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THE PILOT SHARK OF EL SALVADOR

The cruelty and corruption of Juan Rafael Bustillo.

By Charles Lane

Few Americans have ever heard of General Juan Rafael Bustillo, but for more than a decade he was a pillar of American foreign policy in Latin America. As the commander of El Salvador's air force, his troops received almost one-quarter of the \$1 billion in military aid El Salvador has gotten from the United States since 1981. In deference to the critical role he played in the war against Salvador's leftist rebels and in aiding Nicaragua's contras, Bustillo was courted by U.S. military officers, diplomats, and CIA agents. He was even invited to George Bush's inauguration in 1989—the only Salvadoran military officer so honored.

Today, however, the once indispensable general lives in semi-retirement, dividing his time between his home in San Salvador's tightly guarded military colony, the Colonia Arce, and a discreet abode he maintains in Miami. He is no longer in command of the air force, having had a nasty falling-out with his erstwhile U.S. patrons. The air force's brutality, its corruption, and its refusal to cooperate with El Salvador's army (much less submit to civilian authority) had become extreme, even for a military known for lawless behavior.

But the problems persist after Bustillo's departure, and U.S. officials concede there's little they can do about them. The legacy of a decade of American support, it seems, is a divided, fiercely insular air force that depends on millions of U.S. dollars to function but has little use for American lectures about the rule of law. And the relationship between the United States and Bustillo's air force, and how it went sour, is emblematic of the failure of U.S. policy in El Salvador as a whole.

In the early '80s Pentagon plans to stop "Communist expansion" in El Salvador called for an infusion of planes and helicopters to offset the rebels' greater mobility in the field. The aircraft fell under the control of Bustillo, who had been picked by his fellow colonels to run the air force in 1979 because he was one of the few trained military pilots in the country, and because his military school classmates held key positions in the officer corps. Bustillo also was a man El Salvador's powerful far right could trust. A devotee of the virulent

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local brand of anti-communism, the terse, square-jawed military aviator effected the bearing of a Latin MacArthur. If ex-Major Roberto d'Aubuisson was the right's flamboyant hit man and rabble-rouser, Bustillo was its gray-eyed man of destiny.

From the outset, then, U.S. plans to make the air force a lynchpin of counterinsurgency were at odds with U.S. promises to isolate the right and build a moderate civilian government. Air-launched bombs, bullets, and rockets did prove more efficient at killing leftists than anything since the death squads. But at the same time, aerial attacks inevitably entailed civilian casualties, driving campesinos into the arms of the guerrillas.

Even more ominously, with U.S.-supplied aircraft and crack U.S.-trained ground forces at its command near the capital, the air force suddenly had all the tools to stage a coup by itself. The potential for such a disaster became clear in January 1983, when Bustillo threw his choppers and planes behind a mutiny led by a rightist army colonel. The colonel demanded the firing of the defense minister, General José Guillermo García, who was backed by the United States because he tolerated civilian provisional president Alvaro Magaña. In a negotiated settlement, García was removed while preserving Magaña in office; American Embassy officials later reported that Bustillo's pressure was the key factor in getting rid of García. The United States acquiesced in the deal, deeming it unwise to rock the boat at that phase of the war.

The contradictions of U.S. policy sharpened when José Napoleón Duarte, a Christian Democrat, was elected president in 1984. Duarte, the moderate, persuaded Congress to provide more military aid, including millions for the air force, on the grounds that it would help Salvador's fledgling democracy. Bustillo, meanwhile, saw Duarte as a closet Communist. Rumors of rightist coup plots involving the air force were constant during Duarte's presidency.

Once again the U.S. approach was to try to keep the air force chief happy and hope for the best. A modus vivendi was worked out: Bustillo withheld his support from rightist coup plots and was allowed a U.S.-supplied fiefdom at Ilopango free of outside interference. The air force base became "a military dictatorship," says a former Bustillo aide—complete with its own PX, sports club, pilots' academy, and officer hous-

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ing. Salvadoran and American officials say the general systematically co-opted or ousted his potential rivals, regardless of military merit. Pilots even sang a hymn that eulogized Bustillo by name.

