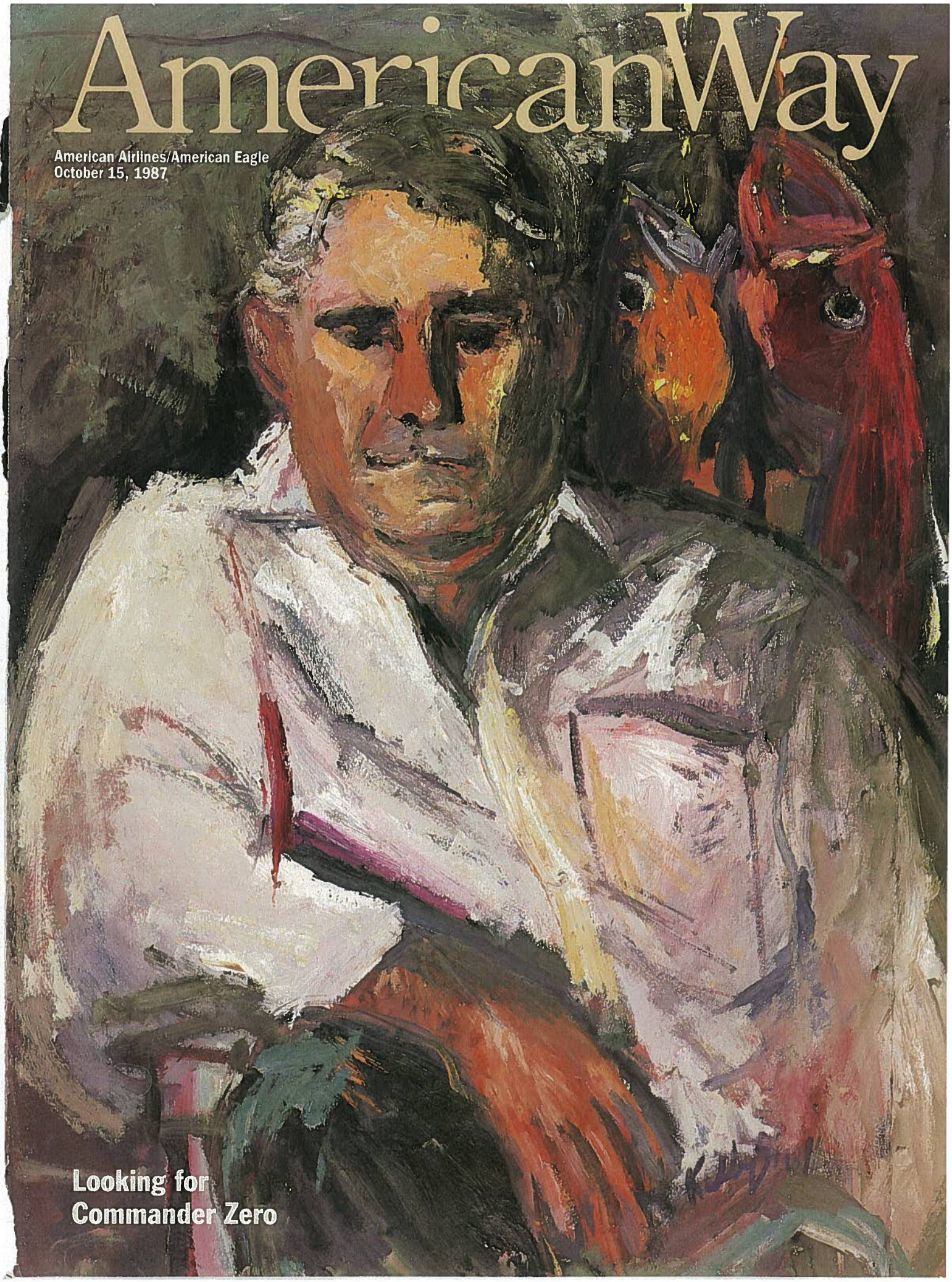
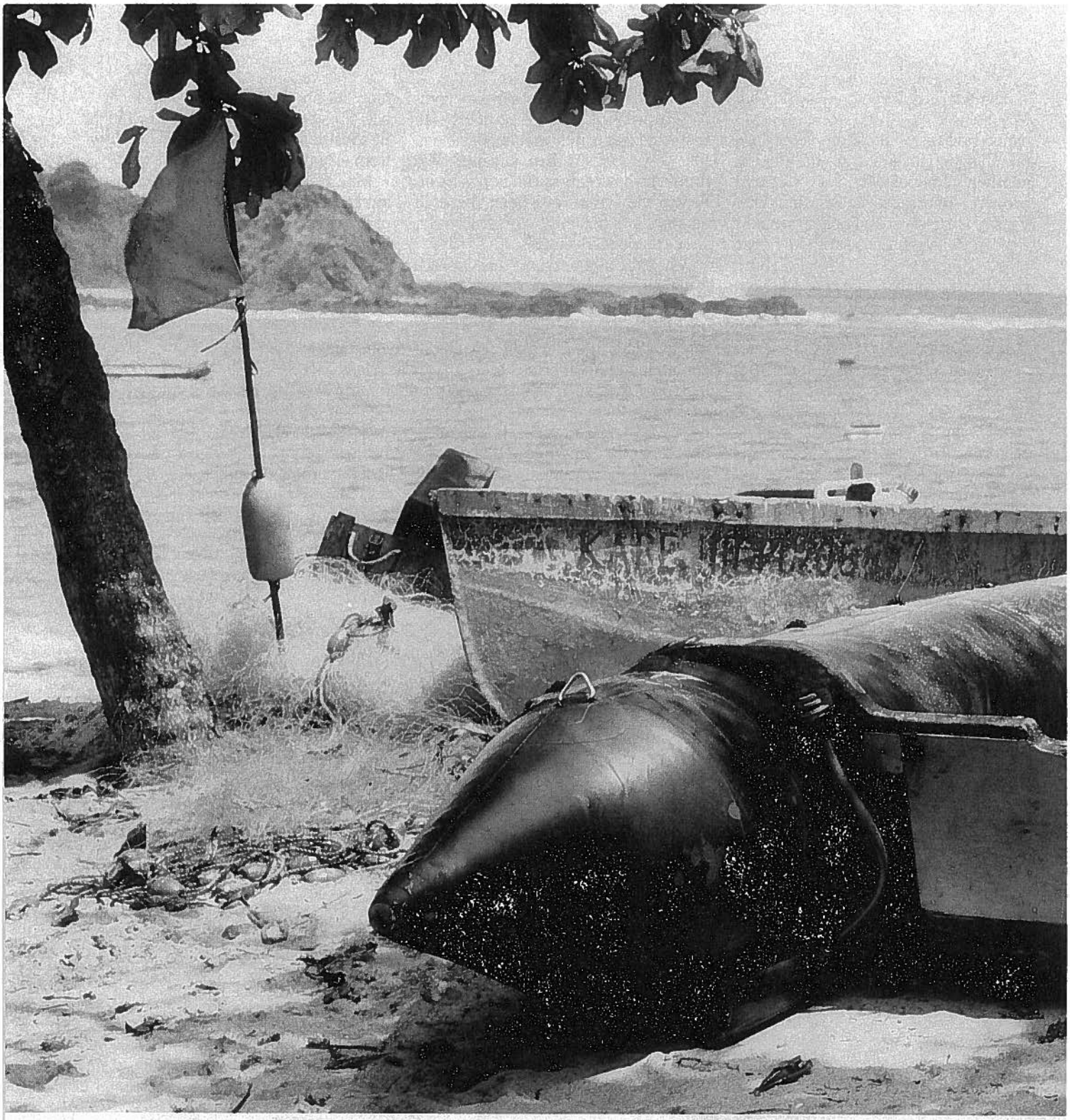
AmericanWay

