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The Carlos File

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For the past eighteen months we have been investigating the explosion of a bomb at a May 30, 1984, press conference called by Edén Pastora Gómez, head of the Democratic Revolutionary Alliance (ARDE), which operates along the border between Costa Rica and Nicaragua. Three journalists and five *contras* died in the blast, which took place in the Nicaraguan border town of La Penca, and twenty-six others, including Tony Avirgan, were injured. Propelled by our personal link to the tragedy and by the growing realization that no government or police agency was seriously investigating the bombing, we sought to uncover the identity of the bomber—a man who, journalists at the press conference say, posed as a Danish photographer, planted a metal box containing the bomb and vanished, uninjured, shortly after the explosion. Our research was supported in part by the Newspaper Guild and the Committee to Protect Journalists.

A year's worth of interviews with more than one hundred people in Central and South America, the United States and Europe failed to uncover the bomber's name or many of the details of the plot. We did, however, gather proof that U.S. officials and Costa Rican security officers planted stories in the press, pinning the blame on the Sandinistas and the Basque separatist organization, Euzkadi Ta Azkatasuna (E.T.A.). A number of leads also pointed to Central Intelligence Agency participation in the bombing. Several current or former C.I.A. agents and informants—including a high-ranking Uruguayan police officer and a Cuban from Miami—told us that the agency was behind it. And in the course of our investigation, several names recurred: John Hull, an American who owns and manages a ranch and other extensive properties in northern Costa Rica; a high-ranking official in the Costa Rican Ministry of Public Security; and an anti-Castro Cuban named Felipe Vidal Santiago. Many of our sources implicated these three men in the bombing and said that they all have ties to the C.I.A. (In an interview with us, Vidal denied he had a C.I.A. connection, and Hull told other reporters that he was not involved with the agency.) Despite all our efforts, we were still no closer to discovering the identity of the bomber.

Then, in March, a young Nicaraguan walked into a San José bar and sat down next to a Costa Rican carpenter named Carlos, the neighbor of a North American woman who works in our office. The Nicaraguan, who called himself David, told Carlos about the existence of a dirty tricks squad working for the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (F.D.N.), the leading *contra* group, and said he knew the identity of the La Penca bomber. Through his neighbor, Carlos contacted us, and in the months that followed we

supplied him with questions to ask David as well as with approximately \$50 for David's cab fare, to facilitate their meetings. David's story raises numerous questions, and some of it cannot be verified. But as long as there is a chance that he was telling the truth, his story must be published so that journalists and members of the U.S. Congress can investigate his charges.

David's story opens with a string of coincidences that strain North American credulity but are plausible in the overheated, factionalized atmosphere of Central America. On Friday, March 29, 1985, Carlos was sipping a beer in the Rendezvous Bar near the U.S. Embassy in downtown San José. Three men came in; from their accents Carlos judged them to be Nicaraguans. Two of them then left, telling the other to wait for them. This man, described as short, dark-skinned and young, with a smooth round face and straight black hair, immediately turned to Carlos. "You must help me," he whispered. "Hide me. I want to get away. I don't want to be involved anymore in their things. They are going to dynamite the U.S. Embassy and many innocent people will die. I want to get out."

For the next ten minutes, David poured out his story. He claimed to be part of a right-wing group composed of anti-Castro Cubans, Nicaraguan *contras*, Costa Ricans and North Americans with ties to the C.I.A. They operated from safe houses and *contra* camps in Honduras, Costa Rica, Panama, Nicaragua and Miami, he said, moving "in and out of Costa Rica like a dog from its own house." He said the group was responsible for the La Penca bombing and was planning a series of terrorist attacks which would be blamed on the Sandinistas. These include bombing the U.S. Embassy in Costa Rica and in Honduras, attacking the offices of Costa Rican President Luis Alberto Monge Alvarez and assassinating the U.S. Ambassador to Costa Rica, Lewis Tambs; Miskito leader Brooklyn Rivera; and Urbina Lara, a well-known *contra*.

David trembled as he spoke and seemed near tears. "I'm an anti-Sandinista," he told Carlos. "But these people are much more evil than the Sandinistas." He also claimed they trafficked in cocaine, marijuana and arms. "They are making money off the blood of my brothers and using our cause to get rich." When Carlos asked why he didn't tell his story to the Costa Rican authorities, David replied that a number of government and security officials were collaborating with his group. Out of desperation, he had chosen to confide in a sympathetic-looking stranger. Carlos explained that he could not hide David in his house. As the other two men entered the bar, David urged the carpenter to keep in touch.