Soon, though, the fine line between merely appeasing Bustillo and actively supporting him began to fade, as U.S. officials competed with each other to show the benefits of cooperating with Washington. The CIA's San Salvador station, which had been parking its helicopters at Ilopango and keeping a warehouse for its special operations there, provided money and training to elite air force ground units, according to U.S. military sources. Edwin Corr, who was U.S. ambassador in San Salvador for most of Duarte's term, lent Bustillo an armor-plated luxury car from the embassy motor pool and lobbied Congress to get more helicopters for the air force. Bustillo was the only Salvadoran commander with a private counterinsurgency adviser: Felix Rodriguez, a former CIA operative in Vietnam and Latin America with close ties to then-Vice President George Bush's office; he arrived in El Salvador in early 1985.

The high point of U.S. collaboration with Bustillo came later that year, when Oliver North made Ilopango the hub of his contra resupply network. Bustillo's help, arranged through Rodriguez, was invaluable: false end-user certificates to buy arms; the expansion of an overflowing warehouse for contra weapons; air force ID cards for nineteen resupply pilots. Some 109 secret flights shuttled in and out of Ilopango, according to the congressional Iran-contra committee report.

Not only did this direct link to the White House strengthen Bustillo, it also weakened Duarte, whom the United States was ostensibly trying to bolster. When the Ilopango operation was exposed in October 1986, Duarte, who had warned U.S. officials that his government would suffer if contra aid from El Salvador were ever exposed, wanted to fire the air force commander. That would have been a breakthrough assertion of civilian authority. But the defense minister, General Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova, objected, pointedly raising the specter of an air force revolt, a former senior Duarte aide told me.

Still, support from the United States might have encouraged Duarte to take on Bustillo. No such support was given. Ambassador Corr sat in on the meeting in which Duarte and Vides debated firing Bustillo. Duarte aides have said Corr backed Vides. Corr told me he neither urged Duarte to assert his authority and remove a right-wing menace to civilian rule nor defended the air force general whom Corr was cultivating, and who was in a position to expose Corr's government and Corr's embassy. "It was cowboy time and Bustillo was our man," says a U.S. diplomat who served in San Salvador during this period.

All the while, bad air force habits were allowed to grow worse. Bustillo irked the army by reserving choppers for the air force's own paratroop battalion, or army troops commanded by his friends. Air force ground units, especially CIA-assisted ground units, remained notorious for human rights abuses. In late 1986, for example, the body

of twenty-three-year-old Nelson Rodriguez, who had been arrested by air force troops as a rebel suspect, was found, thumbs tied behind the back death-squad style. In April 1989 an air force unit ambushed a rebel field hospital, reporting nine guerrillas killed. Later foreign human rights groups found evidence that the air force men had captured, tortured, and killed five of the rebels it claimed to have killed in combat. An autopsy by a French doctor on a guerrilla nurse from France showed she had probably been raped before being killed.

Air force officers spent much of their time pursuing illicit gain. For years a Salvadoran air force DC-6 that carried pilots to training at the U.S. Howard Air Force Base in Panama returned full of contraband liquor and appliances, Salvadoran military officers say. The goods were sold on the black market, shared as patronage, or stocked in the ample air force PX. Other rackets included a fencing operation for stolen cars. A former top-level Salvadoran military officer told me that police arrested an air force captain running a car theft "gang" at the air base in 1986. The captain escaped to the United States.