American Airlines/American Eagle
October 15, 1987



Looking for Commander Zero



THE BEACH

Looking for Commander Zero, the one-time folk hero of the 1979 Sandinista Revolution, isn't just an exercise in patience, it's a lesson in reality. And even when you find Edén Pastora in a Costa Rican fishing village, you're not sure what you've caught.

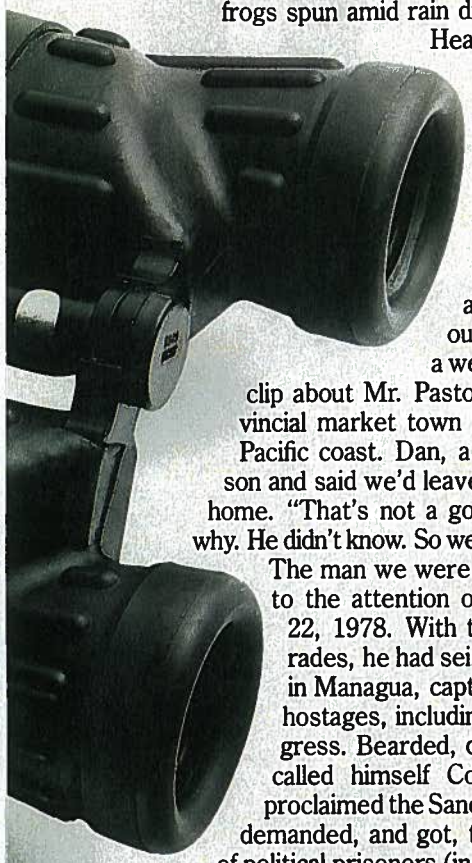
ES OF EDÉN

MAYBE TOMORROW *by Rod Davis*

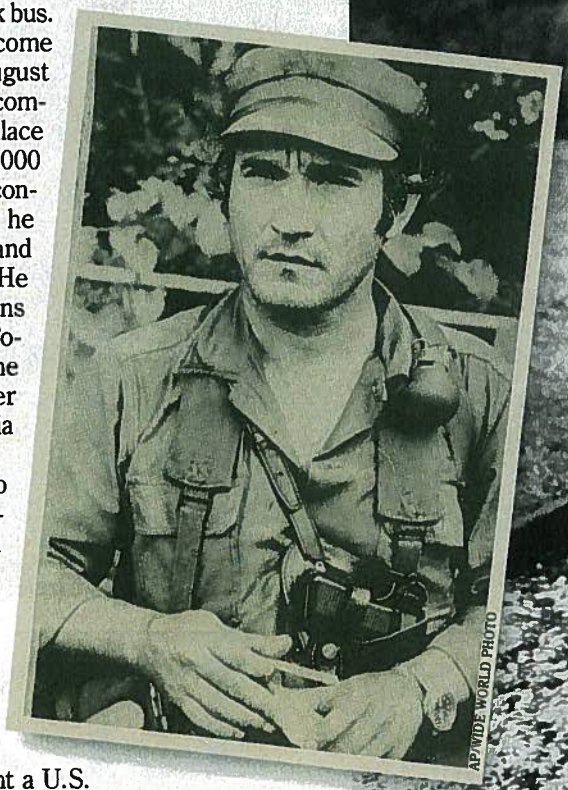
"MIAMI VICE" LOOKED better in black and white, and Spanish, and framed in a 12-inch screen mounted on the wall of a $9-a-night Central American hotel room. I finished a tumbler of Jack Daniels and slapped at a mosquito. Outside it was pouring. A clattering air conditioner fogged the window. It was the

episode where Lieutenant Castillo encounters an old agency buddy. They get to brooding about Zen, martial arts, the KGB and Men Stuff and try to kill each other out of respect. I'd seen it. Dan knocked on my door. It was 8 PM and time to try our "contact" again. I flicked off the video melodrama and went out for the real kind.

