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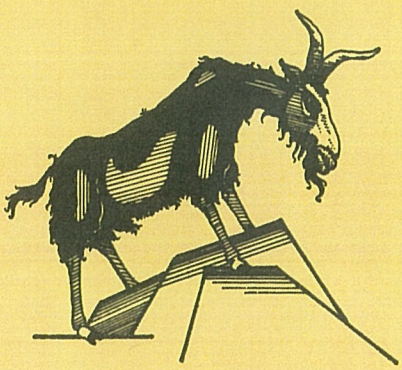

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The Guns Fall Silent on the Miskito Coast

Scott Wallace

You always expect to be surprised when you go out to Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast. It is home to the Miskito Indians and the picturesque backdrop to the festering war waged by them against the Sandinista government for the better part of this decade. Events in the Mosquitia unfold quickly, so I felt a twinge of excitement as I rode into town from the dirt airstrip on my last visit to the Coast. It was October 1987. It had been almost a year since I'd last been there. I was just reaching the center of Puerto Cabezas, the steamy port of decrepit clapboard shacks and lofty coconut palms that serves as the seat of government on the Miskito Coast. Suddenly a caravan of shiny Toyota pickup trucks careened down the main street. The Toyotas belonged to the government and were packed with Miskito guerrillas—fully uniformed, fully armed.

These were antigovernment rebels; yet here they were cruising down the main street of Puerto, piling out in front of the Sandinista Front's regional headquarters. It was apparent that the cease-fire between the Sandinistas and the Miskitos, which had begun more than two years earlier, had been extended to yet another band of the fractious Indian movement. For these were not the same Miskitos I had met on previous occasions.

These particular warriors were obviously new to the peace process under way on the Atlantic Coast. They wore brand-new, U.S. Army-issue uniforms; they must have been allied to the Contras until very recently. I recognized the fatigues, the same camouflage that had just begun to turn up elsewhere in the country, recovered from the Contras and sported by Sandinista officers as war trophies.

In 1985 I was in Puerto Cabezas when the first Miskito combatants—wearing the old bluish-green shirts issued to all the Contras by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency in the first years of the war—were invited to paint the town by their Sandinista hosts. The residents of Puerto looked on in amazement as a pair of long-haired Miskito Contras

were chauffeured about in army jeeps. The pair were sent back unharmed to their leaders in the field as a confidence-building gesture.

Now, two years later, here was an entire company of rebels—about eighty men, the largest contingent of armed Miskitos ever to appear in town—attending a public ceremony in the main square. Their leader, Uriel Vanegas, had come to town to renounce the struggle against the Sandinistas and denounce the United States for pursuing a war of extermination on the Atlantic Coast.

As it turned out, these men were among the last Miskito rebels considered reliable enough by the CIA to merit air-drops of arms, boots and uniforms. But the new gear on display that day in Puerto Cabezas had been dropped into the hands of men no longer willing to put it to its intended use.

These men were the latest dropouts from the Miskito War, that somewhat forgotten sideshow in the Nicaraguan conflict, but one with important strategic implications for the outcome of the main event between the Sandinistas and the CIA/NSC-backed main Contra army, the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, or FDN. Had the FDN promised the Miskitos half of what the Sandinistas have ended up giving the Indians, and had the CIA been willing to recognize the indigenous fighters as equal partners in their project, the revolutionary government would be in far greater danger today than it is. But taking the Miskitos seriously would have meant placing questions of autonomy and indigenous land rights on the Nicaraguan agenda, obviously far more than could have been hoped for from those formulating policy in Washington. Perhaps taking the Miskitos on their own terms is more than can be expected from any dominant "Western" culture, including that of the Sandinistas. But crucial policy errors committed by their adversaries gave the Sandinistas badly needed time to repair damage and learn something from their mistakes.

