

American held in Nicaragua speaks to press

Associated Press

MANAGUA, Nicaragua — The surviving crewman held in Nicaragua after his cargo plane was shot down said yesterday that he was an American aviation specialist who boarded the aircraft in El Salvador after it began its journey in Miami.

Eugene Hasenfus, 45, of Marinette, Wis., was allowed to speak to local reporters briefly in San Carlos, Nicaragua, near the site where he parachuted to the ground and was captured after a surface-to-air missile hit the plane.

The Nicaraguan government has said that Hasenfus was a U.S. military adviser from El Salvador, on a plane that was downed Sunday while carrying weapons and ammunition for Nicaraguan rebels, known as contras. It said the three other men aboard were killed.

U.S. officials said yesterday that the plane and its crew members had no connection with the American government.

Hasenfus said the plane flew from Miami, picked him up in El Salvador, then took a Nicaraguan aboard in Honduras and entered Nicaraguan airspace from Costa Rica at a site known as La Noca on the San Juan River.

The Nicaraguan was one of the three men killed in the crash, according to Hasenfus.

Nicaraguan officials said Hasenfus identified the other two men killed as Americans William H. Cooper, the pilot, of Southern Air Transport Co. of Miami, and Wallace Blaine Sawyer Jr., the co-pilot. No home towns were given.

Nicaragua had said initially that all three dead men were Americans.

Photographers taken to the crash site said they asked Hasenfus what he was doing in Nicaragua. They said he responded, "I was shot out of the sky."

It was not clear from Hasenfus' brief remarks whether he was a military man or a civilian. Pentagon officials said a man named Eugene Hasenfus had served as a Marine and was honorably discharged in 1966.

The camouflage-painted plane was shot down with a Soviet-made surface-to-air missile at a spot 35 miles north of Costa Rica and 91 miles southeast of Managua, Sandinista officials said.

The New Nicaragua news agency reported yesterday that the aircraft had been downed by "special forces" of the Sandinista People's Army. Special missile-toting units are said to have been operating in the area during the last few months, reportedly tracking the flight paths of contra supply planes.

Hasenfus was captured by Sandinista troops "at the moment he jumped by parachute," the pro-Sandinista daily El Nuevo Diario said.

A Nicaraguan military helicopter picked Hasenfus up at the crash site, a remote jungle area north of the San Juan River, and he was flown to Managua last night. The three men's bodies were reported to be still at the crash site.

The Defense Ministry said the downed plane, tentatively identified as a DC-6 or a C-123, carried 50,000 rounds of ammunition for Soviet-made AK-47 rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, dozens of automatic rifles, jungle boots and other military supplies.

Alejandro Bendana, the Foreign Ministry secretary-general, said yesterday on ABC-TV's Good Morning America program that the plane was on "a CIA operation with CIA operatives."

"You have U.S. citizens now dying in Mr. Reagan's war against Nicaragua," Bendana said.

He said the survivor "describes himself as a U.S. military adviser stationed in El Salvador." The United States has about 55 military advisers in El Salvador to help the army fight a leftist insurgency.

Secretary of State George P. Shultz said in Washington that the plane did not belong to the U.S. government.

He said the aircraft "wasn't an American cargo plane" but was hired by "private people," including Americans. He did not name the people.

"They had no connection with the U.S. government at all," Shultz said. Also in Washington, CIA spokesman Kathy Pherson said: "The guy doesn't work for us and CIA is not involved. . . . There are congressional restrictions on assistance to the contras, and we do not break those restrictions."

In Wisconsin, Hasenfus' wife, Sally, said of her husband in a telephone interview yesterday: "I don't know where he is and what he's doing. I only know what I see on the TV, too, and I really don't know any more."

A brother, William Hasenfus, 47, of Oshkosh, Wis., said Eugene Hasenfus began working last summer for an air freight company in Florida whose name and location he did not

know. He said that Eugene was a former Marine and that the brothers once ran a parachuting school.

Pentagon officials said they were not sure whether the Eugene Hasenfus the Pentagon had in its records as a former Marine corporal was the same man captured in Nicaragua. The Hasenfus in its records is 45 years old and served on active duty in the Marines from May 9, 1960, to June 17, 1965, and was honorably discharged on May 13, 1966. He was assigned to Camp Pendleton, Calif., and had no overseas duty. His home town was listed as Marinette, Wis.

Several groups of contras have fought the Sandinistas for 4½ years. The United States supports them, and a bill authorizing \$100 million in military and humanitarian aid is pending in Congress.

The bill, however, would continue the congressional ban on using U.S. military personnel in support of the contras, including U.S. advisers on Nicaraguan soil.

The Nicaraguan Defense Ministry had said the plane was shot down at

12:45 p.m. Sunday. Americans familiar with contra aid flights said it has been common to use El Salvador's airport in supplying the rebels, but added that a flight aboard a slow plane into Nicaragua during mid-day was considered highly risky.

The largest contra group, the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, said in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, that the plane did not belong to it. The group has a small fleet of propeller-driven airplanes used to drop supplies by parachute to its forces in Nicaragua.

NBC-TV News, quoting unidentified contra officials, reported last night that Americans were involved in a cargo operation to supply the rebels. The officials said that each man got several thousand dollars per flight and that at least two flights a month were made from a secret base in El Salvador, all financed by a friendly foreign government, NBC said.

United Press International contributed to this article.