There are also indications the air force ripped off the United States itself. Last year the General Accounting Office found that the Salvadoran air force had sold more than \$100,000 worth of Pentagon-supplied fuel to the contra resupply network, keeping the money in apparent violation of U.S. rules. Separately, the air force sold \$700,000 worth of U.S.-supplied fuel back to the United States to refuel visiting U.S. planes. Apparently that money went into an Air Force slush fund. When the GAO inquired, Bustillo said he spent it to remodel the Ilopango base; as for contra aid, he said that "Salvadoran national security interests" prevented him from answering any questions.

Even more disturbing, reports that the air force was involved in cocaine trafficking began to reach U.S. ears. Sources in the Drug Enforcement Administration told me it has confirmed long-standing rumors that air force members are involved in street-level sales of the drug within El Salvador.

The more important question is whether the air force dabbled in international drug trafficking as well. Reports that it might have done so date from at least 1986—around the time the contra resupply operation was exposed. At that time, an agent from the DEA's branch office in Guatemala City came to San Salvador, seeking access to Ilopango. Bustillo stalled, says a U.S. official with first-hand knowledge of the case. "There was never a good reason why [the DEA] couldn't get on to Ilopango," he told me. "They just kept putting off meetings, stuff like that. [The DEA] wasn't going to beat its head against the wall."

On June 21, 1988, Salvadoran army troops came upon a light plane that had run out of gas and landed near a remote hacienda on the country's Pacific coast. Police found it had been carrying almost half a ton of cocaine, worth more than \$30 million. Some drugs had been off-loaded and stuffed into secret compartments in a pickup truck that was discovered later. Police followed the trail

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to a warehouse on the Boulevard of the Army, in an industrial area that falls under air force security jurisdiction. Inside, they found cocaine packed in large spools of cotton yarn bound for the United States; apparently this was a large, ongoing transshipment operation.

Five weeks after the discovery of the plane, an air force lieutenant colonel, Edwin Napoleón Lazo, was shot to death. The case remains unsolved. The air force never blamed the murder on the rebels and the rebels never claimed it, though they have singled out air force officers for attack. Two officials with close ties to the military, a Salvadoran and an American, told me they believe Lazo was killed by others in the air force because he was about to blow the whistle on cocaine trafficking. Though there is no direct proof of that view, it is indirectly supported by the fact that air force officers resorted to kidnap and torture to frame two civilians for Lazo's murder.

Lazo and a friend named Juan Alexander García Prieto were killed in front of García Prieto's home near Ilopango. Court records in San Salvador show the first authorities on the scene were air force troops. They immediately produced a witness who claimed that a taxi driver named Luis Ernesto Cuellar had shot García Prieto because he owed García Prieto money. Lazo, purportedly, was an unlucky bystander. The witness was brought to court by heavily armed members of the air force who refused to give their names to the judge. But his story clashed with those of other witnesses. The judge said he fell into "a series of contradictions." Paraffin tests on Cuellar to determine if he had recently fired a gun were negative.

Shortly before Cuellar's defense attorney, Roberto Orellana, was to cross-examine the air force witness, the lawyer was kidnapped by heavily armed men, thrown face down into the back of a red Toyota pickup, then handcuffed and blindfolded. For five days, according to Orellana's sworn court testimony, he was beaten, deprived of food and sleep, threatened with death, and so tightly handcuffed that he lost all feeling in his hands. To his astonishment, the kidnapers were trying to force him to confess to helping his client kill Lazo.

Orellana was put in a secret cell—at Ilopango. He recalled hearing helicopters outside as the questions and beatings went on. Finally the door of his secret prison opened and a new questioner entered. The man, whom Orellana never saw, spoke as a superior to the others and questioned the lawyer for several minutes, without harming him. When Orellana's blindfold was removed later in a different room, a guard told him his mystery interrogator had been Bustillo.

The court records include a letter to the National Police from Major Roberto Antonio Leiva Jacobo of the air force intelligence unit, S-2. (S-2 operated an "infamous" red Toyota pickup, a U.S. military officer told me.) Citing orders from Bustillo, the major said he was sending Orellana to the police as a suspect in Lazo's death. Though it is not clear how involved Bustillo was in the affair, at a minimum he wasn't fazed by the

brutalized condition of his men's captive.

