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## Have Guns, Will Travel

**The Secret  
World of  
America's New  
Mercenaries**

**A U.S. soldier of fortune  
training contras  
in Central America**



NATIONAL AFFAIRS

# Have Guns, Will Travel

The private war was run by heroes and zeroes—with a little help from their friends in Washington

**W**hen Eugene Hasenfus sat in the dock of a Sandinista court last week and began telling all, he didn't look much like Rambo. The Sandinistas' first American prisoner in five years of war is facing up to 30 years in jail, and he seems scared and confused. On trial in Managua, the sad-faced, unemployed ironworker appeared more like a tragic portrait of "plausible deniability," than the picture of a gung-ho warrior. During an interview with NEWSWEEK in prison, his eyes twice brimmed with tears, and he worried about his three children back in Marinette, Wis. His wife, Sally, flew down for the trial, but the Sandinistas gave her less time with him than the press got. Hasenfus had assumed he was working for the CIA, he said, but he doesn't expect any help from the administration. "As far as my government saying anything, it's forgotten," he said. "Whoever I was working for out there, they just say, 'Sorry about that, Gene.'"

Hasenfus's capture helped to expose a multimillion-dollar private-aid network set up in 1984 to send military supplies to the contras after Congress outlawed U.S. involvement. "No one came out and said, 'Yes, here, you're CIA,'" he says of his job dropping arms to contras in the Nicaraguan jungle. "It was nothing like that. It was like—it was like Air America." Air America was the CIA front he and his buddies worked for in Indochina. When pilot William Cooper, 62, another Air America veteran, recruited him to kick guns out of an aging C-123 cargo plane, he figured it was more of the same. Cooper and another American, Wallace (Buzz) Sawyer, were killed when the plane was shot down Oct. 5. Last week President Reagan signed an executive order resuming U.S. military aid

*A case of blown cover: Hasenfus (top, right) on trial, the wreckage of his airplane*

to the contras. Soon, according to administration sources, the U.S. Air Force will take over the air drops (page 34). The next time an American is killed or captured in Nicaragua, he may be an airman in uniform rather than a shadowy operative in the private-aid network.

Those who manned that network were a

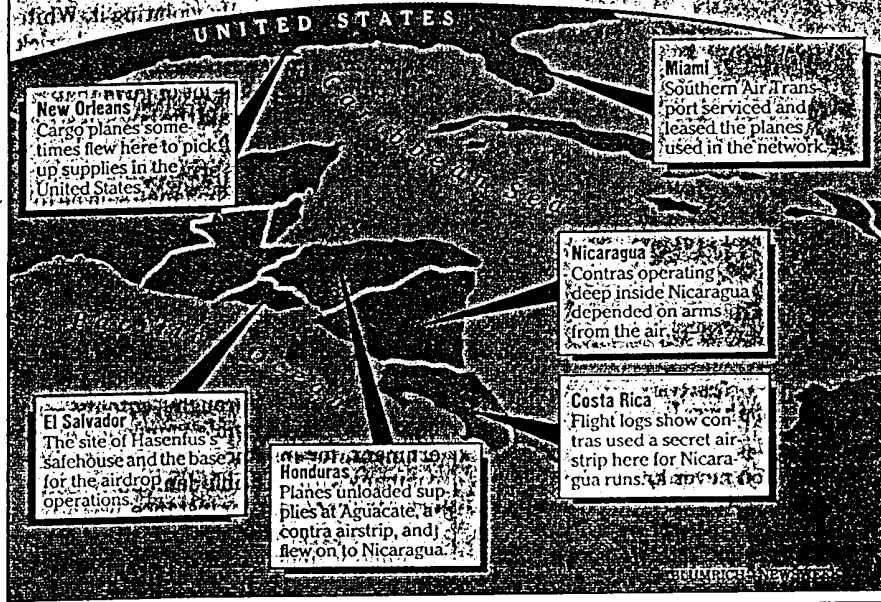


BILL GENTILE FOR NEWSWEEK



## A Central American Web of Support

Once Congress cut off aid to the contras, a far-flung operation shipped arms to the contras from bases and airfields in the United States and Central America.



PETER MORGAN—PICTURE GROUP



motley bunch of heroes and zeroes, from much-decorated generals and Green Berets to ex-cons who had never before pulled a trigger in anger. Some of these soldiers of misfortune were men like Hasenfus, who had learned a skill in war that wasn't much in demand during peace. Many were veterans of the Indochina wars, looking for a chance to even the score by killing Sandinistas in Nicaragua or leftist guerrillas in Salvador. Others were Cuban-Americans still seeking to settle accounts with Castro—through his Central American clients. And not a few were just armchair warriors, finally acting out their jungle-fatigue fantasies in real wars (page 35). "There's a little Rambo in all of us," said one State Department official.

