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Retired General Said to Be Behind Contra Flights

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MIAMI, Nov. 27 — An American who was a pilot on secret supply flights to Nicaraguan guerrillas says the chief pilot for the flights told him "several times" that a retired general, Richard V. Secord, was "behind the operation."

In addition to the Secord report, telephone records for "safe houses" in El Salvador used by Nicaraguan rebels, or contras, list calls to what appears to be the home of a United States Embassy employee in Costa Rica.

An embassy spokesman said the employee could not be named "for security reasons." It is against the law to print the name of an American intelligence agent.

The embassy spokesman refused to comment when asked whether another number that was dialed from contra safe houses was an unlisted line in the United States Embassy in Costa Rica.

The calls to Costa Rica support other evidence that American officials there may have been involved in the contra supply operation, which Reagan Administration officials have contended was "strictly private."

History of Work in Iran

Mr. Secord, the retired general, has a long history of work in Iran for the United States Government, and his company is reported to have once sold arms to the regime of Shah Mohammed Riza Pahlevi. There have recently been unconfirmed reports that he might have traveled to Iran as part of the Reagan Administration's dealings with the Government of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

The chief pilot, William J. Cooper, was killed with two others when Nicaraguan soldiers shot down his plane on Oct. 5 as it was ferrying weapons over southern Nicaragua. The lone survivor was Eugene Hasenfus, who has been sentenced to 30 years' imprisonment by a Nicaraguan political court for terrorism and other crimes.

The telephone records from rebel safe houses in El Salvador, which were obtained by reporters from the national telephone company, also offer possible evidence of General Secord's involvement in the rebel operation. The records list more than two dozen calls to the Secord company in Virginia, Stanford Technology Incorporated.

Mr. Secord has denied that he was involved in the supply operation.

The covert contra supply operation was revealed when the supply plane was shot down, killing Mr. Cooper as well as Wallace B. Sawyer, the co-pilot, and a rebel radio operator. Mr. Hasenfus parachuted to safety and was captured.

'Someone We Respected'

According to a third American who flew rebel planes out of El Salvador, although General Secord may have been deeply involved in the rebel operation, someone else actually hired Mr. Cooper to set up the rebel flights. The American crew member refused to comment when asked if the man who had hired Mr. Cooper worked for the American Government.

"He was someone we respected," was all the crew member would say of the unnamed organizer.

Three Americans who worked on the supply program said previous descriptions of the operation had given a misleading impression of how it was directed.

The Americans said the day-to-day manager of the program was not a former Central Intelligence Agency agent named Felix Rodriguez. They said Mr. Rodriguez, whose code name was Max Gomez, was mainly in charge of getting Salvadoran Air Force permission for the rebel air operation.

They said the actual manager of the contra supply program was Mr. Cooper, who was a former C.I.A. pilot, as were several other pilots in the rebel program.

Role of Vice President

As a consequence, one rebel crew member suggested, Vice President Bush may have had less knowledge of the rebel supply operation than some reports have suggested. The crew member said that although Mr. Bush has said he knew Felix Rodriguez, he apparently did not know Mr. Cooper, who actually ran the program.

The three American crew members complained that the rebel program in El Salvador, which may have been financed by profits from the sale of arms to Iran, received far less than the \$10 million or more that has been reported as having been generated by the sales.

"The Nicaraguans didn't see anywhere near that much money," an American crew member said.

In Costa Rica, a spokesman for the United States Embassy, Mark Kirschik, said the embassy official whose house was telephoned from contra safe houses and whose name cannot be published for security reasons worked as a "political and economic analyst" in the embassy.

Series of 'No Comments'

The official apparently works in the embassy's Office of Regional Reports, according to other embassy sources. Mr. Kirschik refused to comment when

asked if the Office of Regional Reports was an intelligence bureau, and he also refused to comment when asked why the official had been telephoned from a rebel safe house.

An English-language newspaper in Coata Rico, The Tico Times, reported that another number dialed from rebel safe houses in El Salvador was an unlisted line to the United States Embassy. Mr. Kirschik refused to comment on whether the number was in the Office of Regional Reports.

Besides the evidence of telephone calls from rebel safe houses to an embassy official, local residents say two Americans oversaw the building of a secret airstrip in Costa Rica earlier this year that was used by one of the rebel planes from El Salvador, according to an American crew member.

Contra supply flights over Costa Rica and southern Nicaragua began shortly after American intelligence operatives promised rebels there that they would get weapons, according to two rebel officials.

Among the documents carried by Mr. Cooper, according to Nicaraguan officials, was a code book that lists codes for Washington, Honduras, El Salvador and Costa Rica, as well as for an air base in Honduras, Palmerola, that is managed by the United States.

Mr. Hasenfus said in a recent interview that Mr. Cooper used the codes during telephone calls that he made from safe houses to the United States.

Mr. Hasenfus added that he had believed the supply operation was supported by the United States because Mr. Cooper had told him it was backed by the "top shelf" in Washington. In Mr. Cooper's code book, which was seen by a reporter, the code reference given for Washington is "top floor."