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# In Honduras, the Yankees don't wear pin stripes

By SANDY GRADY

**T**EGUCIGALPA, Honduras—"Welcome to the USS Honduras," says a Special Forces captain, drinking beer at the Holiday Inn. That's the standing joke: Honduras is a U.S. aircraft carrier propelled by bananas.

Such humor makes Hondurans bristle. But the U.S. jets roaring over the narrow streets, the out-of-uniform Green Berets playing roulette in the casino, the U.S. airfields, the U.S. tanks—they stamp Honduras as the arsenal for any Central American war.

I doubt if even Nicaragua's Sandinista leaders who prattle constantly about a U.S. invasion think that's a likely event. They're sophisticated enough to know that President Reagan would need a dramatic excuse, such as a Soviet military base, and they're careful students of U.S. opinion polls. But if tempers flared, the U.S. military build-up in Honduras would be a powerful right hook waiting to be thrown.

You only have to spend a couple of days here to sense that Honduras is a nervous host to what amounts to a massive Yankee SWAT team. U.S. pilots take off each night from the Palmerola air base on surveillance flights over El Salvador. Tanks and personnel carriers rumble on the dusty plains. Marines

and paratroopers practice amphibious landings. There were about 10,000 U.S. troops on maneuvers here in April. That doesn't count the 1,000 U.S. Special Forces, military advisers, CIA agents and air personnel. Or the eight U.S. airstrips, four base camps and two radar sites. If Honduran politicians and generals get jittery, they're assured that this hardware is for their protection.

The stunning defeat in the House on \$14 million in military aid for the contras, who operate out of Honduras base camps, will probably have no quick effect. By all reports, the anti-Sandinista rebels plan to keep operating on private U.S. money. "We take the President at his word when he says he won't walk away from the contras and they'll somehow be funded," said a man in the U.S. Embassy here.

I stopped in Honduras after a tour through El Salvador and Nicaragua. You don't come away from such a trip singing "Yankee Doodle Dandy"—or confident that a U.S. policy built on military pressure will ever work in Central America. It looks different from here.

The Washington stereotype—that this is a Soviet-U.S. showdown—breaks down when you see the poverty. Gunships, troops and rhetoric won't change that. You wonder if anyone in the Reagan administration has a feel for the history, the hungers of the campesinos in the tin-roofed shacks. The Kissinger Commission's suggestion of putting \$8 billion over five years into Central America has been flatly ignored.

So what happens next? Curiously, I came away mildly optimistic about Nicaragua. Yes, Daniel Ortega & Co. are fast consolidating everything under the red-and-black Sandinista flag. Yes, there's a lot of Soviet military stuff around. Yes, their economy's going to hell. But there was a mood of hope there that you didn't feel elsewhere.

Whatever they are—Marxists, nationalists, who knows?—the Sandinistas are indisputably doing something for the people's health, literacy and pride. The question is whether the Reagan honchos will be shrewd enough to use diplomacy, pressure and aid to keep Nicaragua nonaligned. Beats war.

El Salvador, where the embassy line

is that the U.S. is "back in control," left me queasily pessimistic. Yes, thanks to C-47 gunships and U.S. trainers, El Salvador's army is quicker and meaner. But civilians are still dying. The guerrillas are more vicious. President Jose Duarte is still the army's figurehead. Army brutality goes unpunished. El Salvador felt like an armed state.

The most impressive man I met in El Salvador was a young professor, who keeps records on his country, which he obviously loves. He spent an hour brilliantly analyzing its politics and economy. Because of possible retribution, he wouldn't let me use his name, even his university's name.

**M**Y LAST question was: "Where's this country going to be in 10 years?" Long silence. Then he spoke slowly: "The war will be going on, with neither side winning. The economy will still be going down. And we will still be dependent on the United States, probably for all my life."

When he stopped, he was near tears.

In Washington, the men behind the Central America desks talk of more gunships, of free-fire zones, of winning hearts and minds, of the Red menace. Sounds familiar.

It looks different from here.