

Mr. Tony Harro  
Newsday  
Long Island, N.Y. 11747

6/2/85

Dear Tony,

A year or two ago a mystery plane crashed into a volcano near the capital of El Salvador. The stories about it were inherently incredible but were, may I say dutifully, reported. There were no questions when the cover story was altered to make it a different volcano, no questions when it was described as a Nicaraguan plane allegedly carrying arms to the Salvadoran rebels, none about how it got where it was on such a mission, and an unexplained mystery when the Salvadoran military kept all reporters a mile or so away from the crash site.

To me, from these and other facts, it was obvious that this was a CIA plane equipped to spot Salvadoran rebels at night, violation of U.S. law.

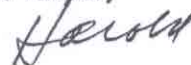
Then it came out that this plane had been from Summit aviation company, at Greenwood, Delaware. And then that federal tax money had been used to improve the airport at which the company was located. Having worked on the Wilmington News and been a farmer, I recognized the smell of overripe bullshit. The runways of that country airport were not enlarged for private ~~executive~~ executive planes so that those who owned and flew them could get to downtown Philadelphia faster. That was the story. Many existing airports already served that purpose. Even the commercial Wilmington airport, which also is on the major highway to Philadelphia and a lot closer - and underused.

I've just seen the attached piece in the Progressive by a New Yorker who worked for Summit and gives a little description of what happened to planes there.

Aside from policy and political if not also military matters, there appears to be the clearly illegal use of tax money and direct violation of an Act of Congress. I do not know, of course, whether this writer can add more or fill in gaps.

At the time I phoned the Post reporter who wrote what it carried. There was interest in what was told to me but nothing was published.

Best wishes,



Harold Weisberg

## In the Belly of the Beast

On September 8, 1983, a Cessna 404 Titan loaded with explosives set out to attack Nicaragua's main air force base in Managua. Before the explosives could be dropped out of the rear cargo door, the plane crashed into the airport control tower, killing the pilot, the co-pilot, and an airport worker on the ground. It was a CIA plane, the type I had helped build.

Incredibly, the pilot of the Cessna had kept his flight logs and customs papers aboard for the mission, and when his plane crashed, the Nicaraguan government managed to recover the documents. The records, and an analysis of them by *The New York Times* and the *Wilmington News Journal*, revealed that the plane had come from a CIA-managed company in McLean, Virginia, called Investair, which had in turn bought the plane from a private airport-turned-military-outfitter in Delaware: Summit Aviation.

I worked for Summit. I had started out in May 1983, proud in my airport blues and fascinated by the sounds of aviation, an opportunity to fly, and the cabin-stove smell of kerosene from the jets I was learning to handle.

My job was on the flight line, one of those people you see on airport ramps who fuel the planes, wave the pilots to their parking spots, tow the planes in and out of the hangars using ground tugs, change the oil and water-methanol, and perform any service not requiring specialized mechanics. Of necessity, those of us on Summit's line service worked inside the cockpits and around the sensitive weapons systems, the rocket mounts, the bomb-sights, and the fire-control panels of the planes the company was modifying.

Despite the exceedingly delicate nature of Summit's activities, security was minimal. Not one employee went through even a casual background security check; Summit considered us all American patriots, and it was assumed that if by chance we happened to figure out what we were doing, it would make us all the prouder. Had Summit or the CIA bothered to make even a rudimentary check of my record, for example, they would have found that I had already been visited by two FBI agents carrying a subpoena concerning the small matter of refusing to register for the draft.

Summit's military director had taken to

*Robert Colburn is a free-lance writer in New York City.*



BILL RUSSELL

overseeing the work himself whenever it involved some large twin-engined planes that had begun to come and go from the airport. One day out on the ramp, I turned around to find the military director behind me. Agitated, he wanted to know if I had seen anyone trying to photograph the plane I was working on. I had not. Neither had anyone else. Dissatisfied with our answer, he jumped into his Mercedes and roared off in the direction of the highway and the nearby woods.

The plane in question bristled with antennas across its belly, nose, and tail. To an expert, the antennas could have indicated the purpose and capabilities of the electronics within, so the military director gave strict orders that the plane remain in closed hangars at all times when it was not being tested or flown. That was our first inkling.

Two weeks after the incident with the military director, the plane returned to the airport covered with sticky black specks and streaks of grit on its aluminum skin. We were told that an oil refinery caught fire near the airport where the plane had laid over. The damage could have happened that way, but we wondered. (The American Petroleum Institute, *The New York Times*, and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration somehow never heard of the refinery blaze.)

It took five of us on line service more than four hours using concentrated aircraft detergent to clean the outside of that plane. The engine shop mechanics began half-seriously and in private to refer to it as "the CIA plane."

Summit's clients also included the gov-

ernments of Thailand and Haiti. All except two workers on flight line service were black, and we could figure out why Haiti's President-for-Life, Jean-Claude Duvalier, wanted a "Summit Sentry" 02-337, which is derived from an anti-guerrilla plane used in Vietnam.

So, knowing this, why did we not flatly refuse to service the planes?

We almost refused. Our shift discussed doing it several times, hesitated, and then lost nerve and let the matter drop. The simple, cynical fact was that more than a hundred salaries and jobs depended on those contracts. Ever since the bottom fell out of the aviation business five years ago, few people felt secure enough to let a single contract, large or small, slip through their fingers.

When I left Summit at the end of August 1983 to return to New York City, it was with faint misgivings, nothing more. I had no idea of the storm that was about to break. But at the end of October, after the revelations in the newspapers, I went back to Summit for a talk with my erstwhile employers. I put my question to Summit's president: How much of what I read in the papers could I believe, and just how much of it had I been involved in?

"Well," he answered, "you worked here last summer. What do you think?"

I responded that I could not be sure. I could think of many reasonable explanations for the equipment I had worked on, but at the same time I was beginning to believe that, yes, some of the planes I had serviced could have been CIA aircraft.

He heard me out and then asked: "Do you have a problem with that?" ■