

SECRET WARRIORS

U.S. Advisers Have Taken Up Arms in El Salvador

VOICE AUGUST 11, 1987

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MR. NIELDS: Well, you put in some blanks. You said "blank" in two places. There's nothing classified about either of these words. One of them is CIA—

LT COL. NORTH: Well—

MR. NIELDS: —and the other is Southern Command. "Delicate stage of transition from CIA run op to Southern Command run op."

LT COL. NORTH: That's referring to the country in which FR [Felix Rodriguez] was living, and I thought that was a classified program. It has nothing to do with the Nicaraguan resistance.

El Salvador was the country in question, not Nicaragua. Chief House Counsel John Nields was quoting from notes that North had taken on a conversation with then U.S. Southern Command head General Paul Gorman; the brief exchange between Nields and North, on the afternoon of July 8, went largely unnoticed in the voluminous Iran-contra press coverage. But they shed first light on the participation of U.S. military and paramilitary personnel in combat in El Salvador.

Fighting in El Salvador has been more intense and claimed more lives than the better-known "contra war" in nearby

Nicaragua. El Salvador has been a laboratory for the post-Vietnam Pentagon, which has been trying to figure out how to run a massive counterinsurgency program without committing U.S. troops. Judging from death tolls, the Pentagon's efforts have been quite "successful." But in another sense, the plan has gone awry. A military counterinsurgency specialist notes that the U.S. never intended to implement some "Machiavellian plan." That, however, is exactly what the Salvador counterinsurgency has turned out to be.

The U.S. has backed the Salvadoran government in its war against leftist insurgents for the past seven years. The Reagan administration has provided El Salvador with over \$1.5 billion in war-related aid since 1981, and has assigned a group of U.S. military advisers to the country. The advisers, limited by a White House-Congress agreement to no more than 55 at a time, are prohibited from entering combat.

Yet U.S. advisers have engaged in combat in El Salvador, according to interviews with military sources.

The exchange between Nields and North refers to a secret military operation involving both the Central Intelligence Agency and the U.S. Army's 7th Special Forces of the Southern Command. Following the initial exposure of this operation during the July 8 hearings,

CIA officials quoted in *The Los Angeles Times* admitted that the agency's operatives had trained and led military teams in El Salvador. These officials would not say whether the units sought out the enemy or willingly engaged in combat. The purpose of these missions, CIA officials said, was to collect intelligence information on guerrilla movements in order to call in air strikes.

Documents obtained from the War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, however, indicate that "Long Range Reconnaissance Patrols," trained and led by the CIA with assistance from the U.S. Army Special Forces, were heavily engaged in combat. The documents, dated January 1, 1985, state: "One of the more gratifying improvements was the establishment of a Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol (PRAL) capability.... This unit, operating in small teams, has accounted for hundreds of guerrilla casualties and has been instrumental in disrupting guerrilla combat operations, logistical nets and base camps."

These teams consist of two to seven specially trained Salvadoran troops, led by a CIA paramilitary operative. It is inconceivable that the CIA operatives who accompanied and led these units did not engage in combat. The War College report, for example, which is entitled "El Salvador: Observations and Experiences in Counterinsurgency," describes the

PRAL teams as one of the most effective components of the government's counterinsurgency: "The unit has proven that El Salvadoran troops, with the proper training and leadership, can operate effectively in small groups and they have set a standard of valor for the rest of the [Armed Forces]" (emphasis added).

The War College documents state that PRAL units were first trained by the Third Battalion of the U.S. 7th Special Forces in Panama. Former 7th Special Forces advisers with experience in El Salvador and Central America reveal that U.S. military advisers, in addition to CIA paramilitary operatives, engaged in combat operations in El Salvador and neighboring countries.

Many of these advisers are from Puerto Rico, where the U.S. military recruits heavily with an eye toward Central America operations. A former Special Forces operative from Puerto Rico, who participated in the 1968 Bolivian campaign that resulted in the death of Che Guevara, was called back from retirement to aid in counterinsurgency training.

The bulk of this covert involvement, former Special Forces operatives say, occurred from 1982 to 1984, when U.S. military aid and assistance to El Salvador was highly controversial.

When the Reagan administration first came to power in 1981, El Salvador, not Nicaragua, was its primary concern in Central America. Leftist guerrilla forces

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BY FRANK SMYTH

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of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) were growing and by 1982 controlled up to one-third of the country's terrain. There was great fear in Washington of a leftist takeover, and the administration was still committed to preventing the "loss" of a second Central American nation after Nicaragua.

The Salvadoran armed forces were plagued by incompetence, corruption, and poor leadership. In the early stage of the conflict, the military and the extreme right committed some of the worst human rights atrocities in the region's history. More than 28,000 people were killed by 1982, according to the San Salvador archdiocese's human rights office, most of them at the hands of Salvadoran armed forces.

The U.S. began to equip and train the Salvadoran military in 1981, at a time when their repressive activities were most out of control. The U.S. Army's Mobile Training Team began by creating the Atlacatl Immediate Action Battalion. A second Immediate Action Battalion, Atonal, was trained in 1982. A third battalion, Ramon Belloso, was trained at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, in the same year. Brought to the U.S. to overcome the limitations imposed by the 55-adviser limit, the Belloso battalion cost \$8 million to train.

