

The Nun Who Knew Too Much

Dianna Ortiz Links This North American Man to Her Rape and Torture in Guatemala

By Frank Smyth

THEY MET last month on the set of NBC's "Today" show. Jeanne Boylan, the forensic artist who drew the Unabomber suspect, is the expert the FBI most often hires for top-priority crimes. Dianna Ortiz is a Roman Catholic nun who says that in November 1989 in Guatemala she was kidnapped, raped and tortured in a clandestine prison. The two women worked together to compose sketches of four men who were present. But unlike most of those Boylan has drawn, one of these men, according to Ortiz, may have been working for the U.S. government.

Only 5-foot-3 with delicate features making her look much younger than 37, Ortiz, over the past six weeks, has managed to reopen wounds in this country first incurred in the 1980s over Central America. She has gained ground in her search for her assailants, which even

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SKETCH OF "ALEJANDRO" BY JEANNE BOYLAN

White House officials admit may yet implicate the U.S. intelligence community.

"We're going to let the chips fall where they may," says Nancy Soderberg, the Clinton administration's deputy national security advisor. "Our premise is that none of this happened on our watch. We just want to get to the facts."

The Ortiz case once again draws America's attention to Guatemala, where a succession of military governments have compiled the hemisphere's worst record for brutality. Human rights organizations estimate that as many as 100,000 Guatemalans have been killed by their own government over the last four decades; torture, disappearances and massacres have been routine. Whatever one makes of Ortiz's story, her bid for U.S. government documents on her ordeal puts to the test CIA Director John Deutch's assertions that he will clean up the agency and tests the White House's ability to get the answers about the relationship between U.S. intelligence officials and the D-2, Guatemala's military intelligence service.

The Bush administration doubted Ortiz's credibility. Last week the Clinton administration released documents

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A Nun's Story

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about Ortiz's case from that period. In one cable to Washington, then-ambassador Thomas F. Stroock, a newly arrived political appointee of George Bush, wrote that he did not believe her account. He rejected her claim that one of her abusers, "Alejandro," was a North American man who spoke Spanish poorly and cursed in English. Stroock questioned "the motives and timing behind the story," writing that it may have been a "hoax" designed to influence an upcoming vote in Congress on Guatemala over U.S. military aid.

"I know something happened to her in Guatemala," says Stroock by telephone from Wyoming. "What I don't know is what it was." Stroock, who met Bush at Yale, has long complained that Ortiz failed to cooperate with both U.S. and Guatemalan authorities after her ordeal. "It is one thing to be traumatized, but it's another thing not to talk to the police." About her story, Stroock adds, "I don't know whether to believe her or not." But today a growing number of people in the White House, Congress and elsewhere do believe Ortiz and her story.

"I'm so stunned that there was a credibility question," says sketch artist Boylan, who was called in to work on the case of Susan Smith, the South Carolina woman who falsely claimed that her children had been abducted by a black man but later admitted to having killed them herself. Boylan doubted Smith's story. "It is part of my job to look for such factors," Boylan adds, explaining that she constantly evaluates whether a subject's emotional reactions and the details communicated are appropriate in the context of the alleged crime." With Ortiz, she says, "I found nothing to indicate deception of any kind."

Boylan and Ortiz worked for four days to reconstruct her memories of her abductors. Ortiz, who by then was down to 87 pounds, reacted differently to each image. "At first it took her an hour to look at Alejandro. She hyperventilated, and then passed out," recalls Boylan. "[Later]

she curled up in a ball on her bed weeping." The two women finished the sketches last Sunday, releasing them at a press conference the next day.

Ortiz, who has broken down during many previous press encounters, appeared stronger and more confident than in any before. "Even though I carry their faces with me, they can't haunt me anymore," she said in response to one reporter's question: "They're out there. I'm free."

Ortiz also announced that she was suspending the vigil and fast that she had begun in front of the White House, and admitted taking some of her inspiration from Jennifer Harbury, a Harvard-educated attorney. Last year Harbury fasted in Lafayette Square to find out what the U.S. government knew about the disappearance of her leftist guerrilla husband. Twelve days later, Rep. Robert Torricelli (D-N.J.) revealed that a CIA-paid Guatemalan D-2 intelligence officer, Col. Julio Roberto Alpirez, was involved in his torture and extra-judicial execution.

Torricelli is one of 103 members of Congress from both parties who last week signed a letter to President Clinton backing Ortiz's demands for all U.S. government documents related to her case and others. The next day the State Department released more than 5,800 documents related to her case and 17 other U.S. citizens who have suffered human rights abuses in Guatemala. The documents released so far about Ortiz, however, elaborate only on the Bush administration's previous doubts about her story, not on the information she demands.

One document, from a yet unidentified agency, states: "We need to close the loop on the issue of the 'North American' named by Ortiz . . . The EMBASSY IS VERY SENSITIVE ON THIS ISSUE but it is an issue we will have to respond to publicly when the [ABC News 'Prime Time'] show airs." The next paragraph and the whole next page of this document is censored for national security reasons.

The Clinton administration, while saying that so far it has found nothing on "Alejandro," has

recently been sending conflicting signals about Michael DeVine, an American innkeeper murdered in Guatemala in June 1990 (Col. Alpirez is also implicated in that killing). But the administration has promised to release more information about these cases and others in June. Taking a personal step, National Security Adviser Anthony Lake paid three visits to Ortiz during her Lafayette Park vigil.