President Reagan set the tone with his famous remark, "I'm a contra, too." Some of the president's men may have taken it too much to heart. Congressional critics have charged that Lt. Col. Oliver North organized the private-aid network from his office in the White House's National Security Council, pulling together private donors and even foreign governments to do what the United States could not legally do.

The most suggestive evidence comes from the safe house where Hasenfus lived in San Salvador. A spacious two-story dwelling at 5272 Paseo Escalón, in a wealthy neighborhood, it was one of three places where former CIA agent Max Gómez is said to have assembled 14 Americans to run the secret airlift operation. Salvadoran phone records from those houses, obtained by NEWSWEEK,

portray a pattern of contact with Lt. Col. North's office, arms merchants with Pentagon connections and private air-transport companies in the United States. North has refused to talk about the charges against him. A White House source close to North says the phone records are Sandinista "disinformation." The proof, according to the source: North didn't have that phone number at the time the calls were made.

If it was Sandinista disinformation, it was an elaborate scheme. The phone records were obtained from sources at ANTEL, the Salvadoran government phone company. They show thousands of dollars' worth of calls to the United States since September. The number North is now answering was called nearly every day from Sept. 10 to 17, and on Sept. 11 it was called four times. The records showed one other White House number: (202)395-3345, where a recorded message now says, "You have reached a nonworking number for the executive office of the president." Until recently that was North's number, too.

**Unlisted phones:** The phone logs also record calls between the air-supply operation and phones used by retired Army Maj. Gen. Richard Secord, a former assistant deputy secretary of defense, who among other duties handled arms sales to Saudi Arabia. His unlisted home phone number in suburban Virginia, a second residential number and his office number at Stanford Technology in McLean, Va., were among the most frequently dialed numbers. Secord is widely rumored to have arranged financial aid to the contras from Saudi Arabia—as much as \$50 million by one account. He is also president of a company that handled the purchase of a short-takeoff-and-landing plane called a Maule: the plane later wound up at a contra airbase in Honduras. Secord could not be reached for comment, but he has publicly denied that he had any involvement in helping to finance or provide military aid to the contras.

Max Gómez (code name: the Condor), whose real name is Felix Ismael Rodriguez, had a long CIA career that took him from the Bay of Pigs to Vietnam and Laos and then back again to Central America. His connections in Indochina are a directory to some of the players who turned up on the scene in Central America. In Vietnam he worked with the CIA's Saigon station chief, Donald Gregg, who is now Vice President George Bush's national-security adviser. Gregg recently recommended Gómez for a post as adviser to the Salvadoran Air Force. Gómez made other contacts in Southeast Asia, including Army Maj. Gen. John Singlaub and Air Force Gen. Harry Aderholt. Singlaub heads the U.S. chapter of the World Anti-Communist League and is a major fund raiser for the contras who has admitted helping them obtain arms—outside the United States to avoid violating

## NATIONAL AFFAIRS

American laws. Aderholt, now head of Florida's Air Commando Association, reportedly has been linked to contra aid, though his group denies it. Singlaub and Aderholt both knew Lt. Col. North in Vietnam.

The old-boy network went into operation, intelligence sources say, when Congress ordered the CIA to keep hands off the contras in 1984. The CIA has denied all association with Gómez or the private-aid network. "We're clean as the driven snow," said CIA spokesman George Lauder. Whatever was happening with Gómez's operation, "we don't want to know," Lauder added. "The links are now indirect," said Thomas Polgar, who retired from the post of CIA director of personnel in 1981 but is still on friendly terms with the agency. "There is no smoking gun or paper trail to Langley."

**Pure zeal:** There still isn't, but questions remain about North's role. "It [contra support] was his account before the aid was cut off, and it was still his account, even while his hands were tied," a White House official said. North's hands may have been tied, but he was not gagged. He made many pro-contra speeches and visited contra camps in Honduras. One colleague called him "nothing short of a hero, the heart and soul of the contra movement in the United States." As others put it, if there were ever anyone who might have stepped across the line, it would have been North, just out of



CHRISTOPHER BELL—GAMMA-LIAISON

Something for the boys: Posey with supplies

pure zeal. "You never know where Ollie's been on weekends," a Reagan aide said. "Don't ever tell me where you were," an admirer joked to North. "I may be under oath someday."

