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U.S. Oversaw Supplies To Rebels, Officials Say

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MIAMI, Dec. 7 — United States officials in Central America were more involved in the covert program to supply Nicaraguan rebels than they at first indicated, according to three American diplomats and to Americans who flew guns to the rebels.

United States officials apparently gained approval from Central American governments for supply flights to the rebels early this year when such flights were legal under the State Department's program to send them nonlethal aid.

But many of the same American flight crews, planes and airfields were used then and later to deliver weapons to the rebels, according to American officials and Americans who flew the guns to the rebels.

'Stretching the Meaning'

"They're stretching the meaning of private when they talk about this," said an American who flew on the rebel flights. "It would be more accurate to say that this was a privately run operation that was officially manipulated."

United States officials in El Salvador, Honduras and Costa Rica kept close track of the secret weapons flights to the contras throughout the program and in some instances appear to have helped them, according to American flight crews and to three American officials.

But they said daily management of the program was purposely left to privately contracted American flight crews. These, they said, were aided by three Cuban-Americans, all former C.I.A. agents.

The prohibition against daily involvement was forced by Congressional restrictions against aiding the contras militarily, according to two American diplomats.

Rebel Plane Is Downed

The supply flights came to light when a rebel cargo plane was shot down over Nicaragua two months ago. Since then, Administration officials have repeatedly said the flights were strictly private.

Three American officials said the United States Ambassador to El Salvador, Edwin G. Corr, was regularly informed of the secret supply effort, which was based at the main Salvadoran Air Force base at Ilopango.

An embassy spokesman said such monitoring was a necessary part of the Ambassador's work and that no American official had done anything "illegal or improper" in regard to the rebel supply program.

In Costa Rica, those involved in the program built a secret airstrip last March in the town of Liberia near the sensitive Nicaraguan border with the help of the local police commander. According to a close friend of the commander, he kept in frequent contact with American Embassy officials.

Two Americans who flew weapons from the airstrip said it was built by three Americans who had been contracted by Richard Gadd, a retired American military officer who also had a State Department contract to deliver nonlethal aid to the contras. They said the same crews that flew the nonlethal aid flew the guns to the rebels. Mr. Gadd has refused to comment.

Pressure Called Intense

When the present Costa Rican Government took office this year, it closed the airstrip as part of a crackdown on contra operations. The action brought an appeal from American officials "for a little more help" for the rebels, according to a senior Costa Rican official. "You wouldn't believe the pressure we were under," the official said.

Civilian and military officials in El Salvador and Honduras said in interviews in recent weeks that they permitted the covert program to begin because they were told by American officials that it had official American backing. It appears that only such official backing allowed the contra supply flights to regularly enter Honduran airspace at odd hours along the volatile Nicaraguan border, which is monitored 24 hours a day by a highly sophisticated radar that until recently was overseen by an American military adviser, according to diplomats in Honduras.

Official American backing also accounts for why the American air crews on rebel planes were given a warehouse at the main Salvadoran air base at Ilopango, were issued Salvadoran Air Force identity cards and were allowed to keep safe houses in the capital of San Salvador.

In addition, the chief former-C.I.A. operative in the program, Felix Rodriguez, was given a United States Embassy identity card and radio, according to embassy officials. Several Americans who flew on the secret flights said they often met American officials during their work in El Salvador and Honduras.

Two members of the American Embassy military group in El Salvador monitored weapons flights, as did C.I.A. agents at the main contra air base in Aguacate in Honduras, the crew members said. In some instances it appears that American officials may have aided weapons flights, particularly in helping arrange arms drops to rebel units operating in Nicaragua near the Costa Rican border.

Arms Pledge Reported

According to two Nicaraguan rebel officials, the C.I.A. promised weapons to rebel combat units along the border in May and June. Under legally permitted "intelligence sharing," a C.I.A. agent asked the rebels if they were in need of guns, one contra official said, with the understanding being that an affirmative answer meant that arms would be delivered.

According to three Americans who delivered the promised weapons, the three Cuban-Americans working as liaisons for the supply program based in El Salvador carried the orders for where and when arms were to be delivered.

One of the agents, code-named "Ralph," was referred to as "The Traveler" because he shuttled between the United States, Costa Rica, Honduras and El Salvador, setting up weapons drops. There is no evidence that Ralph, who is believed to be Rafael Quintero, a former C.I.A. agent, met active C.I.A. operatives.

But telephone records from rebel safe houses in El Salvador show successive telephone calls on the same days to what appears to be the home of a C.I.A. agent in Costa Rica and to the American Embassy there, as well as to a White House office used by Lieut. Col. Oliver L. North and to the company of Richard V. Secord, a retired United States Air Force general. General Secord appears to be a key intermediary in both contra and Iran arms deals.

Colonel Said to Be Involved

In El Salvador, according to two Americans who flew contra supply missions, Col. James Steele, the head of the United States Embassy military group, monitored the operation and was at the military airport several times when weapons supply flights left for Nicaragua. Other American military men and C.I.A. agents were also at the airport, the crew members said.

In addition, members of the embassy's military group lent handguns to some rebel flight crews for their personal use, one of the American crew members said.

According to Eugene Hasenfus, the American crew member who was captured when a Nicaraguan unit shot down the rebel plane two months ago, killing three other crew members, Colonel Steele once visited a rebel safe house to reprimand contra flight crews for being undisciplined, forcing the departure of three pilots.

An American official in El Salvador said it was true that Colonel Steele had

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reprimanded rebel flight crews for rowdiness and had also kept Ambassador Corr informed of "what was going on with the contra flights."

But the American official insisted that Colonel Steele had not "directed or participated" in the rebel flights. An Administration official said that there were arguments within the United States Government about the supply program and that C.I.A. agents had complained that it was poorly run, a conclusion that was reinforced when incriminating documents were found in the plane downed in Nicaragua.

In contrast, a Nicaraguan rebel official noted that when a C.I.A. contra

supply plane crashed in Costa Rica in 1983, no documents were found and the C.I.A. agent in charge of the operation ordered that jaws be removed from bodies to prevent dental identification.

But when asked if American officials felt it had been worth supporting such a high-risk operation with so little apparent daily control, a senior American diplomat in Central America said in an interview that the answer might be affirmative. "The hard-liners in Washington probably think it was worthwhile," he said. "They paid a cost, but they kept the contras alive until Congress approved new military aid to them."