Her ordeal began on November 2, 1989, just days before the Berlin Wall started to crumble. Ortiz, who had come to Guatemala to teach Mayan grade-school children how to read and write, was a guest at a religious retreat in the colonial town of Antigua. From there at around 8 in the morning she disappeared. U.S. embassy officials, including Ambassador Stroock, helped anxious nuns and priests try to find her. They did after about 24 hours. Stroock later saw her briefly in Guatemala City inside the Papal Nuncio. But he did not believe the statement outlining her main claims later distributed by the office of Guatemala's archbishop. It "is in Spanish and not in the first person," he wrote.

Although he offered assistance, Stroock and other U.S. officials were denied the opportunity to question Ortiz. Neither he nor any member of his staff saw the cigarette burns which she allegedly had on her chest and back. The embassy could find no witnesses nor confirm any material details of her account. These facts "seem to indicate that the story as told is not accurate," Stroock told his superiors in Washington.

The following week Congress was scheduled to vote on economic and military aid to Guatemala, El Salvador and other countries, a package which the Bush administration was backing. In the months before, Guatemala, especially, was overcome by a wave of violence. These attacks led some to argue that Congress should put conditions on military aid to the country.

"The old Guatemala of the early '80s seems to have returned with a vengeance," wrote Philip B. Heymann, a Harvard University law professor who was then directing a U.S.-funded criminal justice project in Guatemala, in a September 1989 letter to Sen. Robert Byrd. "The Senate should condition any military aid on the Guatemalan government's investigation, prose-

cution and conviction of the perpetrators of the recent political violence. The entire \$9 million earmarked for such aid should be held in suspension until adequate measures are taken."

The Bush administration disagreed, and Stroock feared that Ortiz's case might have been fabricated to try and sway Congress. Such logic led him and other Bush administration officials to eventually doubt her completely. Sue Patterson, the embassy's consul general, wrote in April 1992 that the case was a "big political problem for Guatemala, because everybody believes a nun more than they do the [Guatemalan government] . . . I don't believe [her], nor does anyone else who knows the case well."

Ortiz, however, still bears signs of her experience, including 111 small round scars. Seen by another doctor as well as by church officials in the Papal Nuncio, Ortiz was later examined by Dr. Gelbert Gutierrez in her home town of Grants, N.M. He confirms the scars: "All over her body, second degree burns," he says curtly between patients by telephone.

In Guatemala, the then-defense minister, Gen. Hector Gramajo, was quoted as saying that Ortiz's scars were the result of a bizarre "lesbian love tryst." Gramajo, who has admitted his own working relationship with the CIA, said that he learned of the alleged tryst from the U.S. embassy.

Who in the embassy? ABC News reported that Lewis Amselem, then the embassy's human rights officer, was responsible for disseminating that rumor about the alleged love tryst. Amselem later threatened to sue ABC News but never did. Recently reached for comment at his State Department office in Washington, Amselem denies he made the statement.

Ortiz tells a different story. She was behind the religious retreat house in Antigua when she says she was abducted by armed men, who later threatened to release a hand grenade if she did not get on a public bus. It stopped in the small town of Mixco, where the men escorted her to a waiting police car, before driving her to a secret prison. There, Ortiz says, she was raped repeatedly. Later, "I was lowered into an open pit packed with human bodies—bodies of children, women and men, some decapitated, some lying face up and caked with blood, some dead, some alive—and all swarming with rats."

Recently Ortiz has made public one alleged detail of her ordeal that few people had heard besides her therapist, Mary Fabri, a Chicago-based clinical psychologist who is now treating Bosnian torture survivors. Fabri says that this act destroyed Ortiz's personality. At some point, her abusers handed her what she has described as either a small machete or large knife. Says Ortiz: They "put their hands onto the handle, on top of mine . . . I was forced to use it against another" victim. Ortiz thinks she may have killed her.

What saved Ortiz from suffering the same fate? She says Alejandro, the North American, intervened. Earlier in the experience, she says her abusers had intermittently referred to this man as their boss. Later, she says, they brought her to him. Upon realizing that Ortiz was American, Alejandro, she says, ordered his men to stop.

"He kept telling me in his broken Spanish that he was sorry about what had happened to me," says Ortiz. "He claimed it was a case of mistaken identity," that his men had confused Ortiz with Veronica Ortiz Hernandez, a leftist guerrilla. Alejandro, according to Ortiz, then offered to drive her in his own vehicle, a gray Suzuki four-wheel-drive, to the U.S. embassy to talk to a friend who would help her leave the country. She says she agreed. But only blocks before reaching the embassy, while the Suzuki was stuck in heavy traffic, Ortiz says she jumped out and ran.

Stroock told Washington that the archbishop's third-person statement describing her ordeal was not consistent with what "persons around Ortiz" had told him at the time. They behaved erratically, explaining as fear what Stroock suspects was disingenuousness. And "when [I] saw her, [I] was not permitted to see her alone and she said nothing."

Ortiz needs no intermediaries now: "I have been consistent in my account since the beginning. The U.S. embassy was inconsistent and, in fact, deceptive." Alice Zachmann is a youthful 70-year-old nun who is a close friend of Ortiz. She says, "If none of this had happened to Dianna, I think she'd be teaching children in Guatemala right now."

Instead Dianna Ortiz has gained exactly what some U.S. officials have always feared: credibility in Washington.