The reversal of allegiances began in mid-1985 in the Indian village of Yulu, set on the grassy plains about an hour's drive inland from Puerto Cabezas. I was in Yulu in November 1986, a particularly tense time for Nica-

ragua and the Atlantic Coast. U.S. warships—armed with Tomahawk guided missiles—were cruising off the shore. All able-bodied men in Puerto Cabezas had been called upon to dig trenches in the bluffs overlooking the beach. Pressure was on the Contras to get out of their camps in Honduras and into Nicaragua. A Contra invasion of the northern Atlantic Coast, backed by U.S. air and naval support, was among the options said to be under consideration. It was the Sandinistas' most vulnerable flank—far removed from Managua and inhabited by a population that regarded the Sandinista revolution with indifference or outright hostility. In the United States, Vice Admiral John Poindexter had just resigned as national security adviser and Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North had been dismissed from the staff of the National Security Council. The revelation of their part in secretly selling arms to Iran and diverting money from the arms sale to the Contras had made an invasion of Nicaragua extremely unlikely in November 1986—but Sandinista forces remained on red alert. Later, in the course of Congressional hearings on the Iran-Contra affair, details of a plan hatched by North to back a Contra invasion of Puerto Cabezas would indeed emerge, including contingency plans for direct U.S. intervention to save the landing forces from annihilation. The American public learned of this plan for the first time in testimony by Elliott Abrams, Assistant Secretary of State, before the Congressional Investigating Committees. But earlier, at the moment when the threat was most real, few on Nicaragua's northern Atlantic Coast could afford to scoff at the Sandinista warnings of imminent attack.

I sat in the glow of a kerosene lamp with Yulu village elder Eagle Ignacio and Koo-ha, a long-haired Miskito guerilla in his late thirties. Koo-ha had been among the first Indian fighters to accept a cease-fire with the Sandinistas, but he remained skeptical of the central government's intentions. Our conversation—covering the history of the Miskito conflict with the Sandinistas—unfolded against this backdrop of tension between the very disparate possibilities of deepening peace or a wider war with more direct U.S. involvement.

In July of 1979, the Sandinista National Liberation

Front, or FSLN, seized power from the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza. The revolution had swept through the populous Pacific side of Nicaragua but had left the remote Atlantic Coast—home of the country's seventy thousand Miskito Indians—virtually untouched. The reception here in Yulu was chilly when the first Sandinistas bounced up the dirt logging road, climbed from their jeeps and announced the end to neocolonial exploitation, misery and backwardness.

No one in Yulu had the faintest idea what they were talking about. Imperialism? Big transnational corporations raping the land, stealing the lumber? The Sandinistas didn't speak the same language, and it wasn't just their Spanish. Relations with the mestizos from the Pacific side of Nicaragua—the "Spaniards," as they are still called by the Miskitos—had never been good. There was always trouble when mestizos showed up. They'd be carrying some lumber contract written in Spanish that no one could understand, or they would be running someone off his land. The best times were when they just stayed away. The people preferred dealing with the Americans. Americans hired local hands to cut and stack the pinewood or plant bananas, and they would bring their ships straight from New Orleans with evaporated milk, Marlboro cigarettes, fruit cocktail. The Atlantic Coast was really an enclave unto itself, more closely tied to the economies and cultures of Miami and Kingston than to Managua.

The division dates from colonial times. The British Crown sought to break the domain of the Spanish in the Caribbean. With her country too weak to take on the Spaniards frontally, Elizabeth I dispatched pirates and corsairs, the clandestine operatives of their day, to ravage Spanish shipping. The pirates found ideal sanctuary for their operations in the mazes of lagoons and inland waterways along Nicaragua's Caribbean shore. They also encountered a hybrid ethnic group—a mixture of native Indians and shipwrecked African slaves—whom they called the Miskitos.

The Miskitos eagerly befriended the pirates. They were especially fond of the firearms their new allies brought ashore. The Miskitos used their new-found might to capture and sell into slavery other Indians from the vaporous

jungles of the Coast. They also turned their muskets on the brutal Spanish, against whose incursions from the Pacific side of the isthmus they had been defenseless. Thus an alliance was born, opening the way for British colonial penetration of the eastern shores of Central America.

Britain later appointed a series of Miskito kings to administer this part of the Atlantic Coast and proclaimed the Mosquitia a protectorate of the Crown. Miskito soldiers were drafted by the British and sent to Jamaica on three separate occasions in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to crush slave rebellions. To this day, Miskitos retain a strong identification with all things Anglo.

