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14 Planes Shot Down By Nicaraguan Army In Past Three Years: A Chronology

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Kohl* On Oct. 7, the Nicaraguan Defense Ministry released a list of 13 planes shot down by Sandinista air defense forces during the past three years. In all cases, the Sandinistas attacked unidentified aircraft in Nicaraguan air space. The Oct. 5 incident involving the capture of US citizen Eugene Hasenfus marks the 14th of its kind since late 1983. A detailed chronology of the 13 incidents appears below. **September 8, 1983: A twin-engine Cessna 404 bombed the international airport in Managua and then crashed, killing two persons. Both were Sandinista defectors who joined the Costa Rican-based Revolutionary Democratic Alliance (ARDE) led by Eden Pastora ("Commander Zero"). The pilot logbook showed that he had flown to El Salvador in June and July, and picked up war materiel as well as uniforms and boots discarded by the US-supplied Salvadoran military. The Cessna involved in the airport attack was outfitted with two 150-lb. bombs at the Ilopango air force base in El Salvador a few days before the sortie to Managua. According to Juan Tamayo of the MIAMI HERALD (10/2/86), El Salvador had become a way station in the supply line beginning in Washington. Cargo was flown from Salvadoran air bases, mainly the Ilopango air force base, to small landing strips in Costa Rica, and then airlifted to contra troops in southern Nicaragua. According to the Federal Aviation Administration, the Summit aviation company purchased the Cessna 404 in October 1982. Summit was known to have worked for the CIA, as well as maintaining CIA personnel on its payroll. On the same day that Summit bought the aircraft, it was sold for \$308,000 to Investair Leasing Corporation of McClellan, Virginia. Investair has frequently performed contract work for the CIA. Agency headquarters are located in Langley, Virginia, about a half-hour drive from McClellan. As reported by Lydia Chavez of the NEW YORK TIMES (10/2/83), US officials in Central America told her that the CIA was "using a Salvadoran air force base and some pilots to resupply contras in Nicaragua." The supply missions were usually flown from El Salvador to Nicaragua on C-47s owned by the Salvadoran air force and purchased with US aid. Apparently, when the supply operation began, only US civilian pilots were used. Later, Salvadoran (and presumably Nicaraguan contra) pilots were used. According to one official quoted by Chavez, the operation ran "as many as 12 missions a week." **A Cessna C-47 was brought down by Sandinista anti-aircraft weapons later in September 1983 near the San Juan River in southern Nicaragua. The crew, consisting of contra troops based in Costa Rica, was attempting to evacuate contra leaders from the area. **October 3, 1983: Two contra pilots and a mechanic were captured by Sandinista troops after their DC-3 was shot down in eastern Matagalpa department. All three were from the CIA-backed Nicaraguan Democratic Front (FDN), based in Honduras. Two others were killed in the crash, and two additional crew members parachuted to safety and escaped capture. (See MIAMI HERALD, 10/9/83.) **January 11, 1984: A US army pilot, Chief Warrant Officer Jeffrey C. Schwab, was killed when the OH58 helicopter he was flying crashed 100 yards inside Honduran territory. Sandinista soldiers fired on the helicopter in Nueva Segovia department. According to the WASHINGTON POST (1/12/84), Schwab the first US serviceman killed in the Nicaraguan conflict was flying an unarmed aircraft, and had apparently strayed off course. The White House called the shooting by Sandinista soldiers "reckless and unprovoked." The helicopter, which was 28 miles off

course when fired upon by the Sandinistas, was described as an observation craft. US pilots were instructed to stay five nautical miles from the Nicaraguan border. On Jan. 13, the POST reported that the helicopter had violated Nicaraguan air space. Meanwhile, the US government claimed Schwab was on a mission supporting the contras. On Jan. 17, 1984, Minister of Defense Humberto Ortega Saavedra reported that unidentified aircraft flew over northern Nicaragua more than 40 times in the first 17 days of 1984. (See NEW YORK TIMES, 1/18/84.) **May 7, 1984: A US-made Honduran helicopter was shot down near the Gulf of Fonseca, in the Consiguina region north of Chinandega, killing all eight Honduran soldiers aboard. According to the WASHINGTON POST (5/9/84), Sandinista troops reportedly downed two helicopters, but the wreckage of one was never found. **September 1, 1984: Two Americans Dana H. Parker Jr., police detective from Huntsville, Ala., and James Powell, 3rd, a part-time flying instructor from Memphis, Ten. were killed flying a UH500 helicopter in Santa Clara, near the Honduran border. The helicopter was given to the contras by the CIA. Both Americans were Vietnam veterans and members of the Civilian Military Assistance. The Nicaraguan Defense Ministry claimed the helicopter, alongwith three contra piloted planes, attacked a military base with rocket fire. The air raid reportedly originated from the CIA-supervised Aguacate airport in Honduras. Juan Tamayo of the MIAMI HERALD (9/5/84) said the helicopter "played an active part from the beginning in a guerrilla attack against a Nicaraguan army base..." This incident led to a congressional investigation. On Sept. 17, the US media reported the investigation disclosed that three Air Force planes had been transferred through the CIA to the contras since December 1983. A senior administration official noted that other small, noncombatant military aircraft had been transferred as well. The three Air Force planes were transferred from an Air National Guard in New York state to Central America. The planes went to the CIA and to a Delaware aviation company where they had rocket launchers installed. **Later in September, 1984, a US-made C-47 aircraft carrying supplies to contra troops was shot down by the Sandinistas near the Honduran border in the Quilali region of the northern department of Segovia. **June 3, 1985: Three unmarked US-made, UH-1 helicopters engaged in a mission to evacuate contra troops from Nicaragua territory were shot down by Sandinista troops near the Honduran border. One of the helicopters made a forced landing after sustaining damages from Sandinista troops. Another helicopter flying over the same area was hit by artillery fire, escaped to Honduran territory, and crashed 18 km. from the border. A third helicopter was shot down in an attempt to rescue the crew of the first helicopter. **July-August 1985: According to the Nicaraguan Defense Ministry, Sandinista troops shot down two helicopters in the northern department of Nueva Segovia, and a Cessna aircraft in Zelaya department, also located in northern Nicaragua. [Dr. Kohl is Managing Editor of the Latin America Data Base (LADB).]

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