White House officials said they could encourage private contra support, as long as they didn't get involved directly. "We kept up a very close, intimate relationship with

the leaders of UNO [United Nicaraguan Opposition]," said one former White House official. "It was understood that we would be giving them everything we could give them, short of guns." Congressional critics complain they were at best sidestepping the law, if not actually violating it. White House communications director Patrick Buchanan, who described his office as "sort of a confessional for a lot of guys that are aiding the contras," said the law was strictly observed by the administration. If anyone came in to discuss private military support for the contras, Buchanan said he told them, "Buddy, what you're doing is a violation of the law, and I can't tell you to do it." There was some confusion, however, about just what was legal. "I don't know exactly where the line is," said one senior White House aide, "but I haven't crossed it."

One of the ways covert operations are normally run is through "cutouts"—go-betweens with no visible connection to government, for instance, or a private front company with plausible deniability. Southern Air Transport, for instance, was a long-time CIA proprietary company that is now nominally independent—but has been linked to the planes and crews used for Gómez's airdrops. Southern's Miami office was the most frequently called number from the safe houses. General Singlaub recalls that, after the aid cutoff, North

## What Lies Ahead: A Deepening U.S. Commitment

With the release of the \$100 million aid package, the Reagan administration's war on the Sandinistas stops being a private one and turns into a semicovert operation of the U.S. government. John Barry, NEWSWEEK's national security correspondent, reports on how the CIA plans to wage the stepped-up struggle.

The White House has had two years to map its campaign, and administration sources say U.S. plans are well advanced. Training the contras will be an elaborate, open-ended project—one that officials expect will cost far more than the \$100 million currently allocated. Officials also expect the war to cost some American lives—but they insist the risks to U.S. personnel will be minimal. "The good ole boys aboard [Hasenfus's] C-123 were doing

a fine job," said one Air Force officer cheerfully. "But you wouldn't exactly call them the cream of the crop, would you?" Some of the highlights of the administration's plan:

- Initially, most airdrops of supplies to contras inside Nicaragua will have to be done by U.S. crews, probably from the Air Force's First Special Operations Wing, headquartered at Hurlburt Air Force Base in northern Florida. The wing specializes in high-risk infiltration and exfiltration. In the long run, the CIA hopes, the contras' own pilots can be trained to do the drops. Sources insist that U.S. Special Forces won't be needed on the ground in Nicaragua.

- There's not enough money to bring the contras to Fort Bragg, so the rebels will most likely be trained in Guatemala by U.S. forces; officers and NCO's will be

flown to the United States for extra instruction. The first contras picked for training are the 12,000 troops now in the Las Vegas salient on the Honduran-Nicaraguan border. They will be split into teams of about 500, with Spanish-speaking Green Berets for instructors. At the moment, says one source, there are only a few dozen Green Berets fluent in Spanish, but administration sources believe they'll be able to cope.

- The Navy, sources hint, may also be involved in resupply operations along Nicaragua's coast. That suggests that the strategy mapped out for the contras includes seizing a chunk of Miskito territory in the northeast. One source conceded that the CIA's plan does have "territorial elements."

Some branches of the administration are more gung-

ho than others. CIA Director William Casey and Elliott Abrams at the State Department seem to be two of the zealots. "Casey really is a throwback to the early days of the CIA," said one source. "Things were played pretty rough back then, and Casey's basic drive is to revive those good times." Casey sees the contra-training operation as a field test of the agency's revived operational capabilities. The Joint Chiefs are privately far less optimistic about the U.S. foray into Central America. Haunted by the Vietnam syndrome, they worry about public support for any adventure in Central America. They also have doubts about the contras' military capabilities. Finally, the chiefs believe the Soviets are using Central America as a cheap way to distract Washington from what should be, in their view, the primary U.S. strategic concerns in Western Europe.

stopped taking his calls, saying, "I can't deal with you anymore." But Singlaub said he soon discovered that he could talk to others, like Robert Owen, who was hired as a consultant to work for the Nicaraguan Humanitarian Assistance Office (NHAO) in the State Department—over the objection of the director of the office. Singlaub said he was sure the go-betweens kept North informed. Administration officials told him, "We'll let you know if you're doing anything wrong." "He was a go-between for Ollie," a well-informed administration official said of Owen, "his eyes and ears."

