

the Progressive

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EDITOR'S NOTE *Matthew Rothschild*

La Penca and Beyond

When Martha Honey called us up a few months ago and proposed a story on Guatemalan hit squads operating in the United States, I instantly took an interest. For one thing, the subject matter itself seemed vitally important. For another, the caller was Martha Honey.

I remembered Honey from her days in Central America in the 1980s, when she and her husband, Tony Avirgan, found themselves in the thick of international intrigue.

On May 30, 1984, Avirgan went to cover a press conference held by Edén Pastora, the Sandinista-turned-contras, at Pastora's camp in La Penca, Nicaragua, a few feet from the Costa Rican border. Honey herself had planned to attend the press conference but had canceled at the last minute.

The La Penca press conference ended with a bomb explosion. Pastora escaped with injuries to both legs. But three journalists were killed. Avirgan was seriously injured. "It blew a tennis-ball-sized hole in his side," recalls Honey. "The skin on three fingers of one hand was blown off, and he had shrapnel wounds all over his body."

To this day, Honey and Avirgan have been investigating the La Penca bombing. "We had two parallel trails," Honey says. "One was the CIA, and the other was coming out of Managua."

For a while, the CIA trail seemed the most promising. Honey and Avirgan teamed up with the Christic Institute and sued many individuals in Oliver North's network—including Rob Owen, John Hull, Richard Secord, Albert Hakim, and Thomas Clines—for bearing responsibility for the La Penca bombing and other illegal acts.

Honey and Avirgan lost the suit, and have since had a falling out with Daniel Sheehan, the Christic Institute lawyer who handled their case. "We would have liked the case run much differently," Honey says. "We were sorry about the way it was handled. We're not sorry we brought it."

But Honey and Avirgan have refused to abandon their search for truth, no matter where it might lead. And it has led—uncomfortably for some on the American left—inside the door of the Sandinista government. Honey and Avirgan identified the bomber as a leftist Argentinian who was working for a unit of Tomás Borge's Interior Ministry, with the assistance of Cuban intelligence. Still, Honey and Avirgan are not prepared to exonerate the CIA and the North network.

"We believe there's some intertwining" of forces, Honey says. "We still have this body of evidence that points to the CIA and the North network," she says. "And the CIA was certainly involved in the cover-up. On some level, there's an interest for all of these parties to cover it up. We don't know what the mix is. We're still looking into it."

For more information about the La Penca bombing, you might want to check out Honey's fine book *Hostile Acts: U.S. Policy in Costa Rica in the 1980s*.

Honey got involved in the Guatemala hit-squad story shortly after the bombing of the car belonging to José Pertierra, the lawyer for Jennifer Harbury.

As it happens, Honey had already been working with Harbury and Sister Dianna Ortiz (see Page 27) on a number of human-rights cases throughout Latin America.

Honey's employer, the Institute for Policy Studies, was keen on investigating the bombing, since it was so reminiscent of the 1976 bombing on Embassy Row in Washington, D.C., which claimed the lives of two members of the Institute, Ronni Moffitt and Orlando Letelier, Chile's former foreign minister under Salvador Allende.

So it was natural for Honey and IPS to take up the case.

"We had a meeting with Pertierra at IPS three days after the bombing and offered our services to do an investigation, which turned out to be basically me," Honey says.

But Honey soon signed up her co-author, Ricardo Miranda. "I'd heard about Ricardo," she explains. "He's gotten awards in Guatemala for his human-rights reporting, and he'd come up here to Washington. So I called him, and we had a lot of friends in common, so we decided to cooperate."

Honey credits the Fund for Constitutional Government with providing crucial support for their project.

Is Honey concerned about her safety? "I haven't been threatened," she says. "But certainly Ricardo's been threatened. Ricardo probably can't go back to Guatemala because of this story and other work he's been doing."

I'm grateful to Martha Honey and Ricardo Miranda for their courageous reporting on this story. If journalists can't ferret out the truth in Washington, D.C., without fearing for their lives, then we're further down the slope than I'd like to imagine. ■