The coastal area was forcibly reunited with the rest of Nicaragua less than a century ago. But the remote land of dense rain forests, grassy wetlands and pine savannas remained virtually unconnected with the rest of Nicaragua. While the other side of the country developed strong Roman Catholic traditions, as elsewhere in Latin America, Protestant missionaries from central Europe disembarked on Nicaragua's Caribbean shores in the mid-eighteenth century. They soon came to dominate all aspects of Miskito village life, filling a void left by the total neglect of the central government.

Even now, the Moravian Church remains the pillar of Miskito village life. The whitewashed, wooden-frame churches mark the center of virtually every community. The only songs a Miskito knows how to sing in his native language are evangelical hymns.

Sandinista efforts to spread the revolution to Yulu at first stirred bewilderment, then resentment and resistance. Sandinistas were ignorant of local customs. They denigrated the time-honored Elders' Council and wanted everyone to join defense committees. The soldiers snickered at these churchgoers. They required all Indians to carry a police-issued I.D. card. When a villager refused to tack a plastic red and black FSLN flag to his front door, they took him for a Contra.

The Sandinistas did not trust the Miskitos to handle their own affairs: just as the U.S. feared that an independent Nicaragua would become a Soviet beachhead in the Americas, so the Sandinistas believed that the Anglophiliac In-

dians, left to themselves, would make easy prey for outside penetration and subversion.

This fear was not entirely irrational. Somozan ex-National Guardsmen, organized and financed by the CIA, had begun staging raids all along the Honduran border by 1981. In the eastern area of Nicaragua, Miskito rebels joined the Contra alliance and embarked on a terror campaign against government fieldworkers. Their tactics were like those of their allies farther west: kidnapping teachers, raping health workers, anything to stop the advance of the revolution's social programs. From the outset, the CIA and Pentagon sought to fold the Miskito struggle into their strategic designs to overthrow the Sandinistas.

The CIA-funded Radio Miskut beamed anticommunist hysteria up and down the Coast. "*Miskitu, kaikibas!* Beware!" The red antimalarial pills distributed by government health brigades were from Cuba, the radio screamed, and the capsules carried an atheistic communist virus. No one could be sure whose soul might already be infiltrated by the Sandino-communist devil. The people began to slam their shutters closed and retreat within their clapboard homes when the *brigadistas* came to town.

U.S. strategists sought at the very least to open a broad front on the Atlantic Coast, forcing the Sandinistas to spread their forces and stretch supply lines beyond the breaking point. But the Sandinistas also feared that the Atlantic Coast—given its isolation and the hostility of its inhabitants toward Managua—would be the scene of a Contra effort to seize territory and create a provisional government.

The Sandinistas came down on Miskito political meetings and rounded up Indian leaders. Antigovernment propaganda beamed from transmitters in Honduras blared through villages up and down the Coast: the Sandinistas were out to enslave the Indian and exterminate anyone who resisted. Scores of kids from Yulu joined the exodus toward Honduras. The Miskitos crowded into refugee camps just north of the Coco River, which forms the boundary with Honduras, and became the logical and recruitment base for the CIA-supported MISURA army. They were armed with Belgian FAL and Chinese AK-47

rifles, trained by Argentine advisers on contract from Washington and sent into Nicaragua to ravage government convoys and projects.

Like the other Contra groups, the Miskitos never acquired the military capacity to carve out their own territory inside Nicaragua. They set up their command posts in Honduras, where they were safe from Sandinista attacks. This "Afghan-style" method, as one Miskito field commander called it, of waging cross-border guerrilla war from refugee camps in Honduras left the Miskito rebels vulnerable: it would later enable the Sandinistas to undermine the guerrillas' chain of command between the top leadership and the troops active inside Nicaragua. The rebels who have entered into the cease-fire and the dialogue with the government have done so against the will of the Miskito high command.

Believing that a Contra invasion of the Miskito villages was in the cards, the Sandinistas drove the Indians off the river at the height of what was called the "Red Christmas" of 1981. The Sandinistas burned hamlets, machine-gunned cattle and rounded up Miskito youth they suspected of subversion. They herded the Indians by the thousands to resettlement camps deep inside Nicaragua.