We walked down the interior courtyard of the Hotel Diria, actually not a bad place if you ever find yourself in Santa Cruz looking for a revolutionary. Since lunch time, the Costa Rican rainy season had lived up to its name. Hand-sized frogs spun amid rain droplets in the swimming pool, zapping insects. Heavy-leaved coconut trees spread overhead, and occasionally you could hear a ripe husk plop onto the thick, wet garden fauna. The grass was freshly cut, by machete, by hand.

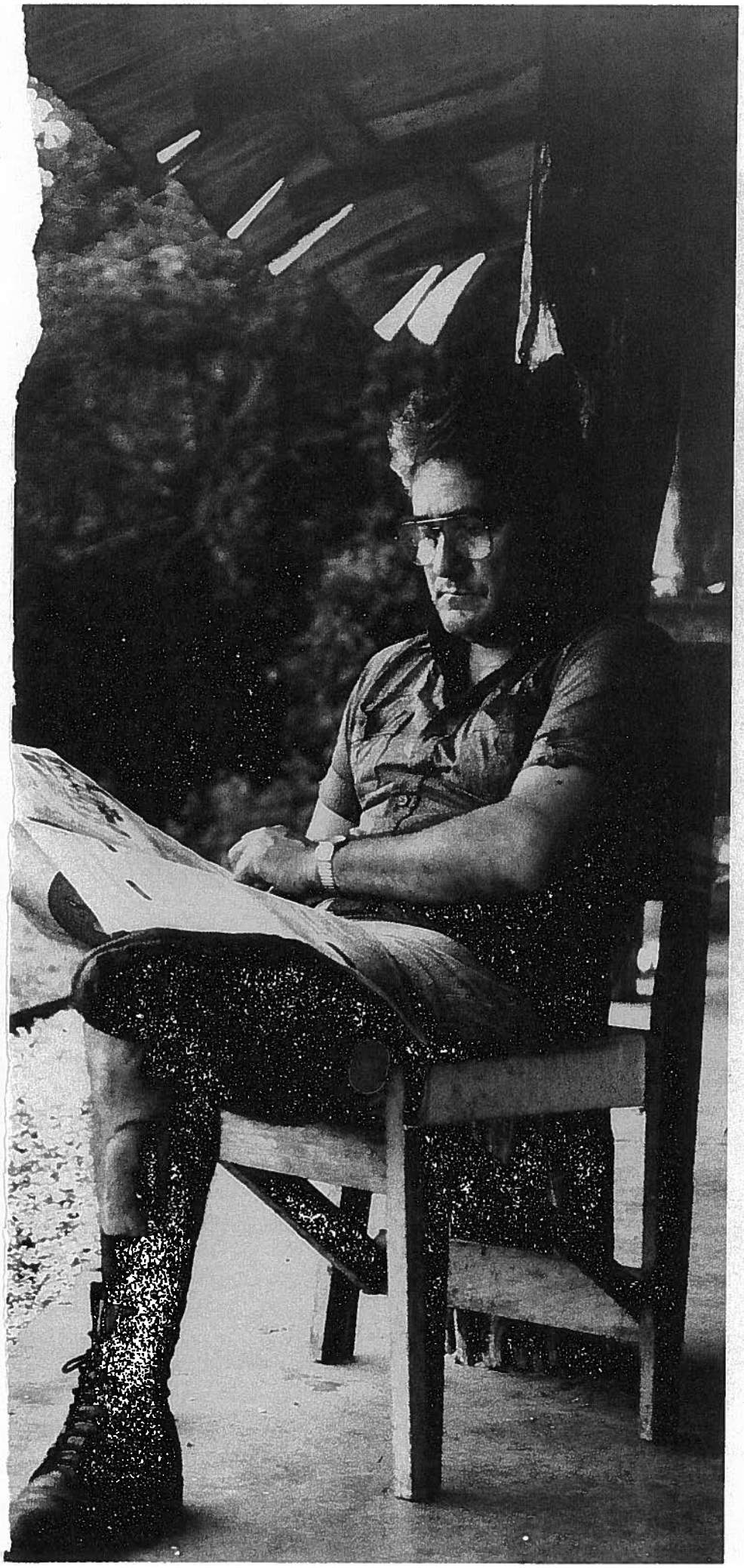


Since yesterday we'd been trying to make contact with Edén Pastora — El Comandante to friends and *compañeros* — but previously arranged appointments and check-in calls were being ignored. Our contact was never home, and all we had been advised to do was wait at our hotel in San José, the capital. I could envision a week of that, and it had a wrong feel. A newspaper clip about Mr. Pastora bore the dateline Santa Cruz, a small, provincial market town 250 kilometers north of San José, toward the Pacific coast. Dan, a photographer, got in touch with our contact's son and said we'd leave that afternoon and meet El Comandante at his home. "That's not a good idea," the son had said. I wanted to know why. He didn't know. So we caught the 2 o'clock bus.

