

# U.S. Witness Admits Contra Flights

## Noriega Lawyers Begin Laying Groundwork for Defense

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MIAMI, Oct. 1—Floyd Carlton Caceres, the government's star witness against Manuel Antonio Noriega, testified today that his smuggling operation included flying weapons to the U.S.-backed Nicaraguan contra guerrillas during the time he was flying cocaine into the United States for the Medellin drug cartel.

Questioned by Noriega lawyer Frank Rubino, the convicted drug pilot acknowledged that pilots working for him made arms flights to the contras "around 1983 and 1984."

Some flights, Carlton testified, were organized by Alfredo Caballero, a Miami-based business executive later indicted with Carlton on cocaine-related charges.

Carlton's testimony about gun smuggling permitted Noriega's lawyers to begin laying groundwork for what is expected to be one of the former Panamanian leader's chief defenses in his drug-trafficking and racketeering trial: that the U.S. government had ties to drug traffickers that were no different than relationships maintained by Noriega.

Rubino's effort to explore those ties made little headway against repeated objections by Assistant U.S. Attorney Michael P. Sullivan. Rubino bombarded Carlton with questions about his gun-flying ac-

tivities, asking if they were ordered by former National Security Council aide Oliver L. North and whether he worked with two former contra leaders.

U.S. Judge William M. Hoeverler sustained virtually all prosecution objections and grew increasingly testy as Rubino persisted. "Just stay away from it," he snapped at him once.

Late in the day, Carlton appeared to backtrack about the scope of his involvement with the contras.

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Asked by Sullivan whether he flew guns to the contras, Carlton said, "No, sir."

Any connections between Carlton and the contras is particularly sensitive for prosecutors because of his critical importance to the Noriega case.

Carlton testified last week that he served as intermediary between Noriega and Medellin drug bosses, funneling \$600,000 in cartel payoffs to Noriega for his approval for four drug flights into Panama in 1982 and 1983.

Rubino attempted to explore Carlton's relationship with DIACSA, a Miami-based airplane sales firm owned by Caballero. According to a 1988 Senate investigation after Carlton and Caballero were indicted, DIACSA received two State Department contracts totaling \$41,130 to fly humanitarian aid to the contras.

Blocked from questions about DIACSA, Rubino pounded at Carlton's credibility, accusing him of "trading" on Noriega's name in an effort to shake down the cartel and of pocketing bribes he said he had paid to Noriega.

At one point, Rubino began reading from a transcript of a secretly taped 1988 telephone conversation in which he contended that Carlton had expressed bitterness at Noriega for confiscating one of his airplanes and threatened "to get even" with him.

The transcript appeared to surprise prosecutors who succeeded in having it barred as evidence. Nevertheless, Carlton said it was based on a conversation secretly monitored by the Panamanian intelligence agency, but he denied Rubino's charge that he threatened to "thank" Noriega by testifying against him.

"I swore before God, the jury and this honorable judge to tell the truth, and I have remained firm in telling the truth for the past five years," he said.