

ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE 1-A

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# Ex-State Dept. consultant called key link to contras

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WASHINGTON — Robert W. Owen, a former State Department consultant under fire for his alleged role in the Iran-contra affair, took part in military planning meetings with leaders of rebels fighting the Nicaraguan Sandinista government in late 1984 and 1985, sources present at the meetings say.

Mr. Owen has been named as a player in the 1984-1986 secret campaign allegedly coordinated by then-National Security Council official Lt. Col. Oliver L. North to keep the rebels supplied with arms while a two-year congressional ban on U.S. military aid to the rebels was in effect.

Colonel North was fired last month for allegedly diverting millions of dollars from secret U.S.-Iranian arms deals to Swiss bank accounts to help the contras.

A picture of just what Mr. Owen did in the contras' cause has emerged from documents and interviews with those connected to the contra supply network. In essence, it appears he operated on two different levels, one open and U.S. government-backed, the other covert.

On the open level, Mr. Owen was from October 1985 to April 1986 a State Department-sanctioned consultant specializing in helping rebel forces, especially Miskito Indians, get medical and other humanitarian aid from the government.

On the secret level, sources say, he operated from December 1984 to the summer of 1985 as a liaison between contra forces fighting on the southern front — along the Costa Rican border — and the northern front — along the Honduran border. At the same time, sources say, he gave them the impression he was also reporting the activities on both fronts back to an official in Washington.

No evidence has surfaced to suggest that he engaged in any contra military planning during the six months of his work for the State Department. Mr. Owen declined to testify before a congressional committee probing the Iran-contra affair, pleading his Fifth Amendment right to not incriminate himself, and has not responded to several requests for interviews.

It does not appear that Mr. Owen, 32, a Washington consultant who specializes in unconventional war-

fare but has no military background, was operating as a military adviser to the contras.

"He would talk about military strategy at some of the meetings," said Joe "Shooter" Adams, mercenary leader and former bodyguard to contra leader Aldolfo Calero. "But frankly, it's a little hard to respect someone who shows up in a guerrilla camp in Sans-a-Belt jeans and a sweater tied around his neck."

Mr. Owen's open involvement with the contras began Oct. 28, 1985, when his non-profit Institute for Democracy Education and Assistance was awarded a \$50,675 grant by the State Department's Nicaraguan Humanitarian Assistance Office.

The grant was awarded at the urging of the United Nicaraguan Opposition, the contras' leadership group formed that year, according to congressional testimony by NHAO director Robert W. Duemling.

The grant called for Mr. Owen to help "the United Nicaraguan Opposition in preparing proposals to NHAO for humanitarian assistance grants, administer such grants and evaluate the medical needs of Miskito Indians in Nicaragua.

In fulfilling that contract, which lasted until April 12, 1986, Mr. Owen made at least five trips to Central America between November and the following April, according to airline receipts Mr. Owen filed with the NHAO.

Mr. Owen's grant, like all NHAO grants, specifically barred him from taking part in any activities related to weapons or combat. There is no evidence he disobeyed that ban.

The Government Accounting Office, which reviewed Mr. Owen's trip as part of an overall study on the expenditure by the NHAO of \$27 million in humanitarian aid, found nothing to suggest that Mr. Owen did anything more on those trips than fulfill his contract, a GAO source said.

But the source added that because GAO auditors were prevented by the State Department from going to Central America, it was impossible for them to determine what Mr. Owen really did.

Mr. Owen's secret involvement in the contras' fight began months before his State Department grant was issued. From December 1984 to the summer of 1985, Mr. Owen reportedly was involved in numerous meetings with contra leaders and others directly dealing with the rebels' military needs.

Mr. Adams said in interviews that Mr. Owen took part in at least a half-dozen meetings with top contra officers and others in Miami, Costa Rica and Honduras in late 1984 and early 1985.

Mr. Adams, who also served as field commander of a force of 14 U.S. volunteers working with Miskito Indians on the northern front and inside Nicaragua in February and March, said Mr. Owen participated in at least a half-dozen meetings in a Howard Johnson's restaurant in Miami and also in Mr. Calero's Miami home in December and January to discuss plans to set up the southern front.

In the Miami meetings, Mr. Adams said, "the topic was that certain funds were going to be funneled to the FDN [the primary contra group] for a southern front, based on intelligence reports and weapons inventories that were discussed. It looked like Owen's job was to report to someone in Washington on the way things were going."