In a similar effort to overcome the 55-man limit, small marine-commando units were trained by elite U.S. Navy SEAL units in Panama. Additional marine commandos were trained in El Salvador. In 1983, the very successful and feared Arce battalion, along with six light-infantry Cazador or "hunter" patrols, were trained in El Salvador and Honduras by the U.S.

Eventually, these elite units and battalions began to make a difference in the war, but a chronic shortage of competent and specifically trained battle officers continued to complicate operations in the field. "Double or tripple hatting," for example, where a company commander might also take on the duties of an operations officer or an intelligence officer, was common.

As a result, military sources say, U.S. advisers were forced to take a more active role in the field. The air force representative of the U.S. Military Group, for example, was moved from the U.S. Embassy in San Salvador to the air base at Ilopango. The U.S. Military Group consists of about 13 midranking officers, whom the Department of Defense does not classify as advisers. According to the January 1985 War College report, the senior air force representative became a "full-time advisor" to Salvadoran Air Force commander Colonel Bustillo.

Former Special Forces advisers say that U.S. advisers were also assigned as Combat Brigade Officers to advise and assist Salvadoran battle operations in the field. Providing full-time advice to Salvadoran colonels, these Special Forces advisers functioned as intelligence or operations officers for infantry brigades. Intelligence officers attempt to predict enemy movements; operations officers plan and coordinate attacks.

U.S. advisers are, of course, prohibited from participation in combat maneuvers, and are told not to discuss the nature of their assignments with these brigades. A brigade consists of two to four battalions, which are the principal combat units in countering a guerrilla war. A former Special Forces adviser says these assignments were spontaneous and erratic, due to the highly secretive nature of this operation and the U.S. government's attempt to keep it concealed.

Smaller team-size units of independent Special Forces troops, a U.S. military officer says, were also deployed in Honduras along the Salvadoran border in 1982 and 1983. It is not clear that they engaged in combat. The Reagan administration hoped these teams could stop the overland arms flow from Nicaragua through Honduras to El Salvador. But another goal of this operation, military sources say, was to find and produce evi-

dence of such a flow to further the administration's overall policy aims. The administration has repeatedly accused the Sandinistas of aiding the leftist rebels in El Salvador, and has advanced this argument to justify military aid to both the contras in Nicaragua and the government in El Salvador. Reliable U.S. military intelligence sources say the FMLN does receive weapons from abroad, but the flow has decreased substantially since 1982. The guerrillas are generally able to get what they need on the Salvadoran black market, including U.S.-supplied M-16s. A year ago, I was quoted a price of \$2000 for an M-16 in San Salvador; bulk prices would presumably be lower.

Overall, the counterinsurgency effort in El Salvador represents the largest such commitment of U.S. resources in a developing country since the Vietnam War. Unlike in Vietnam, the Pentagon has been able to run this war without using large numbers of troops; the assigning of CIA operatives and Special Forces advisers to patrol behind enemy lines has been crucial to the new, scaled-down strategy. Nevertheless, though direct participation by U.S. personnel has been markedly low, in the past few months a number of Special Forces advisers, medics, and maintenance personnel have been wounded or killed.

Many of the Salvadoran officers and units singled out by the War College for their effectiveness, such as former lieutenant colonel Sigfrido Ochoa, are some of the worst known violators of human rights. Elite U.S.-trained battalions such as Arce, Atonal, and Atlacatl are favorite sons of the U.S. Department of Defense. But these same battalions have been responsible for a host of massacres since 1981.

For example, the Atlacatl battalion massacred 700 people in a "search and destroy" mission at El Mozote in northeast Morazan in 1981. More recently, the Arce Battalion killed five suspected "subversives" last May. The victims, who were peasants, were shot and dumped in a well at Los Palitos in the eastern prov-

ince of San Miguel. Colonel Mauricio Staben, the commander of the Arce battalion, is believed to have overseen the killing of hundreds of suspected leftists or sympathizers. Last spring, the U.S.-trained colonel was also implicated in a kidnapping-for-profit ring, but no charges were brought after fellow officers came to his defense.

Although the conflict in Nicaragua has dominated U.S. attention in the past six months, measured in terms of resource commitment the war in El Salvador is the Reagan administration's primary concern. The administration claims that most of its assistance is development-related. But three-fourths of U.S. aid to El Salvador goes either directly or indirectly to the war.

The Salvadoran armed forces have expanded from 14,000 in 1981, when the U.S. began to play an active role, to 54,000 troops last year. El Salvador's leftist guerrillas, on the other hand, have decreased from 10,000 to less than 6000 combatants, many of whom have been fighting throughout the last seven years. The War College documents state that one goal of the administration's policy is "neutralization of the guerrillas." As a result, U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador Edwin Corr predicts the war will drag on another seven to 10 years. Already 60,000 people have died; 25 per cent of the population is displaced.

The CIA no longer leads PRAL missions in El Salvador, as coordination of that and other Salvadoran military efforts has been handed over to the U.S. Army's 7th Special Forces of the Panama-based Southern Command. The Special Forces' goal is to "professionalize" the Salvadoran military, and according to the War College documents, "sensitize" them to the issue of human rights. Even the Pentagon realizes the war will not be won by "simply killing guerrillas." Yet, despite administration claims to the contrary, killing is the only thing the Salvadoran military does well. ■