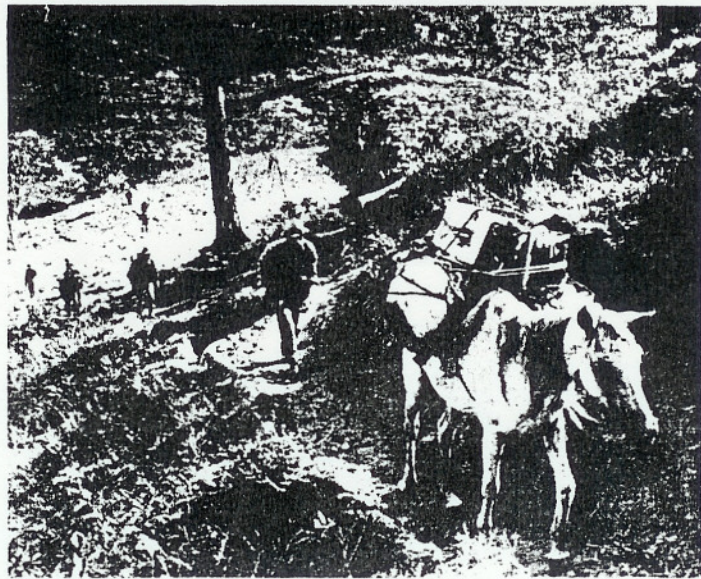


Special Report

by david lynn



Kevin Barry

Nicaragua: peace on the way?

Your Tax Dollars at Work

Nine U.S. Veterans on the Trail of Contra Savagery

As the warm afternoon sun ducks in and out of distant clouds that span the skyline, the children take turns diving off a series of rocks that grow out of the river. Among the floating flowers, the five young Nicaraguans, myself and nine other U.S. military veterans laugh, swim and sun together in a lush and tranquil slice of paradise.

Suddenly, we are shocked back into reality as we stop and listen to an ambush that has sprung up just a kilometer or two away. The distinct sounds of exploding mortars and grenades and intermittent bursts of automatic-weapon fire rekindle the fears we all have ingrained in our memories from our past experiences with war. For the children, it is the sheer horror of remembering seeing the lives of family members and playmates violently taken and their homes burned to the ground at the hands of those who are now attacking over the next ridge. For the veterans, we are immediately drawn back to the harsh memories of similar ambushes in Southeast Asia and our involvement in bringing to the faces of the children of Vietnam the same fearful expressions that we now see in the faces of these Nicaraguan children.

This time our task is not to "search and destroy," but to reconstruct what our own government destroys in this small part of the U.S.-sponsored war zone of Nicaragua known as El Cedro. We are not carrying weapons of war, but are armed instead with hammers and trowels. We are not here as members of the First Marine Divi-

sion or the 101st Airborne, but as members of the Veterans Peace Action Teams, taking a non-violent stand in support of the unarmed civilians of El Cedro.

El Cedro is a small, vulnerable and poverty-stricken *asentamiento* (relocation cooperative) in the Jinotega Province of northern Nicaragua. It sits in a small valley, split by a winding dirt road that ends 14 kilometers to the north at San Jose de Bocay, which is near the site where Ben Linder was assassinated by the contras in April. To the south, the road winds through jungle mountains and valleys, eventually connecting with the paved roads that lead to Managua, the nation's capital, some six hours away.

During our two weeks of living and working with the people of El Cedro, we documented the life histories of several individuals and their families, all of whom were picked at random and interviewed in seclusion.

Our first interview was with Sobraida Blandon, a 30-year-old mother of seven who began her interview by stating, "I have known nothing but war for the last 15 years." In 1972, when she was 16, her father and three brothers were taken from their small farm near El Cedro by members of Anastasio Somoza's National Guard. Bound together at their wrists and ankles with barbed wire, they were led to a waiting airplane.

Sobraida and the rest of her family traveled to Managua to try to find out what

they could concerning the whereabouts of their loved ones. After several weeks of frustration, they were finally told by the Somoza government that the father and brothers had been thrown to their deaths from the same airplane that took them away — because they were believed to be supporters of the rebels. Sobraida's mother expressed her grief by starving herself to death.

In 1983, four years after the fall of Somoza, Sobraida moved to El Cedro, married a woodcutter, Louis Blandon, and participated in the co-op by working in the fields growing coffee, cocoa, corn and beans.

That same year, Louis was kidnapped by the contras. He later escaped after overhearing them discuss how they were going to kill him. Last year, Sobraida's only surviving brother was also kidnapped by the contras. She has heard nothing concerning his fate.

During the 1985 contra raid on El Cedro, Sobraida escaped in the early-morning darkness with her seven children to a nearby underground shelter. After the contras overran the lightly defended community, killing 10 of the local militia, they fired machine guns near the entrance of Sobraida's hiding place, shouting, "Come out of there, you sons of whores!" They lined up her family and 20 others and told them they were going to kill them all.

At that moment, a contra officer came over and told his men they had to leave immediately because the Nicaraguan regular army was closing in. Before they left, they told Sobraida and the others that if they didn't leave El Cedro, the contras would return and kill them for sure.

In the early morning light, Sobraida and her neighbors surveyed the familiar contra calling card. Every building in El Cedro had been burned to the ground or blown away — stores, schools, churches, homes and the health clinic. The contras shot and killed all the cattle, pigs and chickens, even the pet dogs. All they had left were the clothes on their backs. Louis had been wounded but would survive.

Members of other cooperatives pitched in and helped rebuild El Cedro, as they had the two previous times El Cedro had been destroyed by the contras.

Sobraida also told us about the most recent contra attack, on March 19. Again she escaped with her children, but this time two of them ended up with ruptured eardrums from the blasts of the contras' exploding mortar and grenades. As we talked, she showed us the children's pus- and parasite-infested ears, which can only be treated in Jinotega, a full day's drive away.

Sobraida is afraid to make that journey, which could end up taking several days, afraid to leave her remaining children even more vulnerable if the contras should return. Sobraida explained, "We used to have medical workers in this area, but the contras have targeted and assassinated eight of them in the last five years."

"The contras try to kill us because they think we are Sandinistas," Sobraida continued. "And they are right. We are Sandinistas."

We got a taste of the contras' side of the war as told by Victor Zoyla Garcia, a lean 20-year-old Nicaraguan who fought as a member of the ~~contras~~ forces for three years and eight months. In 1982, at the age of 14, Victor was taken at gunpoint from his family's farm and was marched to a contra command post in southern Honduras. Although he was originally kidnapped and