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# Flier says he briefed North on contra drop

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WASHINGTON — A crew member who participated in a secret weapons airdrop to contra rebels inside Nicaragua says he briefed former National Security Council aide Oliver L. North last April about the mission.

Three days later, on April 23, North attended two meetings with President Reagan "which appeared to relate to Central American policy," according to a Senate Intelligence Committee report issued last week. One of those meetings was also attended by a CIA official who contra sources say helped select sites for the April 11 arms drop.

That arms delivery, the first by a supposedly private network, was guided by the commander of U.S. military forces in El Salvador and CIA operatives in Costa Rica, according to crew members and contra sources.

At the time, Congress had forbidden any direct or indirect U.S. military assistance to the contras. The Senate Intelligence Committee reported that it could not determine from White House records what Reagan was told at the April 23 meetings. If Reagan was told about the U.S. involvement in the arms supply mission, it would mean he knew of apparent illegalities by his administration seven months earlier than he has said he did.

White House deputy press secretary Dan Howard said he could offer no further information about the April 23 meetings. He said the Intelligence Committee had been told everything White House officials knew about them.

The crew member who said he briefed North is Iain Crawford, 30, of Fayetteville, N.C. In an interview, Crawford described how he flew from El Salvador to Dulles Airport near Washington aboard a private corporate jet on which North was a passenger last April 20.

Crawford said he told North how seven tons of rifles, grenades and ammunition had been successfully dropped the night of April 11 from a Southern Air Transport plane to a

waiting contra unit in southern Nicaragua.

Upon hearing the details of the mission, North nodded in approval and seemed relieved, Crawford said.

"That was the air of the whole thing," Crawford said. "Jesus, we got away with it."

Reagan fired North in November after the administration said it learned that North may have illegally diverted to the contras millions of dollars in profits from covert U.S. arms sales to Iran. North's attorney, Brendan V. Sullivan Jr., declined to comment on North's meetings with Reagan or the account of the briefing given by Crawford.

Crawford, a former Green Beret, said he worked in Central America as a parachute rigger between March and May last year, preparing weapons and other supplies for airdrops and pushing them out of planes. After he left Central America, he said, his job was filled by Eugene Hasenfus, the only survivor of a contra supply plane that was shot down in southern Nicaragua on Oct. 5.

Crawford said he flew on numerous missions in the supply operation, including the Southern Air arms flight into Nicaragua on April 11.

Crawford's role in the supply operation was confirmed by five other crewmen and radio operators who requested anonymity. Crawford also produced photographs, pay stubs and other records that documented his work in Central America.

Crawford said he was told that North had gone to Central America in April "to meet with a bunch of people and supposedly solve some problems" in the contra supply operation.

According to Crawford and other sources, North's return flight to the United States was arranged by Richard B. Gadd, a retired Air Force commando and president of American National Management Corp. in Vienna, Va. Crawford said Gadd, who also was aboard the flight, was his boss and had hired him for the contra supply operation.

The plane, a seven-seat Lockheed Jetstar that was on loan to Southern Air, flew first to Miami to drop off two airplane mechanics and then to Dulles Airport. At one point during the flight, Crawford said, Gadd asked him to tell North and two other men who accompanied him about the first arms drop into Nicaragua.

"Iain, go ahead and tell these gentlemen basically what you did at the party the other night," Crawford recalled Gadd telling him.

Crawford said he kept his discussion brief because North and the other men indicated they did not want the stewardess to overhear the account.

"They kept nodding their heads at the stewardess like she wasn't supposed to know," the crewman said.

Crawford said he explained how the weapons were first flown from Aguacate, a secret Honduran military airstrip used by the contras, to Ilopango, a Salvadoran air force base in San Salvador. Crawford said he did not know the origin of the weapons or who paid for them.

Once in El Salvador, he said, the munitions were repacked and loaded on a Southern Air L-100 cargo plane, which he said Gadd told him he had rented for \$4,000 an hour. At that time, none of the supply network's limited and aging fleet of aircraft was capable of making the flight, Crawford said.

"They needed a good bird and the L-100 was a Cadillac," he said.

The Southern Air crew first tried to airdrop the weapons to a contra unit in southern Nicaragua on the night of April 10, Crawford said. But after flying in Nicaraguan airspace for about a half-hour without spotting the contras, the plane returned to El Salvador, he said. The next night, he said, the crew tried again,

this time changing their entry route into Nicaragua.

As the plane passed over the appointed drop zone, Crawford said, the contras began setting bonfires on a mountain. Upon seeing the flames below, Crawford said he began pushing the weapons out of the rear of the plane.

Crawford said he had been instructed by the Southern Air crew not to discuss the arms flight with other crew members in the supply network.

"We were not supposed to tell anyone in the operation about it," he said. "They said, 'This is going to be our own little party.'"

David M. Kirstein, an attorney for Southern Air, confirmed that a Southern Air plane and crew were used on the mission.

"They didn't do anything illegal," he said.

He added that Southern officials were "cooperating with all the federal authorities" in Justice Department and congressional probes of the contra supply effort.

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Army Col. James Steele, commander of U.S. military forces in El Salvador, helped plot the path of the Southern Air arms drop, according to an eyewitness. The weapons delivery was made at a time when U.S. military aid to the rebels was illegal because of a congressional ban.

The Reagan administration has repeatedly said that the United States did not provide military assistance to the contras while the congressional ban was in effect.

The first April 23 meeting with North and Reagan, according to White House documents, included a discussion of a recent trip to Central America by Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams.

Others in attendance included Vice President Bush, Deputy Secretary of State John Whitehead, Abrams, White House chief of staff Donald T. Regan, then-national security adviser John M. Poindexter and National Security Council senior director Donald Fortier, who was North's boss, the Senate Intelligence Committee reported.

The committee said that "no topic is listed" in the White House documents for the second meeting. In addition to Reagan and North, the attendees included Regan, Poindexter, a Central American security official and his wife, and the senior CIA officer from the Central American country, according to the committee.

Sources have identified the senior CIA officer as the agency's station chief in Costa Rica. Reliable contra sources have said that he assisted in planning the weapons delivery in the April 11 air drop.

The station chief later was the subject of an internal CIA investigation "concerning unauthorized contacts with private supporters of the Nicaraguan resistance," the Intelligence Committee reported.

Asked for comment about the April 23 meetings, Howard, the White House spokesman for national security affairs, said, "Everything we've got to say has been said to the investigating committees. . . . If the committees couldn't make a determination as to what happened from the documents we've turned over to them, there's no way in hell we can go back into this and find out now what happened."