Rumors spread like wildfire across the Miskito Coast of slaughter on the Coco River. Sixty miles to the south, in Yulu, villagers braced for the worst.

Listening to Eagle and Koo-ha that night back in November '86, I thought the Devil Incarnate could not have wreaked more havoc than the Sandinistas did that night back in 1983 when the troops came to Yulu. They behaved much the same way as the troops did on the Coco River. They chopped down the coco palms; they butchered the cows, then sold what they couldn't eat back to the owners. They rounded up a group of kids and hauled them off onto the plains. A search party found their bloated bodies days later under a bridge on the way to Sutkatpin.

The Sandinistas came to avenge the attack on the sawmill. The Miskito guerrillas had arrived days earlier in Sutkatpin and set the mill's workers to digging trenches around the perimeter in anticipation of a Sandinista assault. Government spotter planes buzzed overhead, occa-

sionally swooping to strafe the guerrillas. As word reached Sutkatpin that Sandinista ground forces were approaching, Koo-ha, in charge of the guerrilla force, ordered his men to burn the sawmill. Then they rounded up the workers and led them away. They ravaged in retreat—ambushing vehicles and kidnapping government technicians. Koo-ha proudly pointed a taut thumb back at his chest and added that *his* were the men who blew the dam at Siuna in the same year—one of the major Miskito victories in the course of the war.

"The best Miskito fighters are here in Yulu talking with the Sandinista Front. They would make a mistake to think we are cowards."

Koo-ha bade us good night and disappeared into the darkness. Eagle's woman and his two boys had been lingering in the shadows of the house. She motioned us to the table for an evening snack of coffee and sweet bread, and Delico, one of Eagle's sons, shyly approached, seeking the warmth of his father's embrace. "*¿Cuántos años tienes?*" I asked him. "How old are you?" I realized from his searching eyes and his unchanging smile that he didn't understand me.

"He has nine years," Eagle said, and explained that Delico did not understand Spanish. Only Miskito. Strange, I thought, here we are, only an hour from Puerto Cabezas, and a young boy doesn't know even rudimentary Spanish. Eagle said that very few people in Yulu could speak Spanish, which made them uneasy when Sandinista officials from Puerto would come to visit.

"My older sons—they speak Spanish." Eagle sighed. "Or they spoke it." Eagle doesn't know whether to talk about them in the past or present. Lamsin and Tolontino disappeared more than three years ago. They used to work at the mill in Sutkatpin. "Remember what Koo-ha said about leading the workers to safety?" Koo-ha's men hauled them away to the camps in Honduras. All one hundred twenty workers, kidnapped en masse. "I haven't heard anything from them. I just pray to God they're alive.

"Koo-ha can say what he wants about the Sandinistas, and it's true, they were very bad. But now they're doing a lot for us." Eagle said that the people would just watch

while the Sandinistas built. A new school. A new clinic. "These things are for us, but everyone just stands around and watches." Eagle shrugged.

It hardly seemed possible that these uniformed Good Samaritans are the same soldiers who three years back were locked in a nasty racial war of vendetta and butchery. Obviously, resentment towards the Sandinistas remained. But—incredibly—the same men who once fought each other to the death on the plains outside Yulu now stalked through the high grass together in joint patrols, sharing supplies.

Watching a truckload of heavily armed Miskito guerrillas rumble past a roadblock of Sandinista soldiers, I had the sense of witnessing a moment in history. In the midst of war, the Sandinistas managed to persuade nearly half of the 2,000 Indian fighters who were previously allied to the Contras to suspend hostilities. Realizing they could not disarm these men, the Sandinistas did better: they then got the Miskitos to turn their guns the other way, in the direction of their former comrades-in-arms.

Many of the fighters still wore their old CIA-issued bluish-green fatigues. They wanted to make it clear that they did not regard themselves as Sandinistas by any means. Nevertheless, a major realignment had occurred, with profound implications for the further course of the larger Contra war.