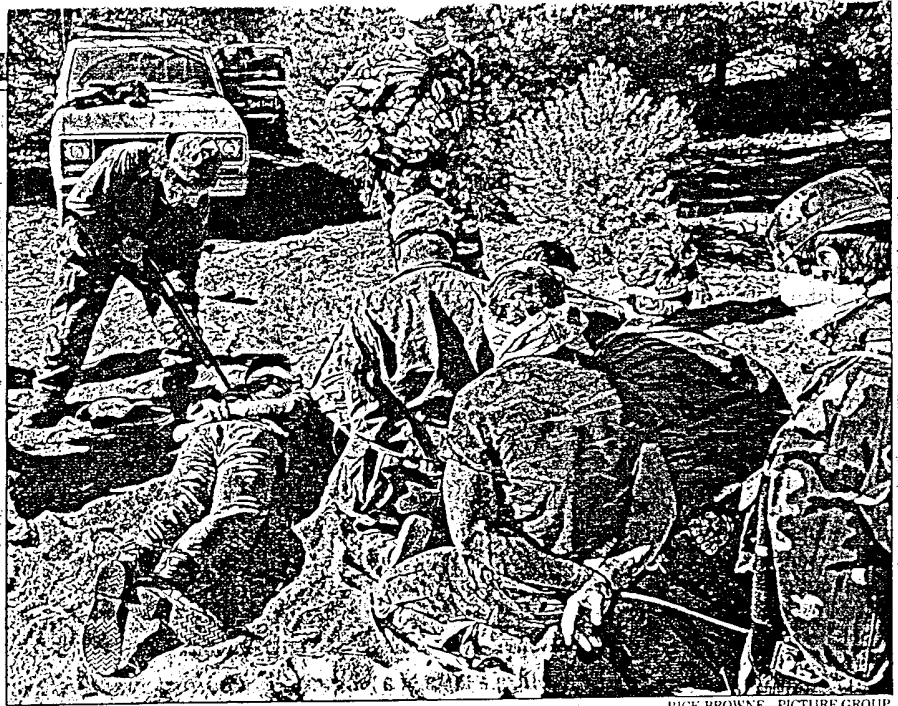
Owen, 33, is an athletic Stanford graduate who was turned down for service in Vietnam because of a knee problem. "He was a young man who didn't have a war to prove his manhood," said his former fiancée, Judi Buckalew. His brother Dwight was killed while working for the U.S. government in Vietnam, and Owen became a protégé of Robert Wahl, who had known Dwight there. "Bob became a surrogate father," Buckalew said. "I give the guy a lot of credit," she added. "He had doors slammed in his face, and he still found a way to go out and play Rambo." Owen's contract with the State Department has expired. Despite calls to the State Department, his consulting firm, his lawyer and his friends, Owen could not be reached for comment.

**Wet towels:** While working for the NHAO, Owen made frequent trips to Central America. Contra leader Adolfo Calero's bodyguard, Joe (Shooter) Adams, believed Owen was playing an official role. "I always considered him to be working for the CIA, [but] wet behind the ears . . . Rob Owen plays *el capitan* out there and doesn't know what he's doing," Adams said in a taped interview with a federal public defender in an unrelated case. "We are not playing a game of wet towels down here."

With military aid to the contras now legal, the private-aid network is less critical. Today Oliver North can take calls from contra commanders in the field, if he wants, and the CIA is free to run covert operations directly. In the meantime, some U.S. officials hope to see the private network stay in place, in case Congress again withdraws contra aid—a possibility if the Democrats take control of the Senate this fall. Plus, administration officials say that even \$100 million is too little to help the contras win—it's "only a down payment."

The private efforts kept military aid flowing to the contras until the administration got back in business. But, said a U.S. official in Honduras: "It's put up or shut up time for the contras. Now they have to prove themselves."

ROD NORDLAND with RICHARD SANDZA, DAVID NEWELL, MARGARET GARRARD WARNER and THOMAS M. DEFRANK in Washington, RON MOREAU and LIZ BALMASEDA in San Salvador, SCOTT WALLACE in Managua and bureau reports



