary measures for certain failings. But you don't kill the man.

Ten, 20, 30—there may have been as many as 40 commandos killed by Krill. No one knew for certain. Their stories were lost to confused rumor and unmarked graves.

And then there had been Cancer. After Krill murdered Cancer, the camp had broken to bits. And now it was weeks, months later, and Visage had to try to put it all back together again. The Americans were saying they didn't want to get involved. Although of course they knew about these "anomalies."

Krill always moved more easily than the rest. Visage waited for him. Visage had brought with him four of the boys he had trained as his special corps to go with him to set up the new command post inside Nicaragua. They spread out slightly to cover lines of fire.

Visage ordered Krill into the waiting Huey copter. Krill told him to go to hell. He was staying here in the mountains with his men. No, said Visage, these boys he'd brought with him were here to establish a base where they could begin to recuperate all those from Pino Uno who were wandering the mountains without rest these last months. Krill was no longer needed here.

Krill looked around for backing from among the commandos. But Visage had chosen his moment well. There were no eyes to look into that signaled support. The hundred or so men in Krill's patrol were exhausted and beaten. They were not going to fight with the new theater commander. Krill was angry, but he swung himself into the Huey.

Caramalo was picked up the same day. Visage saw him as a bum now, not even trying to carry on the war with his little group of men. Both the prisoners were taken to the abandoned chicken farm—La Quinta Escuela—now run by the Argentines as their school just outside the capital.

EL SUICIDA was not arrested when Captain Luque, the Honduran liaison to the FDN, found him near Arenales. By some accounts he was with his woman Sara. He was invited back to the capital to talk. Suicida trusted Luque. He had heard there were changes and he went.

Noel Ortiz did not know what had happened to Suicida until a note was smuggled to him at Radio 15 de Septiembre. "Parientito, they've captured me." Ortiz remembered its saying. "My life's in danger. They want to kill me."

Ortiz called Villegas at La Quinta to find out what was happening.

"Suicida has got problems," said Villegas, the Argentine adviser most trusted by the FDN field commanders. "Don't get into it."

Ortiz said that if there was going to be some kind of proceeding, he wanted to defend Suicida.

"Don't get involved," said Villegas.

The manager of Radio 15 de Septiembre, Suicida's oldest friend in Tegucigalpa, drove to La Quinta to see what he could do, and once again he confronted Villegas. He could hear from one of the rooms—or thought he could—the voice of a man shouting, "Parientito! Parientito!" But Villegas would not let him in.

"They were people who never accepted any of their mistakes," explained one of the FDN officers who judged Suicida and Krill, Caramalo and Habakuk. "Not one. They said it was all envy, that it was a confabulation; they had done everything 'for the fatherland.' But 'for the fatherland' is not going around killing people who are fighting for you, your own comrades. 'For the fatherland' is not raping women."

Suicida and the rest were confronted with the charges at La Quinta in a makeshift court-martial before the general staff. Three former guardia officers, majors and lieutenant colonels, had been brought down from Miami to conduct the investigation and the proceedings. There was about the affair an atmosphere of nervous self-righteousness.

The majors and lieutenant colonels from Miami "brought out the facts encountered and the realities and made their recommendation," said one of their captors. Death.

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*THIS ARTICLE is excerpted from the forthcoming book, With the Contras, copyright © 1985 by Christopher Dickey, to be published by Simon & Schuster in January.*