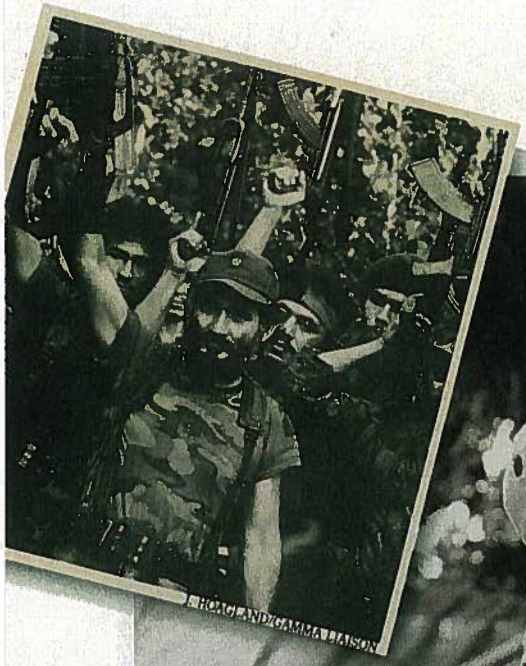


The man we were trying to find had come to the attention of the world on August 22, 1978. With two dozen armed comrades, he had seized the National Palace in Managua, capturing more than 1,000 hostages, including the Nicaraguan congress. Bearded, dashing, and brave, he called himself Comandante Cero and proclaimed the Sandinista Revolution. He demanded, and got, the release of dozens of political prisoners (including arch rival Tomás Borge), plus a half-million dollars ransom. The three-day event was televised, and as Commander Zero, Edén Pastora became the first great media star of the Third World wars.

A year later, on July 19, 1979, dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayles fled the country and the Sandinistas came to power. But Mr. Pastora's reward was a relatively minor post with the militia. He didn't like it, nor the drift of the revolution toward what he perceived to be communism and the undue influence of foreigners, i.e. Soviets and Cubans. Mr. Pastora was a social revolutionary, to be sure. He believed in class struggle and socialist reform, but he was first and foremost a nationalist. His hero, Augusto César Sandino, fought a U.S. Marines expedition to Nicaragua from 1926 to 1933, when the Marines withdrew. Before they left, the Marines set up Anastasio Somoza (the patriarch in the dynasty), who shortly thereafter invited Sandino to dinner and had him murdered on the way home. As a child, Mr. Pastora suffered the murder of his own father, a farmer in the northern province of Matagalpa, by thugs of Somoza's hated Guardia Nacional.



Pigs, chickens, dogs, cats, ducks, and other animals — edible or not — roam freely in San Juanillo, the northwestern coastal village Edén Pastora has claimed as a fishing headquarters since seeking asylum in Costa Rica a year ago. Local life is tranquil, almost medieval in pace, although the border of war-torn Nicaragua is but a few hours to the north. Travelers can get there, or south to Panama, via colorful, cheap, and reliable buses, which are boarded every so often by vendors offering sacks of fried bananas and soft drinks.



FROM CLANDESTINA LIAISON

By 1981, the leftward drift of the Sandinistas under Daniel Ortega, Mr. Borge, and the nine-member Directorate wore on Mr. Pastora as much as his own exclusion from power. In June of that year, Mr. Pastora left Nicaragua for Panama, then Honduras, Costa Rica, and other countries. In 1983, he went "into the bush" in Nicaragua to fight the Sandinistas, claiming they had betrayed the revolution. He commanded up to 7,500 men, by his count, and fought as far north as Bluefields, on the northeastern Miskito coast. But he could not prevail.

Nor would he join with the *contra* forces operating out of Honduras, the U.S. supported groups more or less allied as the FDN (Democratic National Front). Mr. Pastora denounced them as anti-revolutionary and riddled with former members of Somoza's *guardia.* He would have nothing to do with them, considering himself a "third way" and the only true heir of the principles of Sandino.

Gradually, Mr. Pastora fell to the south and in May of 1986 gave up armed struggle. Granted asylum by Costa Rica, he became an exile, as did most of his former compañeros. The story since then was that Comandante Cero was a fisherman, living the simple life. Perhaps so. But last summer both Mr. Pastora and Sandinista officials were quoted as expressing a mutual interest in reconciliation. Which made the Jesuit-trained farmer's son with a flair for the flamboyant a hot property once again. Perhaps too hot. If Managua wanted Mr. Pastora back, you didn't have enough fingers to count the number of factions (including, he says, the CIA) that wanted him dead. It seemed a good idea to seek out this archetype of the Central American drama while it was still possible.

The bus trip from San José took five hours through the rain. Dan and I had seats 49 and 50 at the rear of the coach, just above the engine. Heat poured through the cushions. The scenery up the spine of the tiny country of three million, known in more peaceful times as the Switzerland of Central America, was spectacular. But I felt like I was riding a steam iron.

It was therefore especially rewarding to find that Santa Cruz was two dozen kilometers inland. The only fish were on ice in the market stalls. When we got to the Hotel Diria, we were more than eager for conversational communion with our alleged contact. Who, regrettably, was unavailable again but would call us, without fail, the next day at 1 PM, according to his son.

