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## Dope Story

# Doubts Rise on Report Reagan Cited in Tying Sandinistas to Cocaine

## Little Evidence Backs Tale, Which Came From Pilot Who Claimed CIA Link

### Deal for a Lighter Sentence

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*P* In the early-morning darkness of June 26, 1984, Adler Barriman Seal, a wealthy, convicted drug smuggler working as a federal informant in hopes of leniency, landed his C-123 cargo plane at Homestead Air Force Base near Miami. On board was 1,500 pounds of cocaine he said he had brought from Nicaragua.

Within a few weeks, unnamed "administration officials," citing information provided by Mr. Seal, leaked to the press stories saying that top Nicaraguan leaders, including a brother of President Daniel Ortega, were trafficking in cocaine with the help of Soviets and Cubans.

The Reagan administration has used the Seal story—which Nicaragua denies—ever since in attempts to rouse congressional and public support for aid to the Contra rebels fighting to overthrow Mr. Ortega's Sandinista government. On March 16 of last year, in an appeal for a Contra aid package, President Reagan displayed on national television a photo taken by a camera hidden in Mr. Seal's plane.

"I know that every American parent concerned about the drug problem will be outraged to learn that top Nicaraguan government officials are deeply involved in drug trafficking," Mr. Reagan said. "This picture, secretly taken at a military airfield outside Managua, shows Federico Vaughan, a top aide to one of the nine commandants who rule Nicaragua, loading an aircraft with illegal narcotics bound for the United States."

### Some Problems

But Mr. Seal's evidence of Nicaraguan drug trafficking doesn't appear to be as sweeping as he or the Reagan administration portrayed it.

The Drug Enforcement Administration says the cocaine on Mr. Seal's C-123 is the only drug shipment by way of Nicaragua that it knows of—and Mr. Seal said he had

brought it there to begin with. The Nicaraguan "military airfield" that officials said Mr. Seal flew from is in fact a civilian field used chiefly for crop-dusting flights, the State Department now concedes. That concession undermines the basis for linking Defense Minister Humberto Ortega, President Ortega's brother, to the operation.

In fact, the man who supervised Mr. Seal's work for the government—Richard Gregorie, chief assistant U.S. attorney in Miami—says he could find no information beyond Mr. Seal's word tying any Nicaraguan official to the drug shipment. As for Federico Vaughan, the man Mr. Reagan called an aide to a Sandinista commandant, federal prosecutors and drug officials now say they aren't sure who he is.

Asked about the matter, a White House spokesman says, "We got the information from DEA and have received no indication from them of any change in their original assessment."

### Contra Supply Network

Meanwhile, some DEA officials complain that the administration's use of Mr. Seal's story against the Sandinistas sabotaged a much bigger drug case, against Colombians.

Now there are allegations that besides drugs, Mr. Seal may have been involved with other sensitive cargo. Four drug pilots in prison in Florida say they knew Mr. Seal as part of a network that delivered weapons to airfields in Central America for the American-backed Contras and then sometimes flew back to the U.S. with cocaine. Over the years, Mr. Seal told associates and testified in court that he sometimes did work for Central Intelligence Agency operations. Though the Justice Department was quick to follow up Mr. Seal's Nicaraguan story with an indictment, it rejected allegations from the pilots and others of drug dealing by Contras.

The Seal case is a complex double helix of politics and law enforcement. Mr. Seal provided his story about Nicaragua after contacting Vice President George Bush's anti-drug task force and offering to be an informant. He gave the administration the photographs and testimony it used to accuse Nicaraguan leaders of drug trafficking. In return, federal prosecutors helped him wriggle out of a long prison term he faced on three drug convictions. He got six months' probation.

### Fleet of Planes

Doubts about portions of his story first were raised last year in the Village Voice and Columbia Journalism Review by Joel Millman, who helped locate sources for this broader investigation of the case.

It is clear Mr. Seal was a major drug runner. He had a fleet of at least four planes, and he testified in federal court that he earned more than \$50 million smug-

gling dope. He said he made \$600,000 or \$700,000 while working for the DEA in the Nicaraguan case, which the government says it let him keep to cover expenses.

The money did him little good. On Feb. 19, 1986, as Mr. Seal was getting out of his white Cadillac at a Louisiana shelter where his probation required him to spend nights, a squad of hit men gunned him down.

When Mr. Seal first faced various drug charges several years ago, he initially got nowhere in seeking a deal. He twice went to Justice Department and DEA officials in Florida seeking a milder sentence in exchange for doing undercover work to catch big Colombian drug-cartel leaders, and he made the same offer in another federal drug case in Louisiana. The prosecutors all decided they preferred to have Mr. Seal in jail.

So in March of 1984 he called Mr. Bush's drug task force, got an appointment and flew his Learjet to Washington, he explained later in testimony at drug trials of others in federal court in Miami and Las Vegas. Two task-force staffers say they met Mr. Seal on a Washington street and escorted him to a meeting with Kenneth R. Kennedy, a veteran DEA agent.