HICK BROWNE—PICTURE GROUP

Ambushed by the 'Sandinistas': Training for combat at a camp in California

# The Shadowy World of America's Mercenaries

From the old-boy network to the born losers

**H**e calls himself Paul Fanshaw, his nom de guerre in the French Foreign Legion, and he is a truly scary man. Hard of eye and rosy of muscle, he is a merciless warrior who has an athlete's build at 48; and now, alone in a hotel room in Dayton, Ohio, with *NEWSWEEK*'s Vincent Coppola, he is dangerously drunk and wavering between belligerence and a kind of remorse. He has been rambling angrily about his grievances against the CIA, Ronald Reagan, Muammar Kaddafi; the FBI is after him, he says, for his role in an attempted coup in Ghana. He drinks Dom Perignon champagne and chews Skoal Long Cut, spitting the tobacco juice into a tumbler. "I'm a mercenary who thinks too much," he says. "I've killed poor people. It bothers me about the poor, to have to make a living like that . . . I've lost my honor, they've taken my honor . . ." Suddenly he is weeping silently. "I'm a soldier, you understand. You trouble me. You are a danger to me. I'd as soon shoot you as . . ."

Fanshaw is a far cry from Eugene Hasen-

fus, sitting stunned and morose in a cell in Managua, and even further from the anti-communist zealots and gun-crazy amateurs who have been beating paths to Tegucigalpa and San Salvador in recent years to get a taste of a real war. But all three are variants of the rank-and-file mercenary: losers and misfits.

Rambo beware: They call themselves *mercés*, and each of them thinks his kind is the only real soldier of fortune. Hasenfus "is a disgrace to his country," says a Missouri-based mercenary who has raided with the contras; for that matter, he brags, Sylvester Stallone's Rambo "wouldn't last two minutes in my jungle." Theirs is a shadowy, conspiratorial world, where lies are common currency and yet faith is implicit: plots are everywhere, the CIA has a hand in almost everything, all is deniable and nothing is provable. Its characters range from hired guns who will take anyone's money to fantasy killers who dream over *Soldier of Fortune* magazine and play paramilitary games in the woods. But for all

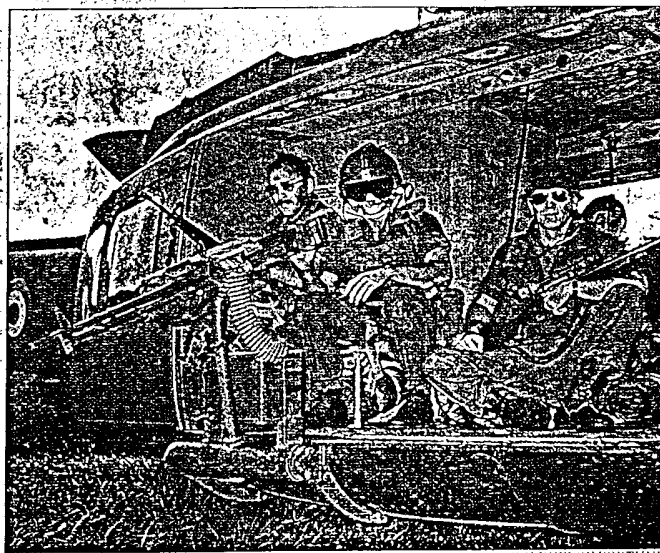
## NATIONAL AFFAIRS

of them, war has a primal pull.

The aristocrats of mercs get to work in the shadow of the government, in operations like the contra supply line conducted through cutouts but controlled by the likes of retired Gen. John Singlaub and his aide, Ed Dearborn, a veteran of the CIA wars in Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and the Congo. Dearborn, who had been flying with TransAmerica Airlines, helped organize and train the contra air force. Singlaub also recruited a dozen or so former military people to replace the CIA personnel who had to be pulled out of the contra supply effort. In this as in recruiting for jobs on the Hasenfus level, Walter Mittys, crusaders and drunks needn't apply. There is a quiet old-boy network that keeps in touch with pilots, medics, skilled trainers and operators who have proved track records. Contrary to the general impression, paychecks are grudging at best; volunteers may be told they'll get only "bullets and beans" and have to pay their own expenses and transportation. Still, there's no lack of recruits. Dearborn says he has been "besieged" with résumés from experienced pilots willing to give up their jobs to fly in the twilight world.

Younger recruits are looking for adventure; older men want to exploit skills they probably learned as servicemen or contract workers in Indochina or the African wars of independence. But if such a man is available, says Thomas Polgar, a retired CIA man who served as Saigon station chief and was the agency's personnel director for two years, it's probably because his career hasn't been going well. He must be willing to take risks and obey orders; he should be in his 40s or 50s, a settled personality, and he should be patriotic but not particularly ideological. American mercenaries are usually just right, says Polgar: "They're patriotic, but they don't break heads over the finer shadings of big policy." To nobody's surprise, that profile fits Eugene Hasenfus like a flak vest.