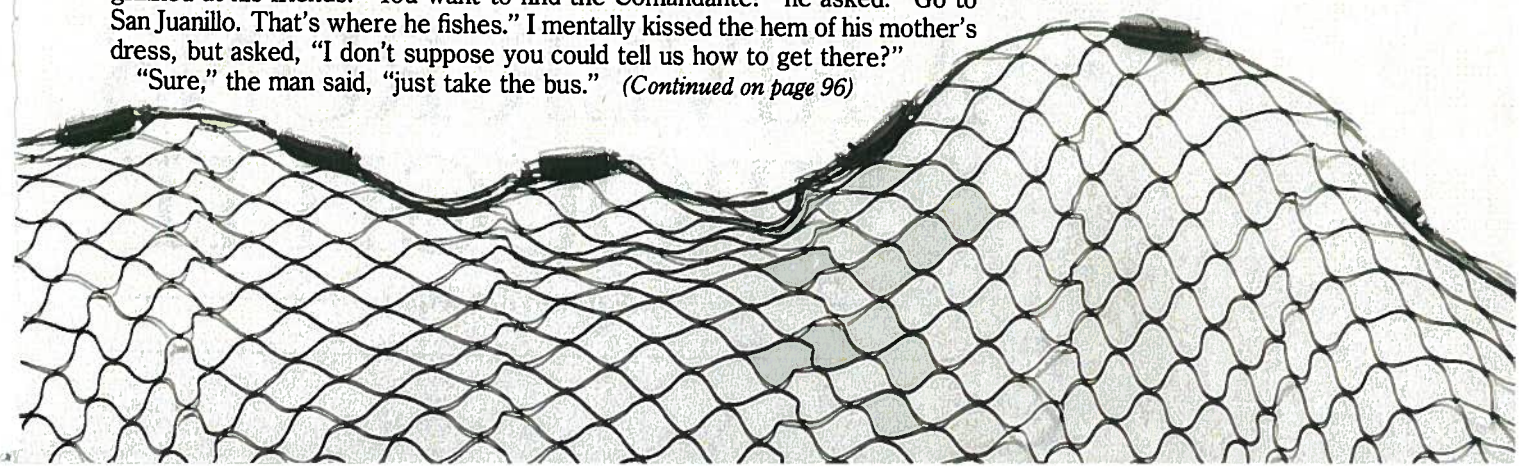
And so to Jack Daniels and Don Johnson. Eventually the rain let up and we went into town. Asphalt portions of the main street glistened, and the unpaved margins were contorted into ruts from passing trucks and buses. We passed streetside bungalows where residents sat on porches and watched us as if we were zoo specimens. Not that I blamed them. A couple of gringos show up frazzled, unshaven, carrying canvas bags, and yelling into the telephone about El Comandante, and what are you supposed to think?

We went down a half block and found a cantina. A few of the boys were at the bar watching a soccer game on TV and drinking *cerveza.* We joined them.

In the course of buying a few rounds of a clear, powerful local liquor called, I think, *juano,* I found myself bewailing our plight. Come all this way and we don't even know where Mr. Pastora is, if he is, et cetera. A young laborer grinned at his friends. "You want to find the Comandante?" he asked. "Go to San Juanillo. That's where he fishes." I mentally kissed the hem of his mother's dress, but asked, "I don't suppose you could tell us how to get there?"

"Sure," the man said, "just take the bus." *(Continued on page 96)*

Top: **Children in San Juanillo gather outside a home to wait out a summer storm. They have a school, a church, and a health-care office — not to mention one of the most beautiful beaches in the hemisphere. Malaria and other serious illnesses common to other parts of the country are relatively absent here.** ***Above:*** **Fishermen rest along the beach. Each day's catch is kept on ice in a large vat and sent to market in San José every Sunday.**



(Continued from page 51)

OR MAYBE LATER

Next morning we packed our bags, paid our bill, and polished off a couple of Cokes, mostly to wash down the aspirin. The problem with the bus was it left at noon and the next phone call was due at 1 o'clock. Missing the bus could keep us in Santa Cruz another day, sans Mr. Pastora, but missing the call could be worse.

Or we could get none of the above. One o'clock passed without incident, so for the next hour we tried to ferret out the guy who had said, for weeks, how he'd meet us at our hotel as soon as we got to San José and take us fishing with El Comandante, who would love to have us. At last, after three days, we heard the contact say hello. It was all a series of mistakes, he said. Without fail, El Comandante would be at San Juanillo at 8 AM the following day, and we should meet him there. I said we'd try, being in the neighborhood and all. Fine. Fine. Click.

We decided to push on that night. Mr. Pastora might already be in San Juanillo, for all we knew, although we had learned by now that El Comandante also had a house in San José and apparently had gone to the capital the same day we had journeyed north. Maybe. It depended on what you wanted to believe.

We got a cab, whose driver agreed to take us on the two-hour trek through jolting back-country roads for a sufficiently exorbitant fee to keep his four-wheel Toyota Land Cruiser in gas and shocks. We drove through fertile valleys linked in chains by green hills pushed up by volcanic turbulence. Low clouds hung through the sky. In some places, banana groves and palms grew thick between poor but remarkably clean *campesino* huts. Other valleys — full of Brahman cattle and hardwood trees — were straight out of Shropshire. We passed Logarto (Alligator) and then sped through even smaller villages. At one, two vaqueros drank beer in front of a wooden cantina, their horses hitched to a post. Boys on bicycles drove small herds of cattle and pigs across half-log bridges. Big gray boars plopped in the right-of-way, daring to be hit. We forded a half-dozen streams brown with rainfall runoff.

At last we moved up a hill bounded by shoulder-high savannah and were in San Juanillo, population approximately 50. The village surrounded a grassy commons, complete with a pair of soccer goal posts. The first building along the road was a hall used for monthly dances. It served otherwise as a communal living area. A minuscule grocery store was grafted to one side, with a phone that often worked. The other dozen or so structures in town were private homes, except for the school/church, the cantina, and a health department office. No cafés, no rooms to rent, nothing at all for visitors or *turistas*.

El Comandante was not expected that night, said Rónal, a muscular young man at the dance hall who didn't look long out of the bush. Did we expect him? I said we did, and Rónal said we could come back at 8 in the morning, although he clearly thought we were unexpected. He wondered where we'd stay that night, because there was nothing in the village.

We thanked him and drove to the

beach, just downhill from the town. A dozen boats pitched on blue waves in a lava-lined cove flanked by thick rain forest. A few more vessels rested on the steep, sandy shore, alongside nets, a workshop, and a couple of houses — one with a new electric generator. Postcard idyll, except for the black, government-issue Zodiac commando raft under a palm tree.