Carlos mulled over David's story for several weeks. On three separate occasions he saw David's companions near the U.S. Embassy. Once they got into a gray limousine without license plates. But what overcame Carlos's reluctance to get involved was the announcement, on April 25, that Costa Rican Rural Guardsmen had arrested nine

Nicaraguan *contras* and five foreign mercenaries at an F.D.N. camp located on a farm managed by John Hull of the United States. David had told Carlos that part of his group used that camp. Now Carlos feared that the U.S. Embassy really might be bombed. He contacted his neighbor, thinking that she might be able to alert U.S. officials. She notified us, and we spoke with the embassy's security officer, George Mitchell, who seemed unimpressed.

David's story represented a possible breakthrough for us. At last we might have a source who could confirm the rumors we had been hearing and fill in the gaps in our investigation. We urged Carlos to contact David again, and one Saturday not long after, he saw David and the two others near the U.S. Embassy. When David's companions left to make a telephone call, Carlos slipped him a note with our number. David refused to meet with us because of the danger of being seen talking to "gringos," but over the following weeks, he met with Carlos at a series of pre-arranged spots—a park near the university, a hotel, a bus. We supplied specific questions and Carlos tape-recorded their conversations whenever possible, took notes or simply remembered what David had told him.

Carlos described David as being extremely nervous, repeatedly telling Carlos that the others in his group didn't trust him and had threatened to kill him and his brother, who was with the F.D.N. inside Nicaragua, if he was caught passing information. David was planning to flee but was awaiting his brother's arrival from Nicaragua with the rest of the hit team. In the meantime, he told Carlos, he wanted to expose the dirty tricks squad.

David told Carlos that the man who had planted the bomb at the press conference and who had identified himself as Per Anker Hansen, a Danish photographer, was a right-wing Libyan exile named Amac Galil. He was hired in Chile by two F.D.N. officials and a C.I.A. agent who poses as a journalist, David said. Galil was considered ideal for the job because if his identity became known, most people would assume that he was working for Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi. David said the bombing was planned at meetings in Honduras attended by F.D.N. leader Adolfo Calero Portocarrero; two Miami Cubans, Felipe Vidal Santiago and Rene Corbo; John Hull; and a North American who was identified to David's group as being from the C.I.A.

This story meshed with other accounts we had heard. After analyzing a voice recording of the man later identified as the bomber, made by journalists on the scene, linguists concluded that he was not a native Spanish speaker, and several speculated that he was either Libyan or Israeli. Some of the people whom David and others had implicated in the plot circulated a story that the bomber was a Libyan working for Qaddafi.

In addition we knew something about several of the alleged conspirators. Calero's desire to get rid of Pastora so the F.D.N. can open a second front in southern Nicaragua is well known in *contra* circles. We have a copy of the diary of a U.S. mercenary soldier who served with the F.D.N. In it he describes a meeting at Calero's house in Miami at which the murder of Pastora was discussed by

Hull, some unnamed Cubans and another man, who identified himself as being "from the company." Pastora's aides claim to have evidence linking the C.I.A. to a plot to eliminate "Comandante Zero."

Hull is by his own admission a *contra* patron. Prior to the bombing he aided Pastora; since then, he has quietly supported the F.D.N. Pastora, Costa Rican security officials and mercenaries we have spoken to all claim that Hull works for the C.I.A. and coordinates F.D.N. operations in Costa Rica.

Two soldiers of fortune, Peter Glibbery and Steven Carr, who say they worked under Hull, told us that he discussed with them several schemes to provoke direct U.S. military action against Nicaragua. These included staging an attack against the northern Costa Rican town of Los Chiles and "spreading around some Sandinista bodies" to make it appear as if Managua were responsible. Glibbery said that on one occasion Hull forbade him to take some Claymore mines because "we may need them for an embassy job later on."

Contra and Cuban sources say that Hull introduced Vidal and Corbo into ARDE as military trainers. The two, who have been connected with ultraright Cuban exile groups in Miami, arrived in Costa Rica in mid-1983, and Pastora aides told us they have long suspected that Vidal had a role in the bombing.

We already had reason to believe that several Costa Rican officials assisted in the plot, helped the bomber escape and planted stories in the press. David named two of them: the man from the Ministry of Public Security and Col. Rodrigo Paniagua, a former agent for the ministry who maintains close ties with it. Former and current ministry employees had told us that the high-level official was responsible for circulating the stories and phony documents blaming the E.T.A. and the Sandinistas for the bombing. They also had said he works closely with the C.I.A. Both government and *contra* sources say that Colonel Paniagua serves as liaison between Hull and security officials. ARDE sources suspect that Paniagua knew of the bombing because he personally urged Pastora to hold the ill-fated press conference.

