

Photographs by Lois Morford



DAVID BARNES, 15, WITH NICARAGUAN BOYS OF A SIMILAR AGE. SEVENTY PERCENT OF NICARAGUANS ARE UNDER THE AGE OF 21, AND MANY ACCEPT GREAT RESPONSIBILITY.



THE TWENTY WITNESS FOR PEACE DELEGATES FROM OREGON WITH THE THREE LONG TERM VOLUNTEERS WHO ACCOMPANIED US DURING OUR STAY IN NICARAGUA.

SUNDAY, JUNE 16, 6:30 A.M.

Last night, during the battle preparations, there was a celebration for San Antonio on the porch of house number thirty-four. We went at 7:00 and sat on benches with the patient people until 9:00, but nothing had started yet so I went home to bed. I hear it started late and went until 1:00 or 1:30 with dancing, singing, and rum!

Yesterday, outside the bomb shelter, my regrets were three. That Paxton was not there to share it with me. That I did not have my exposed film with me (in case our house was burned down). That I might not live to enjoy my granddaughter growing up. She will be a year old July 12. Today is Shairn and Margo's big party — for housewarming, Father's Day, and Margo's birthday. I am thinking of them. I hope they are thinking of me.

Friday night was difficult. We learned late in the day of Contra in the area. The people were very tense. As crisis team leader I walked around and checked that everyone in our group was packed and ready to help one another to the shelter if we were attacked. But it did not happen until after light, about 7 a.m., with loud mortar noises close by. The women took the children to the shelter.

SUNDAY, 1 P.M.

Our emotions go from one extreme to the other here. Everything is so intense! Just a short while ago I was translating while Robert, Heike and I talked with three young men from the teaching brigades who had walked down from their nearby villages to check on Gilda, our teacher. The four of them had wanted to walk on to Escombray to check on their compañero there, but the soldiers said the road was unsafe, so they all spent Sunday here. What inspiring young people! They are all aged sixteen to twenty and from wealthy families in Managua, but they interrupted their college educations to volunteer to come up into the mountains for two years to teach in the literacy campaign. Each one, as the only educated person in their villages, must do more than teach. They must carry out all of the government work: health, housing, building cooperatives, immunizations. There were originally sixteen hundred in their brigade. Only a thousand remain. The rest have been kidnapped, killed, or forced to leave because of danger from the Contras. Teachers and schools are prime Contra targets. We were very inspired by their courage and idealism. Suddenly, as we talked, we heard a rifle shot at the perimeter, and all of the men grabbed their weapons and ran from their houses. The children headed for the central bomb shelter, and we for the one near the school. The word is that the Contras are returning. The original group of four hundred split into two groups. Three hundred of them are very near. They kidnapped a family on just the other side of El Consuelo this morning (a twenty-five minute walk up the hill). The rifle shot was because a Contra scout was spotted here. So we wait in the school. It is pouring rain outside. I think, "I'm glad it's raining on those damned Contras!" But the truth is that they are well equipped with mortars, food, supplies, undoubtedly raingear and everything else they need, while we are defended by campesino farmers, some barefoot, no rain gear, with rifles under their beds. A community of thirty-seven families trying to defend themselves against three hundred Contras. I wonder if I should write a letter to my family in case I do not survive and this journal does. I did return for my exposed film. If the Contras invade and burn my house and I am allowed to live, I want my pictures to document this story. I love all these people here. I pray to God we will all be safe, and all these brave people of Ernesto Acuna.

Four Miskitu Indians from Escombray just spoke with us. They were going in their John Deere tractor with trailer to the central warehouse to get food for their co-op, but the soldiers have closed the road. We asked them for news. They told us of their past, their goals, their crops, their religion, rather than yesterday's battle even though they were dressed like soldiers. Regular army men are beginning to arrive and stand under the shelter. It is raining steadily. I saw one soldier with two mortar shells in a plastic bag. I am glad they are here. Can they defend this small settlement against three hundred Contras said to be in the neighboring (abandoned) hacienda? I am afraid about tonight. The Contras will probably attack in the dark or just at dawn. The army here has no radio communications. Messages come to the men from outside by horse, motorscooter, truck, or by people walking in. Robert and Richard have been out in the rain with the wet, cold soldiers. The Contras are all around us now. The soldiers have installed a couple of machine guns in the trenches, and shoulder-mounted missiles. They are going out in the rain to try and make contact with the Contras and start a battle. In a couple of hours it will be dark. Our biggest danger will be at night. We are discussing whether to stay here in the school (next to the bomb shelter) for the night. But if it gets a direct hit, we may all be killed. Scattered out in houses some of us would probably live. John Addiego says that if all twenty of us were killed, it would be a big blow to the Contras! This is incredible! It is really happening! I do not want to be alone tonight. I want at least one of my fellow Oregonians to be with me. Guadalupe Quinn from Eugene says that I can sleep on the floor at her house.

