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How jail escapee joined rebels' supply network

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Friends of a Cuban exile, accused of terrorism, took advantage of a secret contra supply network to give him a new identity after his escape from a Venezuelan jail last year, telephone records and interviews show.

Salvadoran phone records show that calls from a San Salvador house rented by a "Ramon Medina" were placed to the Miami homes or offices of a number of people with close connections to the accused bomber, Luis Posada Carriles. Among the recipients of the calls were Posada's wife, his family doctor and a longtime friend.

Eugene Haseafus, the captive American flight crewman, last month named "Medina" as one of two Cuban exiles directing contra supply flights at a Salvadoran Air Force base. Nicaraguan authorities later said that Medina and Posada were the same person. Now Posada's doctor and another friend have acknowledged, in interviews that Posada made the calls from the Medina "safe house."

It is still unclear who ordered, controlled and paid for the contra supply effort mounted from San Salvador's Ilopango Air Base. It is also unclear who authorized Posada — whose whereabouts are unknown — to join it. But the new evidence shows that the contra support system was used in this instance to harbor an interna-

tional fugitive under the noses of U.S. officials.

U.S. officials have not denied that they monitored the supply operation, but maintained in interviews last week that they knew nothing of Posada's participation.

"We obviously had no knowledge of this man's presence in El Salvador, if indeed he was there," a White House spokesman said.

'Far-fetched'

Intelligence and law enforcement sources familiar with Cuban exile activities said however, that it was difficult to believe that the appearance in El Salvador of a man with Posada's extensive espionage portfolio would have gone unnoticed.

"There is no way Posada could have gotten involved inside Ilopango without some [CIA] agency involvement," said a Washington-based law enforcement official. An intelligence source described as

"far-fetched" the official U.S. government denials.

Posada, a one-time CIA agent, Bay of Pigs veteran and explosives expert, escaped Aug. 18, 1985, from a Venezuelan prison. Venezuelan authorities have accused Posada and Miami pediatrician Orlando Bosch of masterminding a 1976 bombing that destroyed a Cubana de Aviacion DC-8 airliner shortly after it took off from Bridgetown, Barbados. Seventy-three died.

Although the U.S. role in the Ilopango supply operation remains ambiguous, it is clear from interviews and documents that Posada's friends broke him out of jail in a carefully planned plot, secretly spirited him across the Caribbean and took advantage of the clandestine contra world to stash him in Central America.

A 1977 CIA biography says Posada, now 58, first received demolition and weapons training before the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion. He formally joined the CIA in 1965 as a military instructor and informant on the activities of several Cuban exile organizations plotting to overthrow the Communist government of Fidel Castro.

In 1965, the CIA document says, Posada collaborated briefly with Guatemalan conspirators seeking to tap his demolitions expertise for a coup d'etat in that country. In 1967 he moved to Venezuela where he held a variety of high-level jobs in government intelligence and special police operations for seven years. In 1974 he resigned as operations chief of the Venezuelan intelligence service to set up his own security agency.

CIA informant

Throughout the period, the agency document said, Posada remained on the CIA payroll, routinely passing along information on Venezuelan secret police activities and Cuban exile affairs. Exiles respected him as a dedicated anti-Castro militant and a highly rated counterinsurgency expert.

In June 1976 Posada — and Bosch, among others — attended an anti-Castroist "summit" in the Dominican Republic, where nu-

merous terrorist missions were assigned. A string of bombings followed in Colombia, Panama, Trinidad and Tobago and Barbados.

Posada's above-ground career abruptly ended in October 1976 when Venezuelan authorities arrested him and Bosch as the suspected "intellectual authors" of the airliner bombing. Two younger men, Freddy Lugo and Hernan Ricardo, Posada's part-time Venezuelan photo technician, were arrested for placing the bomb.

The case has languished in a variety of Venezuelan courts for 10 years, during which Posada, a "spirited and bold man," chafed at the snail's pace of Venezuelan justice, according to Salvador Romani, a Cuban exile leader in Caracas. Posada twice tried and failed to escape. He told Romani and other friends after the second attempt that "if he didn't get out he was going to kill himself." Posada, Romani said, "was a desperate man."