The Justice Department says that he was accepted as an informant to trap Colombian dealers and that everyone was surprised to learn later of a Nicaraguan connection. But Mr. Kennedy recalls Mr. Seal's saying at their first meeting that "the officials of the Nicaraguan government are involved in smuggling cocaine into the United States, specifically the Sandinistas; that he would go through Nicaragua and get loads and bring them back; that he had brought loads of cocaine [through Nicaragua] in the past and he could continue to do it."

Thomas Sciafani, who was just becoming Mr. Seal's lawyer in Miami at the time, says that he is "absolutely" sure that nailing Nicaraguans was "a key ingredient" in the deal Mr. Seal offered the government.

### Getting Started

Mr. Kennedy sent Mr. Seal to agents Robert Joura and Ernest Jacobsen in the DEA's Miami office. They authorized him to go to Colombia and Panama to arrange a drug shipment, but they say it was a total surprise when he returned with news that cocaine-cartel leaders were moving their operations to Nicaragua because of law-enforcement pressure in Colombia. Mr. Seal testified that the cocaine leaders explained to him, "We are not communists. We don't particularly enjoy the same philosophy politically that they do. But they serve our means and we serve theirs."

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Mr. Gregorie, the federal prosecutor in Miami, says the politics of it made no difference to him, either. "Nobody cared," he says. Nicaragua "was just another place they [the cocaine cartel] did business."

As Mr. Seal related the story in his testimony, it was in Panama in mid-May 1984 that the Colombians introduced Mr. Vaughan to him as "some sort of a government official from Nicaragua." He said Mr. Vaughan claimed to be a top aide to Tomas Borge, the Sandinista interior minister and security-police chief.

Mr. Seal testified that Mr. Vaughan took him and a co-pilot to Nicaragua on an airliner, dodging customs at the airport, and that they stayed at Mr. Vaughan's house overnight. Then, he said, a Nicaraguan military driver gave them a tour of an airfield and Mr. Vaughan pointed out anti-aircraft batteries they should avoid, before putting them on a flight to Panama. As evidence of the trip, he offered his boarding pass on an airliner to Managua and a receipt for payment of the Managua airport tax; neither document appears to bear any date or name identification.

On his first scheduled drug run after becoming an informant, Mr. Seal testified, his plane skidded off a muddy Colombian airstrip and crashed as he was taking off. He said the accident forced the cocaine shipment onto a smaller plane that needed to refuel to reach the U.S.; the refueling stop was in Nicaragua, he said, and Mr. Vaughan met the flight. As he related it, after taking off again, his plane was hit with anti-aircraft fire and limped into the main Managua airport, where he and his co-pilot were held by military officers.

Eventually, Mr. Seal testified, Mr. Vaughan's military driver brought a truck to the Managua airport, transferred the cocaine off the plane and drove it away. He said he was jailed overnight, then picked up by Mr. Vaughan and given a small plane to fly home to the U.S., leaving the cocaine in Nicaragua. He said this plane was owned by Pablo Escobar, who the DEA says is a major partner in Colombia's largest cocaine syndicate.

#### Secret Camera

On the night of June 24, 1984, Mr. Seal continued, he, a co-pilot and a mechanic headed back to Managua to get the coke, flying his newly acquired C-123 cargo craft. Hidden within it was a secret camera, installed by the Central Intelligence Agency at Rickenbacker Air Force Base in Ohio. Although the camera didn't work right, he said, he managed to squeeze off dozens of grainy, shadowy photographs.

Most of them show a few men in casual attire lounging against a grassy background. Mr. Seal identified one as Mr. Vaughan, one as Mr. Escobar, the Colombian drug kingpin, and a third as another Colombian drug dealer. Several pictures show men, whom U.S. officials called soldiers, carrying canvas bags.

After this trip the DEA sent Mr. Seal back down to Nicaragua with \$1 million, and he said he arranged with Mr. Vaughan for another cocaine shipment. But in mid-July of 1984, DEA agent Joura remembers getting a call from his agency in Washington saying that a story based on Mr. Seal's C-123 trip would shortly appear in the Washington Times.

Chances of using Mr. Seal to catch members of the Colombian drug cartel vanished. "At that time, there was a Contra funding bill that was up for approval, and I guess that precipitated the leak of the photographs," says Mr. Joura. "It ruined the case. We hoped to go a lot further with it."

Mr. Joura did have time to tell Mr. Seal to round up some Florida distributors and another pilot for a meeting so they could be arrested. (It was at the 1985 Miami trial of these men that Mr. Seal, as a government witness, related his Nicaraguan story. He repeated it at another federal drug trial that year, in Las Vegas.)