MONDAY, JUNE 17, 6 A.M.
(Margo's birthday)

Last night we had a meeting to discuss whether we should leave here early if the roads are open. After everyone spoke, we decided to stay until tomorrow morning as originally planned to show our solidarity and support as well as our confidence in the ability of the people of Ernesto Acuna to defend themselves and us from the Contras.

We returned briefly to our houses for dinner. At my house, Rosa Maria, my little nurse, was shouldering her rifle to go out in the cold rain to the trenches to load ammunition. She did not even have shoes, just broken plastic sandals. It rained all night. These poor people must be so wet and miserable without rain protection.

Because they expected the Contras to attack during the night they asked us Americans to sleep in the school next to the bomb shelter, which is in front of a cave-like opening in the dirt that now has a stream of water running into it. Mud. The back room of the school has a trap door in the floor with a five foot drop to the ground so that you can leave without going out the door. We had a drill: two people held flashlights below while others helped each of us drop down, feel our ways around the building, and learn the way to the shelter in the dark. Lights draw fire. Then we all stretched out on the muddy floor of the schoolhouse with our boots on, our crash packs at hand. It was a long night. I kept hearing the roosters crow and imagining that I saw light, yearning for light, but the roosters seem to crow all night.

However the night passed with no battle sounds. This morning the word is that the government soldiers went out in three groups to surround the Contras and wait for light. They will probably make contact with them soon and the battle will start. At last count the Contras number four hundred. They will probably split into groups of one hundred with different objectives, and we (the co-op) are a prime objective, so our group is to remain near the bomb shelter.

The villagers are fierce in their intent to protect us. They fear that if one of us is hurt or wounded the international press will twist it to their disadvantage. We are now having the hardest rainfall yet. The skies have opened and the rain is pounding down. Several houses have flooded. The paths and roads are fast flowing rivers of muddy water. What miserable conditions for a war! The dogs, pigs and chickens are all under the covered porch with my family and me. The hen is standing all fluffed out with eight little chicks under her. All I can see of them is their sixteen little feet on top of her's. Maria Leonor is in the kitchen patting tortillas for breakfast. Juana is catching water as it pours from the gutter on the roof, saving herself a muddy walk through the rain to water pipe in the stream. The men are discussing the battle. In the schoolhouse school begins. The children line up and say "Patria libre o morir" (Give me liberty or give me death!) and sing the national anthem. There are no books. They work writing in their copy books in the dark schoolroom.

MONDAY, 3:15 P.M.

The word is that the Contras were ready to attack us. But we were on emergency alert, and when the soldiers went into the jungle last night to chase them, they slipped over the mountains and back to Honduras.

We have prepared a ceremony for our departure with balloons, a banner, songs, clothes and medicines to give, speeches of thanks and farewell. After our long wait for the San Antonio celebration, we set the time earlier than we wanted to start. But people are gathering already!

LATER:

We just had a beautiful time. We sang songs, the people sang to us, we all made speeches of peace and love and brotherhood. We did not have enough balloons for each child, but each family got one. But what contradictions there are here! As we finished the ceremony a truckload of regular army soldiers drove up, some of whom John and Peter Kemmerle, a longterm Witness for Peace volunteer and one of our chaparones, had met on their trip to an evacuation camp to document Contra atrocities at El Cedro a few days ago. They looked wet and exhausted, but they reported that they had killed twelve Contras yesterday. One, in camouflage fatigues, picked up a guitar and joined us in a couple of songs. Then he was called back to the truck and away the soldiers went to kill more Contras who were sent to kill them by my government.

Now we are all crowded into the school for music and dancing, although there is no room. My emotions are full to overflowing. Whenever we have group reflection — even silence — my eyes fill with tears. Someday I will have the luxury of being able to sit down and cry about all of this, but I can't afford to yet. Occasional trucks of soldiers pass as we fiesta inside. Poor, cold, wet campesinos.

Lois Morford lives in Astoria and is a teacher. She has been to Central America every year for the past twelve years and speaks fluent Spanish. Two years ago she was a United Nations observer at a refugee camp in Honduras that was populated with El Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees who had fled repression and death squads in their countries. She plans to write more articles about Nicaragua and will soon recount her experiences as a Witness for Peace on KMUN. She also intends to put together a slide show, which will portray many of the people and events she described in her journal.