The prison break, when it finally came, was easy, at least in the initial stages.

Venezuelan Cabinet ministers later said Posada had been paying key penitentiary officials a daily stipend to buy their complicity in his escape. In mid-1985 a friendly exile couple sold his house for about \$11,000, sending half the money to Posada and half to his wife Nieves in Miami. On Aug. 18, 1985, after paying the equivalent of \$28,600 in all to prison authorities, Posada walked out of the San Juan de los Morros jail some 60 miles south of Caracas and disappeared. The source of the remainder of the bribe money is unknown.

A Miami wholesaler and Bay of Pigs veteran who said he had spoken with one of two Cuban exiles who aided Posada in his escape said that Posada was told while he was still in prison that a job with the contras was waiting for him in El Salvador.

Posada's Venezuelan lawyer, Francisco Leandro Mora, would not confirm this, but admitted that the escape "was meticulously planned" with plenty of outside help. It was designed "to get Luis out of the country within 24 hours," he said.

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Forced to hide

According to Leandro Mora and Venezuelan journalist Rafael del Naranco, who later interviewed Posada, the conspirators missed signals in the first hours after the escape, however, and were forced to hide the fugitive in a Caracas apartment building for about a month. When public uproar over the escape subsided, the conspirators took Posada to another safe house on Venezuela's Caribbean coast, Leandro Mora and Del Naranco said.

It is still unclear exactly how much time Posada spent in this second hideout. But he sent at least two letters to friends in Caracas, one dated Oct. 9, 1985, the other dated Oct. 29.

The letters give a sense of Posada's depression: "I am free, but I feel a deep sadness because my friends are still in prison."

Although he was trapped for the moment, the network of Cuban exiles and sympathizers that had sprung him from jail now allowed him to send messages to friends and family more or less as he wished: "Where I am there is a total absence of news, and I don't know what's happening. Nieves will call you and will transmit [information] to a friend who will get it to me through a complex system of communications," said one letter. He enclosed a Miami telephone number for his wife.

Del Naranco said Posada spent a bit over two weeks on the Venezuelan coast, then flew or sailed to a "nearby island" which Leandro Anaya identified as "Aruba, Bonaire or Curacao," tiny Dutch territories just a few miles off the beach.

The Miami wholesaler said that the two men who eventually accompanied Posada across the Caribbean were both middle-aged anti-Castro activists from Miami, with businesses and families. The older of the two exiles had been a lieutenant in Cuba's Bureau of Anti-Communist Repression under former strongman Fulgencio Batista, he said. Both men were Bay of Pigs veterans who had worked for several months in their off hours raising money for and shipping supplies to the contras.

'Unknown soldiers'

"Unknown soldiers" in the anti-Communist struggle, the wholesaler called them.

The wholesaler, who met Posada in the U.S. Army and also knew him in Venezuela, said the two men stayed with the fugitive throughout the odyssey.

"A guy in jail nine years can't be left alone on the street," he said.

Sometime late last fall, Posada and his friends flew to a private sugar plantation in the Dominican Republic, the source said, changed planes, then proceeded to a logging camp in Honduras.

There, the wholesaler said, Posada's friends provided him with a Salvadoran passport — official-looking but false. Duly documented, Posada crossed into El Salvador without incident and began his new life as "Ramon Medina," the source said.

Several Cuban American sources in Miami said they believed that Jorge Mas Canosa, chairman of the Cuban American National Foundation and another Bay of Pigs veteran, had used his influential contacts in Washington to arrange Posada's Ilopango job. Mas Canosa denied this.

"I like the guy, but Posada is the subject of judicial proceedings" in Venezuela, Mas said Friday. "He hasn't been found guilty, but due to those circumstances I wouldn't have gotten involved."

Another Bay of Pigs veteran said it was likely that Posada had been brought into the contra operation by Felix Rodriguez, a longtime Cuban American CIA agent whom Vice President George Bush recommended as an adviser to the Salvadoran Armed Forces. When Posada arrived, Rodriguez was already working in Ilopango as "Max Gomez."

"We have been asked if Mr. Bush knew or knows Ramon Medina," Steven Hart, the vice president's spokesman, said last week. "The answer is no. The same answer holds for Ramon Posada or any other names or aliases."

