

GRAND STREET

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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