**Macho life:** And what most mercenaries want, Polgar says, is not so much money or public service as a taste of excitement, adventure and the macho life, particularly if they can rent a nice apartment, hire a housekeeper and go home every night. "They think back to the good old



Getting a taste of a real war: U.S. volunteers in El Salvador

days in Saigon, where they could get drunk and laid every night for nothing," he says. "They can do that in Central America too."

That particular yen is hardly confined to hardened mercenary types; together with a wish for excitement and the compulsion for self-challenge, it is a large part of the appeal of the mercenary life. And nobody knows that better than Robert K. Brown, the former Green Beret who comes closest to being the mercenary's guru. It was Brown who sensed a waiting audience in 1975 and founded *Soldier of Fortune*, a rough-hewn magazine of battle reportage, sensual reviews of weapons and reader back talk (labeled Flak) that has grown to a circulation

## Coups—And Collapses

**S**oldiers of fortune have had their successes in recent years, but far more stalemates—and more than a few outright fiascos.

**Angola:** American mercenaries fought with the losers in the 1975-76 civil war, and a few are once again supporting rebels against the Marxist regime.

**Zimbabwe:** About 400 Americans enlisted with Ian Smith in 1977 to preserve the white government of what was then Rhodesia. They lost the fight.

**Dominica:** Grand Wizard Don Black of the Alabama Ku Klux Klan was arrested with 9 mercenaries in 1981 trying to impose a white supremacist regime.

**Libya:** In 1981 renegade ex-CIA men Edwin Wilson and Francis Terpil hired as many as 50 Americans to help support Muammar Kaddafi's government.

**The Seychelles:** "Mad Mike" Hoare, leader of the famed "wild geese," came to comic-opera grief in 1981 trying to unseat President Albert Rene.

**Comoro Islands:** In the last big coup for a soldier of fortune, Frenchman Robert Denard took over the government in 1978—and managed to keep power.

of 171,000. Brown bluntly puts down most of his readers as Walter Mitty types, and most observers don't doubt that, all told, there are probably no more than 200 American mercenaries actually working all over the world. Moreover, Brown's influence in the mercenary world is limited by his high visibility and his lack of any official role. But he is a true believer, a fervent anticommunist who lives his own magazine. "I have the best of both worlds," he said recently. "The business pays for my vacations. My vacation is mortaring a Russian fort in Afghanistan, and that's a legitimate tax deduction." Recently, however, Brown's dedication to supporting the contras has exceeded his means. The magazine is comfortably profitable,

but he has financed so many training missions and sunk so much in special weapons that he told his 45 staffers last week that 16 of them would have to be laid off or the business would fold in six months.

Brown also promotes a brand of "action journalism" that encourages reporters to shoot as well as write. In a celebrated incident last February, the magazine's Steve Salisbury joined seven Salvadoran soldiers in a raid on the village of Sisiguayo. As the villagers later told it, the soldiers opened fire on 150 people dancing in the moonlight to celebrate a village girl's 15th birthday; 12 were wounded and 3 were killed. One of the dead had a gun. Salisbury posed with that body the next day, telling his media colleagues that this was surely a guerrilla and that civilian deaths were a regrettable fact of war. "It feels better to blast away at the commies than write," he said.

**Swapping lies:** Brown's annual *Soldier of Fortune* conventions in Las Vegas regularly draw up to 1,000 aficionados in camouflage uniforms who earnestly attend seminars in such arts as tire-iron throwing and rappelling down the hotel façade. But not all of them are swapping lies and braggadocio: regular participants include such real-life operators as Singlaub; retired Air Force Gen. Harry C. Aderholt, leader of a group of pilots in Guatemala who claim to be flying only humanitarian missions, and Thomas Posey, whose Civilian Matériel Assistance volunteers provide medical aid, supplies and training for the contras but also disclaim a fighting role.

Amateur mercenaries have a well-established tendency to fall for crazy plots and get in over their heads. A classic case, now known as the second "Bayou of Pigs," broke last summer with the collapse of a comic-opera coup attempt against the government of Suriname, a former Dutch colony

## NATIONAL AFFAIRS

on the north coast of South America. As government investigators told the story, a former U.S. Customs agent, Tommy Lynn Denley, cooked up a scheme to topple the regime of leftist Lt. Col. Desi Bouterse. But in the course of recruiting, seeking financial backing and buying munitions for the coup, Denley made so many waves that he picked up almost as many federal infiltrators as genuine recruits before the group made its move. Indeed, he couldn't have moved at all without the federal stingers, who had by then promised to put up the money and an airplane. Most of the group were arrested on the tarmac, just before boarding the DC-3. All 14 have pleaded guilty to various federal charges and await sentencing. It was the third such plot foiled in the area in five years; earlier, a band of white supremacists were caught planning the takeover of Dominica (the first Bayou of Pigs) and rebel Haitians failed in a bid to unseat Jean-Claude (Baby Doc) Duvalier.

