

CMP

Key Contra Aid Operative Tells Court He

By Walter Pincus and George Lardner Jr.

Washington Post Staff Writers

A former operative in the Reagan administration's contra resupply network said yesterday that he grew disgusted with profiteering in the secret operation, but decided not to quit during a May 1, 1986, meeting with then-Vice President George Bush.

Felix Rodriguez, who had been enlisted in 1985 to help the rebels against Nicaragua's ruling Sandinistas, said he did not mention his work for the contras in the meeting with Bush. But the effect of his decision was to keep him in Central America until his covert role was exposed in the fall of 1986.

Testifying at the trial of former CIA spy-master Chair E. George in federal court here, Rodriguez was called to the stand yesterday as a prosecution witness. George is accused of lying about Rodriguez under questioning by members of Congress in October 1986 as the Iran-contra scandal was beginning to unravel.

Rodriguez, a former CIA operative, said he went to El Salvador in early 1985 to lead helicopter attacks against guerrilla forces there. He was enlisted by then-White House aide Oliver L. North a few months later to run contra resupply flights out of the air base where he was stationed.

In arranging the flights, Rodriguez said he drew no distinction "between lethal and nonlethal assistance" for the Nicaraguan rebels. He said he became upset by price-gouging of the contras and the presence in the operation of individuals he considered unsavory.

Rodriguez said he told the U.S. ambassador to El Salvador, Edwin Corr, in April 1986 that he was quitting because he was worn out and because the anti-guerrilla campaign was so successful. He said he was planning to tell Bush the same thing at the May 1 meeting when Corr, who was also present, began telling the vice president "what a magnificent job I was doing" in the Salvadoran counter-insurgency effort.

Rodriguez said he changed his mind on the spot and decided to stay. It was his continued role in the resupply operation, under the alias "Max Gomez," that George has been accused of lying about on Oct. 10, 1986, before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and on Oct. 14, 1986, before the House intelligence committee.

Rep. Matthew F. McHugh (D-N.Y.), the first witness yesterday, testified under prosecution questioning about the impact that George's allegedly false testimony had on him as a member of the House intelligence committee.

"I concluded," McHugh said, that the CIA "did not know the identity of the people supplying the contras."

Craig A. Gillen, the chief prosecutor in the case, noted that a briefing book George had with him when he testified before the House committee explicitly mentioned Rodriguez's role with the resupply network. McHugh said that information was not presented at the hearing.

"It would have opened up another line of questioning," McHugh said, including "what further connections" existed. McHugh also said that if the additional

Almost Quit Over Profiteering

information about Rodriguez's role and that of CIA Costa Rican station chief Joe Fernandez had been known, it "in my judgment . . . could have jeopardized" \$100 million in additional funding of covert support for the contras that was awaiting congressional approval.

Rodriguez, after his court appearance, told reporters he did not have to tell anyone of his role in assisting the contra resupply effort because "it was general knowledge, particularly among the intelligence community." He also said that "most Americans" in El Salvador knew him by both his alias, Max Gomez, and his real name, which was on his passport.

In a development outside the courtroom, Philip Cherry, a retired CIA covert operations officer who has appeared in court as an unpaid member of George's legal defense team, was seen last Friday afternoon leaving CIA headquarters. He was using a pass normally possessed by agency employees.

Asked Monday what he was doing at the agency, Cherry, an attorney, said that it had

nothing to do with the case. Asked why he had a CIA pass, he responded, "No comment."

Yesterday, in response to questions, a CIA spokesman said Cherry had applied earlier for a contract position with the CIA's newly expanded historical review staff and had been offered a post. He had "come in [Friday] to see his contract and pick up a badge," said Peter Earnest, CIA's deputy director for media relations.

Earnest said he believed Cherry had decided not to take the position with the agency until the trial was over.

"We don't want a conflict or the appearance of a conflict," Earnest said. He added that he believed the office of the CIA's general counsel would consider what to do about Cherry possessing an employee pass in the meantime.

A spokesman for independent counsel Lawrence E. Walsh, whose office brought the charges against George, said there would be no comment on the matter. "There are no rules governing this sort of thing," the spokesman said.