#### Los Brasiles

The Washington Times story, which touched off many other press accounts, quoted "U.S. sources" as saying that "a number of highly placed Nicaraguan government officials actively participated in the drug smuggling operation," naming Interior Minister Borge and Defense Minister Humberto Ortega. U.S. officials have said that the defense minister could be implicated because the drug shipment used a military airfield, Los Brasiles.

But the State Department now confirms reports from Nicaragua that Los Brasiles is a civilian airfield used mainly for agricultural flights. It is also listed as a civilian field in a Defense Department Flight Information Publication.

The Justice Department said in 1984 that cocaine-processing labs had been established in Nicaragua and that the drug was being shipped in "multi-ton" amounts. Within a month after the story of the flight broke in the press, Mr. Vaughan was indicted.

The department says it knows that Mr. Seal's C-123 went to Nicaragua because a device aboard the plane enabled satellites to track it. But Mr. Gregorie, the federal prosecutor in Miami, and the DEA's Mr. Joura concede that their only evidence of who Mr. Vaughan is comes from Mr. Seal and a tape of a call to a man Mr. Seal identified as him. The Nicaraguan government says that a Federico Vaughan worked in 1982 and 1983 as the deputy manager of an export-import company run by the Sandinista government but had left before the Seal flight and was never an aide to a commandant.

Mr. Vaughan hasn't been put on trial. Though the U.S. has an extradition treaty with Nicaragua, the federal prosecutors never tried to extradite Mr. Vaughan. Mr.

Gregorie says the State Department told him it would be futile.

While the account of Sandinista drug involvement brought swift Justice Department action, U.S. officials have rejected accusations of major drug trafficking by the Contras. The handling of those accusations now is being reviewed by two congressional committees and the independent counsel for the Iran-Contra affair.

"There have been allegations that the laws have not been evenly and appropriately carried out, so we're looking into that," says Hayden Gregory, an investigator for a House Judiciary Committee subcommittee.

#### Former TWA Pilot

The imprisoned drug pilots say Mr. Seal was involved in flights that brought weapons to Central American airfields for the Contras and sometimes returned to the U.S. with drugs. The pilots claim that their Contra weapons deliveries were directed by the CIA. The people they say they worked with are known to have been supervised or monitored by the CIA and by Lt. Col. Oliver North, the National Security Council staffer fired for his role in the program to sell arms to Iran and fund the Contras. As is its practice, the Central Intelligence Agency refuses to comment.

Mr. Seal once was a pilot with Trans World Airlines, but he lost the job in 1972 after being charged with smuggling explosives to Mexico. The explosives, he later testified in federal court in Las Vegas, were for CIA-trained personnel trying to overthrow Cuba's Fidel Castro. An appeals court threw out the indictment.

Fred Hampton, whose Mena, Ark., firm does a global business repairing aircraft, says Mr. Seal used to talk in 1982 and 1983 about working for the CIA. He says Mr. Seal was secretive about it but discussed aerial reconnaissance of Nicaraguan air bases when the subject came up.

Jack Terrell, a former Contra mercenary who now opposes U.S. intervention in Nicaragua, says that "we knew he [Mr. Seal] was flying for the Contras" at Aguacote, a Honduran supply base. And a jailed drug pilot named Gary Betzner says he once ran into Mr. Seal at Illopango air base in El Salvador, where much of the Contra weaponry was transhipped.

Another imprisoned drug pilot, Michael Tolliver, says he was recruited into the Contra supply network by Mr. Seal, whom he had known since they were both airplane enthusiasts in Louisiana. He says Mr. Seal called him in the spring of 1985 and said, "I've got some interesting flying for you to do." Says Mr. Tolliver: "I figured it was government because everybody knew he was working for the government."

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### Gunned Down

Following Mr. Seal's drug convictions, his undercover efforts served him well with sentencing judges. In federal court in Fort Lauderdale, Judge Norman C. Roettger reduced a 10-year drug sentence to six months' probation after DEA agents spoke to him. The judge specifically praised Mr. Seal's cooperation in the Nicaraguan case. Then, under a deal worked out with the Justice Department, Mr. Seal also got probation for another Florida drug conviction and for drug charges in Louisiana.

But the judge in the Louisiana case, upset at the leniency of the Justice Department terms, required Mr. Seal to spend nights during his probation at a Salvation Army shelter in Baton Rouge. The requirement made him easy for his enemies to find, and one day early last year some of them did. Three Colombian men have been charged with killing him.

Of the two others Mr. Seal said went to Nicaragua on the C-123, one, co-pilot Emile Camp, died in a crash of his one-man plane. The other, mechanic Peter Everson, who has never been charged or asked to testify, won't discuss Mr. Seal's story except to say he would corroborate it if called. He lives in a fortresslike building in Louisiana.

One final footnote: Mr. Seal's C-123, after a change in ownership, crashed in Nicaragua last October while on a Contra supply run. The Nicaraguans captured an American cargo handler who survived. His name was Eugene Hasenfus, and his capture began the unraveling of secret U.S. efforts to supply the Contras.