Such harum-scarum schemes are the antithesis of the style approved in Washington, and it may be a tribute to that matter-of-fact approach that the contra supply operation lasted as long as it did: nearly two years of as many as six flights a day, under the supervision of a much-respected ex-CIA agent known as Max Gómez. But in the long run, as Hasenfus told NEWSWEEK in an interview last week, "we got careless. We got supercareless." In the mercenary community the pros clucked disdainfully at the litter of calling cards, mission logs and other telltale evidence found in the plane that finally got shot down.

**Gone geese:** That, too, is part of the mercenary pattern, however; the best of them make mistakes, grow old, get caught in disasters. The legendary "Mad Mike" Hoare, a Britisher who led the "wild geese" in the African wars of independence in the 1960s, ended his career in a desperate fiasco trying to take over the Seychelles archipelago in the Indian Ocean. Disguised as a rugby fan club, he and his beery band were caught in an airport security check with guns in a false-bottomed suitcase. And even when the professional help is competent, plotters don't always find sympathy. Two years ago retired Army Col. Charles A. Beckwith, the Delta Force commander of the ill-fated Desert One mission to rescue U.S. hostages from Iran, was approached by a group that wanted him to assassinate the president of Honduras. Instead, Beckwith went to the Feds with the story. At least two of the plotters have been convicted and sent to prison; others are awaiting trial.

The trouble with mercenaries, complains one old Washington pro, "is that they frequently become uncontrollable." Fanshaw, the former legionnaire, prides himself on his professionalism and reliability: just hours after his drinking bout in the Dayton hotel, he met Coppola again, clear-eyed and



Action journalism: *Brown on the Nicaraguan border*

coherent, just as he had promised. His story was full of circumstantial detail, but it was a tale of drifting, loss and dependency. As he told it, he had been a Benzadrine addict in his youth, tried to defect to the Soviet Union and served time in a state mental hospital. He had been in the Army and the Marines, and had spent 13 years in the legion. But he was kicked out of the Marines because of his past and ultimately deserted the legion. As a mercenary, he said, he fought in El Salvador and participated in several abortive schemes; he had to sell his legion uniform and medals to collectors, and he was reduced to working as a strikebreaker for

neighbor once asked Davis what he did for a living, he replied: "I kill people and keep my mouth shut." And when Davis died last year of a heart attack, Ronald Reagan sent a personal note—in Fanshaw's telling, at any rate.

At least one of the failed plots Fanshaw said he was involved in actually got under way, but without his services; it failed anyway. As he told it, he was met in New York by a Ghanaian dissident, Godfrey Osei, who said he could raise \$175,000 to overthrow the Marxist government of Flight Lt. Jerry Rawlings. Fanshaw said he took a \$5,000 down payment and relayed half of it to an

arms dealer but then was cut out of the plot. Others continued, but the coup collapsed when a seagoing tug, the Nobistor, was seized last March in Itaipu, Brazil, with a crew of eight American mercenaries and a six-ton cargo of arms bound for Ghana. The eight, who told conflicting stories of what they were doing and how they got there, have been in and out of jail in Brazil ever since. Their convictions on arms-smuggling charges were reversed on appeal, but Argentina, where the cruise originated, now wants to extradite them.

Most of the eight were seasoned mercenaries who had fought with Ian Smith's army to preserve the white government of what was then Rhodesia. But like Fanshaw, they tend to be misfits and drifters. One of them, Fred Verduin, grew up in California with a fixation on the Foreign Legion. He served



More fun than writing? *Soldier of Fortune's Salisbury*

## NATIONAL AFFAIRS

three years in the Army, fought in Rhodesia, deserted after the transition to black government, joined the South African raiders in Namibia and Angola and finally came home to attend computer school. But over his parents' heated objections, he took a leave of absence from the school to join the Nobistor crew. "It was his adventure," says Fred's father, Carl. Like the relatives of several other mercenaries now languishing in various foreign jails, the elder Verduin is convinced that the government was somehow involved in the plot but has now washed its hands. "He is an idealist who thinks you've got to fight communism," Carl says of his son. But he adds: "He's in a struggle to find himself."