Later that year, as the southern front was established, Mr. Owen "would report to Adolfo on what was going on there and get reports on what the northern front was doing and then take the whole package back to someone in Washington," Mr. Adams said. He said Mr. Owen never represented himself as a formal representative of the U.S. government, but rather as an informal link to someone highly placed in Washington.

Mr. Adams, now a bounty hunter for bail jumpers in St. Louis, said American farmer John Hull, who owns six ranches in Costa Rica, and who has been described in numerous published reports as helping the contras militarily, was present at some of the Miami meetings.

"At the meetings, military advisers were discussed . . . the need for private Americans to come down and reorganize the border, to protect the farms there, including Hull's," Mr. Adams said.

"We also met at Adolfo's house in Miami during the same time frame. . . . That meeting was also about picking advisers and having volunteers to go to the southern front to protect the ranchers and Hull's farms."

Mr. Adams said others involved in the meetings included Alabamian Tom Posey, who heads a contra support group called Civilian Material Assistance, and Jack Terrell, a mer-

cenary who was picked as overall chief of the northern front operation but was later deported from Honduras after a falling-out with contra leaders.

Mr. Posey, interviewed Friday by phone from Alabama, confirmed that Mr. Owen was present at a January 1985 meeting in Mr. Calero's house. Mr. Posey also recalled that Mr. Hull was present. He said the purpose of the one-hour meeting was to discuss "how to get supplies" to the southern front.

In addition to the Miami meetings, Mr. Adams said he also saw Mr. Owen in meetings with Mr. Calero and others in Costa Rica and Honduras in the summer of 1985 to discuss specific weapons requirements with FDN leaders including Mr. Calero. But Mr. Adams said he did not believe Mr. Owen took specific weapons orders, but merely relayed the contras' requirements and plans to Washington.

Mr. Terrell, who has since left the contra cause and now opposes their efforts, said in a recent interview that he met with Mr. Owen and Mr. Hull in Houston in January 1985 "to put together the new southern front . . . and plan to train troops on Hull's property."

Mr. Terrell said he also saw Mr. Owen two weeks later in a meeting of the FDN directorate at Mr. Calero's Miami home to finalize plans for the southern front.

Mr. Owen served as "the eyes and ears" of Colonel North, Mr. Terrell said.

Others also have described Mr. Owen as directly involved in the contras' military efforts:

□ Peter Glibbery, a British mercenary involved in contra efforts on the southern front who was arrested on weapons charges in April 1985, and is now in jail in Costa Rica, told CBS in July that Mr. Owen joined him in Costa Rica in meeting a cargo plane from Florida carrying an illegal arms shipment of 22mm. cannon, 50-caliber submachine guns, mortars and high explosives.

□ John Mattes, an assistant federal public defender in Miami who has investigated the contra supply network in preparing a defense of contra volunteer Jesus Garcia, who was arrested last year on weapons charges, said Mr. Owen served "in planning and orchestrating" the southern front in 1984.

"He was an active participant in meetings and he was also seen on Hull's ranch, getting briefings by mercenaries on their resupply needs," Mr. Mattes said.

□ American journalists Tony Avirgan and Martha Honey, in a civil suit filed in Miami in May, named Mr. Owen as a participant in an elaborate — and so-far-unsubstantiated — plot by 29 people to engage in various crimes including gun-running to the contras.

The allegations are contested by some in the contra movement and its support groups.

Mario Calero, chief procurement officer for the the FDN and brother of FDN leader Adolfo Calero, said Mr. Owen worked with his group only in providing medical aid. Lanny Duyck, a Texan whose contra support group provides medical assistance to Miskito Indians and who was identified by Jack Terrell as being present during a January 1985 planning meeting that allegedly included Mr. Owen, said flatly he was never at any such meeting.

He dismissed both Mr. Adams and Mr. Adams' former commander, Mr. Terrell, as "liars . . . troublemakers . . . and legends in their own minds."

Neil Livingstone, president of the Institute on Terrorism and Sub-National Conflict, where Mr. Owen worked as an unconventional warfare expert from mid-1984 until he resigned Dec. 15, said he would "not dispute" charges that Mr. Owen was a link between Colonel North, the reported coordinator of secret supplies to the contras, and Nicaraguan rebel leaders but had "no independent verification of that."