Up near the holding vat used to store fish, a group of men sat and talked. I asked if they'd seen Señor Pastora. Not recently. That pretty much exhausted the conversation, so I backed off. Our contact had suggested that once in San Juanillo, Dan and I could spend the night on the beach with the fishermen. I thought I'd give it a pass, at least until we'd been vouchsafed OK by El Comandante. We were unmistakably in his camp, but we were not as yet unmistakably welcome. We decided to wait for dawn elsewhere.

The taxi took us 30 kilometers north along the coast to an isolated resort hotel on the Playa Junquillal, more or less deserted at that time of year. The surroundings could not have been a greater contrast to those at San Juanillo, but we were only looking for a place to sleep, not cavort, and this was the closest. While swimming alone in the beachside pool before dinner, I paused to look up the hill at the well-scrubbed cabanas and the dense, complex jungle behind. I thought about how Rónal looked at me as he spoke, as though I were some gringo vapor from outer space, nonexistent in this place I'd never grown up in. Probably true. I swam a dozen laps and stopped once or twice because it was so quiet I wondered if something was with me in the water.

That night I lay awake for hours listening to sounds from the bush. Tomorrow could easily mark day four of zero from Zero. Paranoias grew. Had Mr. Pastora changed his mind and decided to blow us off? It was, after all, a phony journalist who had planted the bomb at the May 30, 1984, press conference along the Rio San Juan, just inside Nicaragua's southeastern border, which killed an Associated Press reporter and two others and sent Mr. Pastora to a hospital in Caracas with severe leg wounds and lungs so burned by hot, explosive gases that he nearly died. Mr. Pastora blamed the incident on the CIA and/or the FDN, both of which he was going to denounce at the press meeting. Why should he now meet a couple of American journalists without checking their credentials? Were we being brought down and set up? Or was his security that lax?

And what about the CIA? Was it conceivable that Mr. Pastora could receive journalists or any other visitors, especially after the July Senate hearings and the Sandinista overtures, without somebody in the San José station knowing the details? Were we being watched?

And the Sandinistas. If Commander Zero spurned their offer, would he not remain, as they had previously said, a traitor? A potential threat on the southern frontier?

The problem with being kept on a tether is that you start seeing too many places for the line to lead. We were,

after all, just *periodistas* trying to nail down an interview. Nobody was shooting at or around us, and we weren't exactly sleeping in swamps. And Mr. Pastora was well known for tardiness. It was just that, looked at one way, things added up to nothing more than a little b.s. and unneeded hassle. From another point of view, the entire slapstick arrangement was predicated on a surrounding miasma of violence. My dreams were even stranger: images of the ride through the rain forest, of chalk-covered phantom guerrillas moving up to my bed, of swimming that evening alone, mosquitos skimming across the aqua-blue surface.

At five I woke to the *congos*. I had never heard such sounds and at first thought they came from a jaguar on the porch. But a cat's throat couldn't vibrate like that. Deep, guttural, biomechanical. Very, very loud. I went to the window screen and peered into the trees, barely lit by dawn. Figures not much bigger than raccoons jumped through the branches. Monkeys, congos by local name. I watched them gather among the broad green leaves. They lived an exposed life out there. Howling like devils made you think they were something they weren't.

Maybe Now

El Comandante showed in San Juanillo just after 11 the next morning. Dan and I had been waiting since 7 inside a modest, one-room house talking to Abuelito, a 72-year-old Miskito Indian who'd fought alongside Mr. Pastora for several years. It was looking like another one of those days — nobody shows and nobody knows anything. But two red Dodge pickups braked hard into the gravel outside the house and a half-dozen men spilled out. Some wore military sunglasses and the others sported variations of the ex-compañero look. They weren't fishermen.

Mr. Pastora, 51, was smaller and more solid than I'd imagined. About 5 feet, 7 inches, very muscular. He was smooth-shaven — had been for 3 years — and with his square, wire glasses and graying temples, this 20-year veteran of guerrilla wars looked like a sociology professor. He walked directly into the house and introduced himself. He seemed about as laid back as a mongoose. He immediately explained that he could not meet with us that day but would give us an hour tomorrow. No more. He and his entourage turned for the door, but paused. Mr. Pastora's light, long-sleeved shirt was buttoned almost to the neck. He had a hairy chest. "I might be able to meet you this evening," he said. "Don't go anywhere." The pickups and the men left. Half the children in the village gathered along the roadside.

All day we waited on Mr. Pastora. The afternoon rains came early and didn't let up. For hours I watched the life of a 17th-century village. Nothing much happened, but not much needed to. The day set its own pace. On porches around the small settlement — an eyedropper of a clearing amid the semijungle all around — people sat and talked. A coterie of piglets moved up and down the street, grunting in displeasure at getting wet, routing chickens in sheltered havens. Dogs lay among them, and a few cats. There

was an interesting ecology among the animals — the carnivores didn't attack the others. I thought it had something to do with the attitude of the people. They allowed their animals to roam free not out of disregard for order, but love of companionship. My daughter would have understood completely.

Nonetheless, one of the pigs wound up as lunch, prepared by the wife of the cantina owner. Dan and I had taken over a corner of the open-air serving area and had prevailed on the woman to feed us. Like most Ticos (Costa Ricans), she was warm and friendly, showing us her kitchen, where a new clay oven had been built, and chatting with us throughout the day. Later, she called us into the family dining area to show us 19 ducklings, which she was helping her daughters feed. "This is a very poor village," she said, tossing cracked corn to the multitude, "but our children are happy and healthy. Here we don't have the diseases [malaria, dengue fever] like some other towns do." I was glad. The children in San Juanillo were among the nicest and best looking I've ever seen.