The ordeal: It is men like Verduin who go to the training camps. Some camps are relatively straightforward, condensed versions of military basic training; others stress survival techniques in the wilderness, security measures or counterterror tactics. But there have been at least two that profess to train mercenaries, and these try to out-Rambo Stallone with a deliberate ordeal of brutalization, humiliation, fear and pain. "We run an extremely rough course," says Frank Camper, until recently the operator of one such camp in Alabama. "We subject them to mental pressures they think extremely unfair. But they don't know what it's like to be overseas working for a madman or for people they don't entirely trust. I tell the guys they don't really want to do it. It's not lucrative, it's not romantic—don't get involved."

Camper certainly drives home his point. As survivors of his two-week course have described it, it comes near torture: students are run across rivers under live machine-gun fire, forced to fight each other with heavy sticks and shown sadistic methods of interrogation. As a Wall Street Journal reporter described it, he was made to stand by while another student was suspended naked and screaming over a campfire. Camper boasts that only 1 in 10 actually lasts the two weeks without quitting. School is at least temporarily out, since Camper, a Vietnam vet who served with a Long Range Patrol (the fearsome Lurps), is in a California jail awaiting trial on charges of being a hired fire bomber. But he says three of his former students have set up similar schools in North Carolina, Mississippi and Nevada.

But all this is just comic relief, says a cynical old pro. Joseph Cincotti, a recently retired Special Forces colonel who has

fought dark and secret wars from Iran to Vietnam, served as commander of the Special Forces school before he retired to Fayetteville, N.C. And when it comes to choosing agents for covert work, he thinks inconspicuous is better: "The days of the blue-eyed merc going off to fight in Latin America are over. Train the trainer. Why do it with a gringo when you can use a cutout who is a foreign national?" Hasenfus was a low-level operator, he says; most of the seasoned professionals with sophisticated skills—retired officers or noncoms—won't risk their pensions for mercenary work, especially since they can easily get safer, steadier work as consultants or overseas trainers. And Cincotti would prefer the

vision equipment, when a rebel patrol was spotted and shot up. When the helicopter landed, he noticed one of the supposedly dead guerrillas twitching in pain and picked her up. She turned out to be Nidia Diaz, a high-level *commandante* with a knapsack full of documents that government forces are still exploiting. But in a wholly new mercenary style, Grasheim won't even admit his exploit. "A lot of people say a lot of things about me," he says. "What I do, I keep my head down."

Grasheim's big score aside, it has to be conceded that mercenaries haven't made much of a dent in the world in recent years. By definition, their smaller successes are mostly invisible, like the contra supply



The making of a special operative: Dearborn (counterclockwise



from top) on scene in the Congo in 1963, in Laos two years later and working for the contras now



LESTER SLOAN—NEWSWEEK

typical American recruit, motivated at least partly by patriotism, to the hardened European pro who is in the game purely for money. "You have to worry about his loyalty," he says. "He's less likely to put his ass on the line."

In reality, as Cincotti tells it, the true mercenaries now operating in Central America are not soldiers of fortune, but salesmen. U.S. manufacturers want a share of the \$100 million Congress has voted the contras, and their sales representatives are flooding the zone offering to equip the fighting men with gadgets and train them in their use. And sure enough, it was Wally Grasheim, salesman for a New York company, who pulled off one of the Salvadoran war's biggest intelligence coups last year. According to Salvadoran Gen. Adolfo Bladón, Grasheim was riding a chopper, training its crew in the use of his firm's night-

flights; it is failure that makes headlines. But the last big coup for a soldier of fortune came back in 1978, when a Frenchman named Robert Denard took over the Comoro Islands in the Indian Ocean and managed to stay in power. That thought, however, is unlikely to discourage any true mercenary or even the Mittys dreaming of the glory of war. And there can be rewards short of victory. Homer Lee Phillips Jr.—"Animal" to his old survival-camp buddies—was one of the 14 mercs who pleaded guilty in the Suriname fiasco. He is due to be sentenced Nov. 5, but meanwhile, his friends say, he is getting much hotter dates as a convicted mercenary than he ever did when he was just a body-and-fender man in Harrisburg, Mo.

LARRY MARTZ with VINCENT COPPOLA in Atlanta, GEORGE RAINE in San Francisco, JOHN MCCORMICK in Chicago, PETER MCALEVEY in Los Angeles and bureau reports