The White House never had much success at selling the image of the main Contra forces, with their military command dominated by Somoza's old National Guard. But the Miskitos provided the political punch the other Contras lacked. The Reagan Administration's professed concern for the Miskitos' rights has never found similar expression when it comes to our own indigenous population. The federal government has even gone so far as to press charges against a Seminole chief for killing a panther on his tribal lands. Yet Ronald Reagan, amidst the tombs of Nazi storm troopers in Bitburg, eulogized the Miskitos in his litany of peoples oppressed by world communism. "I am a Miskito Indian," he proclaimed.

The Sandinistas finally reached the conclusion that they had to stop the war with the Miskitos. However mixed up the Indians may have become with the CIA, however bit-

ter the memory of cadres lost in combat to the Miskito rebels, the irony of the war was not lost on the Sandinistas: in Nicaragua a supposedly popular revolution was locked in an antipopular struggle against an Indian people on the verge of extinction.

In 1985, the Sandinistas lured Miskitos to the bargaining table with a proposal to hand over the affairs of the Atlantic Coast to an autonomous government. They allowed the Indians driven from the Coco to return to the river. They announced a cease-fire and safe conduct through the pine savannas to allow the talks to get underway.

The first guerrillas to accept the offer came across the plains to Yulu, about sixty of them spread out under a white flag. They had disobeyed orders from the warlords who plotted from the base camps in Honduras. The war must continue at all costs, they were told. Bargaining with the Sandino-communists was tantamount to treason and betrayal of the Miskito cause. So, without wishing it, those who shook hands with the Sandinistas on a cease-fire would become the targets of their old friends.

Eagle disappeared into a back room and emerged with a Vietnam-era M-14 rifle in hand. The Sandinistas had given it to him. "In case the Americans invade." Or in case Yulu came under attack from Miskitos who had not accepted the cease-fire.

The news on the radio in Yulu when I was there in '86—the warships offshore, the mobilization in Puerto, reports that Contras dressed as Sandinistas were planning to attack a town in Honduras to spark a regional conflict—had everyone nervous.

I was awakened in the night by a strange chanting of Miskito mixed with Spanish from Eagle's bedroom, "*Estados Unidos . . . Frente Sandinista . . . Autonomia.*" In the morning, when I asked, Eagle told me that he prayed twice a day for his sons. He asked me if I thought they were still alive. He asked me if I believed the United States would invade. I didn't have an answer to either question.

"If United States invade, Yulu finished," Eagle said.

Eagle led me out onto the plains beyond town in search of firewood. A thunderstorm moved across the horizon to the east. "It's raining in Waunta," he observed. I

noticed another storm to the south and pointed toward it. "Ah, and it's raining in Layasiksa too."

I asked Eagle to complete a circle, pointing in all directions around the horizon at what he knew to lie out there. As he did so, Eagle traced the boundaries of his universe. Over there was Haulover. Then Maniwatla, Karatá and Sutkatpin. No east or west, north or south. I asked him where the United States was. His face went blank. "Right up there," I laughed and pointed straight into the sky overhead.

"Very good. Very funny," he cackled. Then I waved to the north and told him it was that way but many, many days' journey away. "Hum," he answered, "I thought it would be over that way, where Puerto is." He nodded eastward.

I understood why he thought so. An invasion or bombardment would come from that direction. "You're right," I said. "It's over there too."

When the war began six years ago, few Miskitos had any reason to doubt the good intentions of the United States. The Miskitos thought that the United States stood for progress and would back their struggle for survival. But time and again Miskito leaders have thrown up their hands in despair over a callous policy which has no evident objective beyond the dumping of the Sandinista government. The day Uriel Vanegas brought his eighty men to Puerto Cabezas to renounce his ties to the United States, he said: "The United States never showed an interest in the rights of the Indian people. Only the Sandinista Front has publically declared its support for autonomy."

It was later claimed in the opposition newspaper *La Prensa* that Uriel Vanegas was a Sandinista agent planted among the rebels. It would not have been the first time the Sandinistas managed to infiltrate high places in the Contra ranks. But the question was almost irrelevant. Vanegas himself might have been an agent, but why did an entire company follow his lead and give up? And what—if not the entire context of a dying Miskito insurgency—could make his decision to bring his fighters in from the swamps appear like that of a genuine leader, in search of a new course for his people?

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