A vaquero drifted in on horseback and hunkered under the cantina eave. A young woman, clearly the village beauty, passed across the commons like an Astrud Gilberto melody, carrying a freshly killed chicken. Then a new silver van came into town, heading off in the direction Mr. Pastora had taken. So did other vehicles. Whatever was happening, the press was not invited.

Dusk set in and something had to be done. I had a feeling Mr. Pastora might leave town that night and if I didn't talk to him there wouldn't be another chance. I had to find Abuelito again. He spoke English and had been delegated as our host.

Back at the house where I'd first seen Mr. Pastora, a group of fishermen had come in and were preparing dinner — fresh snapper, rice and beans, fried bananas. It was dark inside. The town has electricity but to save money it's used sparingly. It was odd to see Abuelito cooking. At an age when other people get social security, he had taken to the bush, up near Bluefields, against the Sandinistas. He thought the Miskitos had been treated "like animals" and that their best recourse was for "the Americans to rule the Indian coast." On the other hand, he believed Congress and the CIA were Communists.

I told Abuelito we wanted to find Mr. Pastora that night and that we needed a place to bunk. He looked up from the grill and smiled. "You haven't seen him?" he asked, genuinely surprised. "Well let's go down to his house. You can talk to him and you can sleep there."

Abuelito guided us by flashlight down a dark, muddy road leading to one side of the village. We crossed a small clearing and came to the compound of a modest thatched hut, rented from an American, perched atop a bluff giving way to the rocky coastline below.

Mr. Pastora's pickup was parked behind the hut. As we approached, I could see through the screens a group of people in a large open room with a kitchen to one side. Mr. Pastora was there; so was his fourth wife, Yolanda, and two of the compañeros I'd seen

earlier at the beach. A U.S. Army PRC-10 radio transmitter was shoved against a wall adjacent to two small bedrooms. A shirtless man in fatigue pants, a heavy, sharp, cross-shaped medallion around his neck, stood in the center of the room. His name was Javier. He was from Barcelona, had fought with the Sandinistas in "the war" of '79, and had brought his wife and two young children back to Costa Rica for a visit with his old friend and hero. He spoke excellent English and was drafted as our translator.

Mr. Pastora wanted to know where we'd been all afternoon. We would of course be his guests that night if we didn't mind sleeping on the floor. It was a brand new movie. Mr. Pastora led us to the front porch and offered us chairs. He said he'd been busy all day arranging for a new ice machine for the fishing cooperative, which stores its catch all week and sends it directly to San José each Sunday.

I gave our host a bottle of brandy I'd been carrying around, and also a paperback copy of the transcript of the testimony of Lt. Col. Oliver North before the Senate committee. Mr. Pastora had seen excerpts of the hearings on TV but was amazed a book was out so fast. I showed him a passage on page 221, in which Lt. Col. North refers to having given $225,000 to an unnamed contra leader on the southern front. A television commentator at the time had said Lt. Col. North was referring to Mr. Pastora.

Javier translated the passage. Mr. Pastora, Yolanda, and the others huddled around the book under a bare bulb suspended by its cord from the ceiling. "This is not me," Mr. Pastora said. "I received nothing from Oliver North. I met with him two times [in Washington], but he never gave me an answer." Yolanda said that was true, that Lt. Col. North hated her husband because he would not ally his former group, ARDE (Revolutionary Democratic Alliance), with the FDN. "This money went to another man," Javier said, "but he did not lead the fight. This man [Mr. Pastora] led the struggle."

We ate on the porch. Yolanda and Javier's wife prepared sandwiches and ceviche, washed down with Pepsi. Soon we were all tired. Mr. Pastora retrieved some foam-rubber mats and put them next to the kitchen table for

Dan and me. A compañero made a call on the PRC-10 and left, along with Abuelito. El Comandante and Yolanda retired to a small bedroom, Javier and his family to the other.

I stretched out, drawing up a camouflage bag for a cover. Rain fell off and on during the night. I got up once and unbolted the door to go outside. The grass was cool and damp on my feet. I stared down at the waves smashing against the coast and looked back to the quiet, dark cabin.

Earlier, I had confronted Mr. Pastora about his apparent lack of precautions against assassins. How did he know we hadn't come to blow him up? "Effective security is not spectacular," he had shrugged. "We know where you have been." I wasn't sure if that were a stock answer to conceal a slipshod intelligence network or a statement of matter-of-fact confidence. Probably the latter, for when I asked if it were not true that Edén Pastora had a price on his head, he replied, "Yes, but there is also a price on the head of whoever collects it."

Before dawn, the congos woke me again. I rolled up my gear and went out onto the porch. Later the others got up and we had eggs and sliced salami and coffee, and Mr. Pastora said we'd go out on the boat for three hours. No more.

Tomorrow Is Another Day

The beach at San Juanillo shapes itself into an acute teardrop cove, which at high tide appears a quarter-mile wide. When the waves recede, strips of black lava show the opening to be a tenth of its façade. If the approach to the village from land is difficult, narrow, and easy to defend, that from the Pacific is even better. Which is why El Comandante chose the place.

Most of the fleet was already out when we came banging down in the pickup. The waves were huge, throwing up rooster tails of spray as they hit semisubmerged rocks. Yesterday, I'd watched a series of whitecaps nearly scuttle a boat that got turned sideways coming to shore. Mr. Pastora's craft, a 25-foot blue, open shell, lay midway out in the cove. We used a small green skiff of military origin to reach it. In the party were Mr. Pastora, Javier, Javier's son Gorka, and three fishermen, one of whom had been in Mr.

Pastora's various commands nearly a decade, and he didn't look 30.