Eventually a judge dismissed the charges and both Cuellar and Orellana were released. A friend of Cuellar's told me that he fled to asylum in Australia; Orellana stayed in Salvador. Neither the air force nor anyone else has investigated the Lazo murder since the trumped-up case fell apart. Nor have the authorities looked into the apparent frame-up. As for the drug plane, three Salvadorans arrested as suspected smugglers, one of whom is rumored to be related to a former top army officer, have all gone free: two were ordered released by a judge who was later disbarred for taking a bribe to release a gang of kidnappers with ties to rightist death squads; the third walked using a forged release order.

A few months after Lazo's death, Bustillo asked the U.S. Embassy if the DEA would check out the drug rumors swirling around his men. DEA agents in the region were wary of this change of heart, according to U.S. officials. At the time Bustillo was bidding to become minister of defense; the agents thought he had to know what was going on at his base and just wanted to curry American favor for his campaign. "It was all a show for the embassy's benefit," says an official sympathetic to the DEA's view. But William G. Walker, the new U.S. ambassador in San Salvador, agreed to the idea, deciding it would be even riskier to let Bustillo say he had spurned his offer.

The DEA report, according to U.S. officials who have seen it, contained strong leads on air force drug smuggling, but not conclusive proof. Much of the report apparently came from sources within the air force itself. The document named Colonel Manfred Koenigsberg, then director of the air force pilots' academy, as a key figure in alleged transshipment.

Koenigsberg had run S-2 in the early '80s, when the secret jails at Ilopango were a route to "disappearance" for perhaps hundreds of Salvadorans. Christian Democratic Party officials say that in 1981 bodyguards for Antonio Morales Ehrlich, the Christian Democratic head of the U.S.-supported land reform, caught Koenigsberg waiting outside Morales Ehrlich's house carrying a gun. He also commanded civil defense groups that enforce security in barrios around Ilopango, including the industrial area on the Boulevard of the Army, and he maintained close ties to S-2. He supervised the air force DC-6 shopping trips to Panama, sometimes flying the plane himself.

After El Salvador's presidential elections in March 1989 U.S. officials briefed Bustillo on the DEA report. At that point, U.S. officials told me, Bustillo tried to fire Koenigsberg. Reportedly he made his accusation directly to Vides, still defense minister at the time. But Koenigsberg insisted on his innocence, and for reasons that are still unclear, Vides took no action. Apparently Koenigsberg was one of the few Salvadorans who could cross Bustillo and survive, perhaps because he was on good terms with Colonel René Emilio Ponce, the army chief of staff who was Bustillo's

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rival for the defense minister post.

Bustillo's bid for defense minister, a job that would have given him overall control of the armed forces, was a joint project with d'Aubuisson and other hardline leaders of the right-wing Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA). D'Aubuisson got Cristiani, the new president, to promise Bustillo the job. Bustillo had a strong claim: he was the senior officer on active duty. The right wing had won at the polls, seemingly validating his worldview. And he had always been able to deal with the United States.

But George Bush had replaced Ronald Reagan, and U.S. interests in Salvador had begun to diverge from Bustillo's interests. Bush inherited a collapsed center, a resurgent right, increased guerrilla activity, and a rising number of human rights abuses by the military. With the cold war ending, the new administration's plan for the El Salvador mess was to keep it on the back burner. So when U.S. officials learned that Bustillo's choices for two vice minister slots were far rightists who had been exiled for human rights violations at U.S. request, they feared the reaction in Congress.

Suddenly all the air force misdeeds that U.S. officials had rationalized earlier were coming back to haunt U.S. policy. The United States began urging Cristiani to name Bustillo's army rival, Colonel Ponce, instead. The air force lashed out. An air force officer threatened the life of Colonel Milton Menjivar, the top U.S. military adviser in El Salvador. On May 24, 1989, a week before Cristiani was sworn in, air force jets buzzed a ceremony at army headquarters—drowning out a speech by Vides. As another protest, the air force withdrew its helicopters from combat for two days. The army responded by threatening the air force.