David also told Carlos that Galil sometimes stayed in Managua at the home of anti-Sandinista relatives of President Daniel Ortega Saavedra, who are involved in drug and arms smuggling.

On July 17, David told Carlos that Galil and his hit team would arrive in Costa Rica in a few days and carry out attacks on the embassy and other targets. Soon after, other strikes would be carried out in Honduras. On July 17, in a diplomatic note delivered to Managua, the U.S. government warned that Nicaragua would be held responsible for terrorist attacks against U.S. personnel anywhere in Central America. Horrified by this message, we contacted a Costa Rican government minister we knew to be a strong supporter of neutrality and an opponent of *contra* activities in the country and told him about the plot. He went straight to President Monge, who instructed him to work with several other officials in carrying out an investigation and snagging the hit team if it entered the country. We exchanged information with Maj. Harry Barrantes, an official of the Costa Rican Rural Guard, who had infiltrated the F.D.N.

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Several days later, as David and Carlos were about to part after a long meeting, they were pushed at gunpoint into a jeep by three Costa Ricans, who cried, "We caught you, we've caught the informers." They were driven four hours until they reached what David recognized as one of the *contra* camps located near Hull's ranch house. By assaulting one of the guards, the two managed to escape. When Carlos reached San José, he called us. Tony found him, near tears from exhaustion and fright, and got him an out-of-town hiding place. Several days later Carlos insisted on returning to his house.

During the next few days, Carlos received anonymous telephone calls warning him not to talk to anyone. Known *contras* and Cubans cruised past his house, according to government security guards who had been stationed outside at our request. Then, one night, five shots rang out. Several days later, ARDE officials, who knew David because he had once fought with their group, said that they had learned that he had been murdered, and that the *contras* were after Carlos. Costa Rican officials told us the same thing.

Shortly thereafter, Major Barrantes suddenly left for the United States. His startled superiors later learned that the U.S. Embassy had issued a special invitation for him to attend a course at Fort Benning, Georgia. One of his superiors said he has "no doubt" that Barrantes was lured out of Costa Rica to cripple the government's investigation of the terrorist unit. Although we were able to confirm that Barrantes is at Fort Benning, we were unable to reach him for comment.

We made arrangements for Carlos and his family to leave Costa Rica for about a year, and on August 18 they boarded a plane for Western Europe. Several days later, the Costa Rican daily newspaper *La República* carried a distorted story that Rural Guard officials had obtained information from someone named Carlos that the La Penca bomber was a Libyan who fled to Managua after the incident. The paper implied that the bomber was working for Colonel Qaddafi and the Sandinistas.

How accurate is David's story? Does it solve the mystery of La Penca or deepen it? We have confirmed some portions of it; other sections are more difficult to verify. Some coin-

cidences can be explained, others cannot. For example, we still don't know why David chose to confide in a stranger who happened to be the neighbor of one of our co-workers. Nor did Carlos and David ever discuss why David's companions left him in the Rendezvous Bar.

We can account for other strange assertions. It is difficult on the face of it to believe that a Libyan could pass for a Dane; and even harder to accept that a Libyan could convince the Swedish television reporter with whom he traveled for several weeks before the bombing that he was a Dane. But "Hansen" claimed that he had been raised in Latin America, which explained why he spoke Spanish but no Danish. He and Peter Torbjornsson, the Swedish journalist, conversed in English because Torbjornsson wanted his Bolivian assistant to learn the language. And Torbjornsson does not appear to have been particularly curious about his companion—not wondering, for instance, why Hansen's wallet was always stuffed with \$100 U.S. bills although Torbjornsson said he claimed to be working for an obscure (in fact nonexistent) photographic agency; or, even more damning, why Hansen didn't know the most popular brands of Danish beer. Although Torbjornsson was a suspect in the bombing, David and our other sources denied that he was involved.

How could David, a relatively minor figure in the terrorist ring, know so many details of its operations? David said that his immediate supervisor was involved in the Pastora bombing and told him much about the operation.

Still, there are details we have not been able to verify. In many cases, David did not know names or positions—of a woman in the Nicaraguan Embassy, for example, who was supposed to be passing money to the *contras*, or of the Costa Rican security officials who were cooperating with the terrorist ring. And Nicaraguan officials have not been able to check out David's assertions about Galil's links with the relatives of President Ortega. Most important, we have not found independent confirmation of Galil's identity.

For all its ambiguities, however, David's tale strongly suggests that the C.I.A. is involved in dirty tricks in Central America which are designed to provoke U.S. intervention. If that is true, Costa Rica may become the Tonkin Gulf of America's next war. □

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