The outboard engine started smoothly and we put out through the lava portals. Mr. Pastora jumped onto the prow, grabbed a rope fasted to a metal stay, and rode as if on a skier's towboard. Supposedly he was watching for rocks, but it seemed like he was showing off or having fun. Below his blue cutoffs, a huge stretch of skin along his left calf had been scorched away. It had healed ugly. He continually scratched at it.

The swells were moderate. We went out a few kilometers. Giant tortoises popped in and out of view — one of them in struggle with a shark. The three fishermen cut up sea snake and baited a pair of trotlines. As the boat slowed, the lines were played out from the stern, marked every now and then

It was hard not to think of Edén Pastora as a commander without an army, a man who could no longer perpetrate history.

by Styrofoam containers for pickup in the afternoon. The fishing had been good the last few days — crews were running around the clock. Were Edén Pastora the rustic, almost biblical figure of the sea he was said to have become, his day would have been made. But it was clear that although he liked the work, it neither exhausted his intellect nor paid his bills.

"Every life has two sides," he said as we idled and more hooks were baited. "The professional and the hobby. Fishing is my hobby."

"And revolution?" I asked.

He smiled and didn't answer.

Just up the coastline was the southwestern border of Nicaragua. It was difficult not to think of Edén Pastora, sitting alone on the bow, in his bush hat, as a commander without an army, a man who could no longer perpetrate history but only discuss it. None of Mr. Pastora's family remains in their homeland, and few of his supporters. I wondered if there were any real chance he'd go back.

"I would talk to either Borges or Ortega or anyone," he said, "if they

wanted to move the revolution back to Sandinismo and not Marxism-Leninism." Yet he insisted on so many preconditions that the odds of a reconciliation appeared remote. One in ten, by his estimate. Less, by mine.

The boat stopped. Gorka, about 12, was seasick. Mr. Pastora, a reputed ladies' man with 21 children of his own ("On this too I am divided," he said when I asked how many were boys [11] and how many were girls [10]), counseled the boy to watch the horizon, not the waves. As we waited, the fishermen pulled out small boards with nylon line. They would try for snapper. Mr. Pastora hooked a three-pounder, drawing the line in barehanded.

"It is a political thing now, not military," he said. "There is no chance of defeating Managua by force. Besides, the political takes precedence over

"There is no chance of defeating Managua by force. While the contras are in place, no political change can happen."

military events. Politics forces changes . . . which is why the Americans should stop giving money to the [FDN] contras, should stop helping the Somocistas. While the contras are in place, no political change can happen. . . . The only aid the U.S. should give is nonmilitary and only to revolutionary Nicaraguans."

Mr. Pastora's snapper flapped madly on the deck. Fifteen minutes passed and nothing else struck, and Gorka wasn't getting any better, so El Comandante said if the interview and picture-taking were over we should go back. He had many things to do and fishing wasn't one of them.

We stood at the front of the boat, under a small canvas awning, watching the coastline draw nearer. Big steep cliffs, jungle right down to the surf. I asked El Comandante if there had been any day in his life better than the one when he stood in the National Palace and seized the momentum of the revolution. "Only the day of victory," he said. It's been a long time since either of those moments.

Today, he is not a victorious com-

mander; neither is he defeated. He exists as a symbol. Since he will probably never go back into the bush under arms, the only place he can henceforth make a difference in the Nicaraguan future is as a carping exile, which seems uncharacteristic, or as a political candidate. The next presidential election in Nicaragua is scheduled for 1990, unless current international negotiations force an earlier date. A ticket with Commander Zero would be tough to beat. If Mr. Pastora is correct, the people of Nicaragua are at the same place he is. Tired of war, of sacrifice, of death. Tired of foreigners telling them what to do. Tired of communism and tired of capitalism. Ready for something different — a Third Way.

The boat glided into the beach and we disembarked into thigh-deep surf. Mr. Pastora said he would drive Dan and me to Santa Cruz but that we had to hurry. He had an appointment. We returned to the hut where Mr. Pastora spent 30 minutes showering and changing into slacks and a clean, short-sleeved football jersey. Then we left the village at a reckless speed. I could only wave at Abuelito, who had wanted the address of President Reagan, to tell him what should be done. I had told Abuelito I'd get the letter mailed, but I didn't.

We bounced through the same mudholes and over the same bridges I'd endured coming in, only this time at twice the speed. Who needs assassins, I thought, when all you have to do is give this guy hot wheels. Twice we stopped. Mr. Pastora got out, circled the pickup and checked the hubcaps, removing one of them.

After an hour, I figured we should have been in Santa Cruz and I remarked that the trip was taking a long time, considering our rate of speed, at that moment about 70. Then we came to a small town that didn't look like Santa Cruz. "I have to leave you here," Mr. Pastora said. Before I could figure out what was happening, I was getting out of the cab and Dan was climbing down from the truck bed. I was just lifting out my bag when Mr. Pastora put the Dodge in gear and spun gravel getting away, nearly ripping off my arm. We were outside a bus station on the street corner of a town called Filadelfia, and I had no idea where it was.

I felt wined, dined, and dumped. Did El Comandante leave in a hurry on purpose? Were the hubcap checks a signal? Did he change routes to show us the countryside or effect a nonspectacular form of security? Was this Pastora the flake or Commander Zero the cagey? It was making me crazy again. We'd either spent time with the Thomas Jefferson of Nicaragua or some caricature from a Charles de Gaulle delusion. A saint or a fool. But you couldn't help liking him.

I went into a café for a Coke and returned to a bench outside the station to endure the smirks of the fruit vendors across the driveway. Maybe I looked funky, so what? I'd been tracking a chimera. I pushed up my REI sunglasses, stretched out my brine-soaked Nikes, and watched as two young gringos came down the dusty street. They wore dark trousers, black ties, and short-sleeved white shirts with ID badges on the pockets. Mormons — they knew the bus schedule.