In the end, however, Bustillo couldn't win against both the United States and the army. But before he left, he exacted concessions. Ponce was denied the defense ministry; it went instead to a caretaker, General Rafael Humberto Larios. (Ponce finally got the job this month.) General Rafael Villamariona, groomed by Bustillo as a hand-picked successor, was installed as commander of the air force. Bustillo stayed at Ilopango for two months after January 1, when his transfer to his new post, military attaché in Israel, supposedly took effect. It is understood that he will never have to set foot in Israel if he doesn't want to.

The end of Bustillo's decade of U.S.-indulged total dominance of the air force has prompted a fierce power struggle. One contender is Lieutenant Colonel Juan Antonio Martínez Varela, an ultrarightist protégé of Bustillo. He is believed to have piloted one of the planes that buzzed Vides's speech. Another contender is Koenigsberg, who was recently promoted to full colonel. Guns were reportedly drawn and fired in the air when Koenigsberg's supporters and Martínez Varela's people met at a recent party in San Salvador. The free-for-all threatens a branch of the armed forces upon which the government will have to rely if, as expected, the current round of stalled peace talks gives way to a

new fall offensive by the rebels. But the United States has virtually no say in the matter, because of lingering bad blood over the way Bustillo was treated.

The issue of drug dealing, and what Bustillo might have known about it, was left unresolved. Earlier this year Koenigsberg told the United States either to prove its suspicions or shut up. He said he would take a lie detector test, so the U.S. Embassy brought two DEA lie detector specialists to San Salvador. The tests showed Koenigsberg was telling the truth when he denied dealing drugs.

Of course, the record of U.S.-run lie detector tests in El Salvador is mixed. In the case of the six Jesuit priests murdered last November by army troops, a lie detector test given the priests' maid by FBI agents in Miami showed she was lying when she recalled seeing soldiers at the scene of the crime. She was, of course, being truthful. Koenigsberg told me he wasn't asked anything about either the drug-laden 1988 plane or the Lazo killing. (He says he has no knowledge of either matter.) Not surprisingly, Koenigsberg is telling anyone in San Salvador who will listen that he has a clean bill of health from the U.S. government.

U.S. officials in San Salvador aren't sure what to believe. Was Bustillo really in the dark about drugs? Or was he trying to use the DEA to pin the blame on Koenigsberg and ease his campaign for minister of defense? Or is Koenigsberg really a drug smuggler, as many U.S. and Salvadoran officials said he is, but cool enough to brazen out general questions on a polygraph test? Perhaps the main point is that, whatever the truth, the United States is in no position to find it. The United States got just close enough to the air force to be tarred by its abuses, but not so close that it could trust officers to tell U.S. officials the truth—though given the see-no-evil attitude of many of those officials in the past, air force officers could perhaps be forgiven for wondering if the truth was really what they wanted to hear.

Bustillo didn't respond to a request, communicated to him by Salvadoran officials, for an interview. If he had spoken, he might well have said he feels betrayed by the U.S. government. Who could blame him? For ten years the United States had no qualms about using him and the force he commanded in its wars against communism in Central America. Then it got all huffy. There are many other military commanders in El Salvador who could, and do, make the same argument, when the United States starts challenging their human rights performance or personal probity. This is a principal reason the United States can't get to the bottom of the Jesuits' massacre or root out military corruption. In its pursuit of an elusive military victory, the United States tolerated so much military crime that U.S. claims of good intentions have lost credibility. Now, for the first time, it seems likely that Congress will cut military aid as punishment for killing the Jesuits, and the Bush administration may well go along. The move could send the Salvadoran armed forces a message they have long needed to hear—if it isn't already too late. •