

RECEIVED
AGE A15

WASHINGTON POST
26 April 1987

Ex-Commando Speculates on CIA Aid to Contras

Honduran Radio Base, Arms Airlift, Wounded Helicopter Pilot Described to Hill Probers

J By Dan Morgan
Washington Post Staff Writer

A former Army commando who worked in the contras' private network has told congressional investigators that a mystery plane piloted by Americans ferried military supplies to the Nicaraguan rebels last spring from a base at Aguacate, Honduras.

P Iain Crawford said another U.S. crewman told him that the unmarked DC6, loaded with ammunition and supplies, was on a mission for the Central Intelligence Agency. But he said he had no conclusive evidence of who controlled it.

The U.S. government was prohibited by Congress from providing military assistance to the contras from October 1984 to October 1986. A private network under the direction of a since-ousted National Security Council aide, Marine Lt. Col. Oliver L. North, kept the pipeline going, but U.S. agencies insist they were not directly involved.

Crawford said he had described the plane to investigators informally, but was not questioned about it when he gave a sworn deposition.

"It wasn't the contras' and it wasn't ours," Crawford said of the private network. "But it was there. So whose was it?"

Crawford also said that last May 13 he accompanied a man he thinks was a CIA employe aboard a UH1H helicopter that took food and plastic explosives from the remote Aguacate base to a detachment of contras on the Rio Coco.

Crawford, 30, now runs Force

Inc. of Fayetteville, N.C., which sells such equipment as backpacks and parachutes for air drops.

Crawford says he was hired to work in Central America in January 1986 by the Vienna, Va.-based companies of retired Lt. Col. Richard B. Gadd. From March through June he lived and worked in El Salvador and Honduras, rigging ammunition boxes and supplies on pallets and participating in more than 20 parachute drops. He was later replaced by Eugene Hasenus, who was captured Oct. 5 when a C123 was shot down in Nicaragua, exposing the private network.

At the Aguacate airstrip, Crawford said, he met two Americans who he thinks were CIA employes. He said they lived in a hilltop cottage having two racks of radios, a situation board and a satellite roof antenna. "They were not part of our operation," Crawford said.

In early May, he said, he saw a damaged helicopter being brought back from the direction of Nicaragua by a Chinook helicopter accompanied by heavily armed smaller ones. One of the Americans told him that the helicopter had been badly shot up and that an "agency pilot" had been severely wounded by ground fire and nearly bled to death.

On May 13, Crawford said, he was bored and asked to ride on the helicopter with one of the Americans. The trip turned out to be no milk run.

The pilot, he said, was strapped into an armor-plated seat, wore a bulletproof vest and had a flak vest draped over his legs. The normal destination—the contra base at

Bocay—had "gone hot" as a result of enemy troops in the area, and the explosives and supplies had to be delivered to another point just inside Nicaragua, Crawford said.

The DC6 was based at Aguacate throughout this period, he added. Normally, Crawford said he was told by other Americans there, its pilots arrived at dusk aboard a twin-engine Beechcraft and flew the supply plane to an unknown drop point, returning before dawn and departing the same day.

However, during one such run, Crawford was told, the plane was damaged when an abortive drop of improperly rigged ammunition forced it into a near-catastrophic dive.

On April 20, he said, he came back to the United States with Gadd, North and North's principal private operative, retired Air Force Maj. Gen. Richard V. Secord. Crawford described a drop inside Nicaragua en route using an L100 cargo plane and a crew hired by Gadd.

Overall, Crawford said, the private network seemed to him to be wasteful, inefficient and badly organized. He said it was plagued by inadequate communications and parts. It was short of competent radio operators, cargo planes were sent out on dangerous missions over Nicaragua with no backup generators, and personnel often were paid late, he said.