By April, Posada had set up housekeeping in a two-story stucco house in a fancy San Salvador neighborhood. He apparently felt comfortable enough to sit for an interview with Miami friend Ernesto Aviño and Venezuelan journalist Del Naranco "somewhere in Central America."

'Like a chameleon'

Del Naranco's report said Posada claimed to have undergone extensive plastic surgery. The Miami businessman said he was certain that claim was untrue and had been planted only to confuse Posada's potential trackers. Posada's attorney said his client was, in

any event, "like a chameleon" — an expert in disguise.

Little is known about Posada's work at Ilopango. Downed American crewman Hasenfus said "Medina" was little more than an errand boy for "Gomez." Other sources suggest that Posada had greater responsibility and certainly had greater freedom of movement.

Several times, Posada contacted Hernan Ricardo, still jailed in Venezuela for the Cuban jetliner bombing — from several places. One letter to Ricardo in late spring included a photograph taken in Peñas Blancas, a tiny settlement on the Nicaraguan border with Costa Rica. Small groups of contras have often worked in that area.

In El Salvador, meanwhile, Posada, Rodriguez, Hasenfus and

others working in the Ilopango supply operation were routinely using their safe-house telephones to call family and friends in Miami and elsewhere.

Posada called Miami physician Dr. Alberto Hernandez from his safe house July 23, records obtained from the Salvadoran phone utility ANTEL show.

Hernandez said last week that he had been the Posada family physician for years. "I talked about medical treatment for his family, and that's it," Hernandez said of the call. "I didn't want to get into any long discussion of his situation."

Hernandez, a prominent physician active in both Cuban exile causes and in providing medical aid to wounded contras, heads an informal committee that raises funds on behalf of the Cuban airliner defendants.

One of its members is Bay of Pigs veteran Syla Cuervo, an old friend of Posada and the godfather of Posada's son. Phone records show that, in July, Posada called Cuervo in Miami at least twice from his safe house. Cuervo said in an interview that Posada may also have called on other occasions. He said they discussed family problems.

The records also show that Posada's wife received phone calls on July 13, 23, 27 and 29 from the San Salvador house. Mrs. Posada did not respond to messages left Thursday and Friday.

Several Cuban American sources suggested in interviews that Hernandez's and Cuervo's Committee to Free Orlando Bosch could have channeled money to finance Posada's escape. Both men said they respected Posada's decision to flee prison, but had opposed escape because it might harm Bosch's efforts to free himself legally.

"We didn't provide money to get Posada out, ever," Hernandez said.

Besides Posada's own calls, someone phoned over 60 times this summer from Posada's house to Miami's Southern Air Transport, a one-time CIA firm that apparently serviced Hasenfus' doomed contra supply plane.

Rodriguez — Posada's co-worker — also apparently made liberal use of Posada's safe house phone. He called his family in Miami and his friend Eugenio Rolando Martinez, a Bay of Pigs veteran and convicted Watergate burglar. Martinez said Rodriguez asked for video movies.

And from the phone in Rodriguez's own rented house around the block from Posada, someone called the White House office of Lt. Col. Oliver North, a close supervisor of private contra aid efforts.

"While it is possible that the U.S. government didn't know about the presence of this guy [Posada] in Ilopango, I find that far-fetched," said an intelligence source with long experience in Cuban exile and contra affairs. "Uncle Sam must have had a good fix on him. It is more plausible that Uncle Sam knew who he was and that his presence there did not bother us."

Posada faces no criminal charges in the United States, law enforcement records show.

Leonardo Somarriba, spokesman for the contra alliance UNO, said he was unable to confirm that Posada had worked at Ilopango. He said the question was of "no concern."

"If you hire an outfit to do a job for you, it doesn't make you responsible for everybody in that outfit," he said. "We are not a government. We don't have the capability to check everybody out."

Herald Washington correspondent Alfonso Chardy and staff writer Tim Golden in San Salvador contributed to this report.



Luis Posada Carriles: Bribed way out of Venezuelan prison.



Orlando Bosch: Charged with Posada in airliner attack.