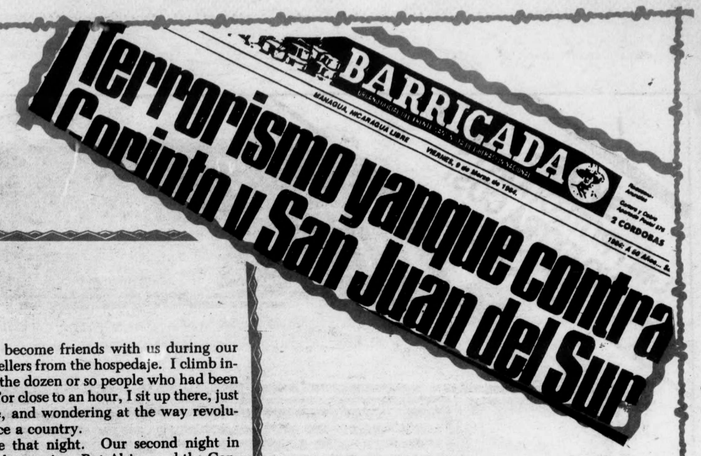
This weeks Feature deals with Nicaragua and the perceptions of a Canadian travelling through Central America. I hope you will enjoy this story and gain insight into the problems of Central America.

R.HUTCHINS
Features Editor

NICARAGUA



The fishing village of San Juan Sur lies on Nicaragua's southern Pacific coast, a short distance from Costa Rican waters. A fine-sand beach stretches around San Juan's U-shaped bay, and hills spread outward from where the village sits. It is a tranquil place where children play soccer on the street at night, and where the townspeople sometimes wander out to swim in the cool bay waters during the day.

After weeks of travel in deadening heat, we decide San Juan is the perfect place to spend our last two days in Nicaragua.

My travelling companion Cindy Hanson and I arrive during the afternoon. Our hotel is a massive wood structure just across a narrow street from the beach. We swim, lay in the sun and think about a trip nearly over.

In the evening we go for an unhurried seafood supper--one of the first variations on the rice and beans we had during most of the trip. We return to our hotel room and sit out front on the edge of the beach looking over the bay. God, it's peaceful.

We hear only a jukebox from a nearby bar and waves, when we fianally collapse in our rooms.

The first shots and explosions rip through our sleep. "What's going on? What's happening?" More shots, machine guns, explosions. People are running past our open window. Jeeps and trucks are racing by.

We jump out of bed shaking. We begin grabbing for our clothes. I can't find my other shoe. Where the hell is it? Cindy is clutching at the side wanting to hide. I grope my way to the wooden shutter to close and lock it. I look outside for an instant and see a mesh of red tracers crossing through the black sky, over and around our hotel.

We hear thumping over our heads as others in the hotel begin jumping up. I open the door to go out and I see a figure looking like a soldier, running down the stairs. But it's only a tourist.

The harsh shooting continues as we move out into the lobby where other tourists are gathering. Someone says, "Get under these tables. It's safer in case a bomb lands." People begin crawling under tables; there seems to be no dignity when you are being threatened and feel fear.

A Nicaraguan woman who works in the hotel comes into the lobby and turns on the light. Someone else turns it off. "Don't worry unless you hear a siren," says the woman, "then we'll have to evacuate. This is the first attack we've had here." But it seems like she knows what to do. She goes back to bed.

After 15 minutes, the firing ends. Three German travellers go out to check the situation. They come back and tell us rapid speedboats called piranas had come near the bay and fired misiles toward combustible tanks on the hills above our hotel. Nicaraguan boats pursued but the Contrarevolutionarios slipped into Costa Rican waters. No one was injured, though there was a fire.

Near dawn we hear more gunfire, but it seems further away and we are more mentally prepared. We learn next day an unidentified helicopter had flown overhead. Shots had been exchanged.

In the morning, after tossing and hearing every unusual sound throughout the night, we get up, white-faced and red-eyed, and talk about leaving. Reluctantly, we agree that we are not really needed in San Juan, and decide to head back to Costa Rica one day early.

Travelling back to Costa Rica, I think about the harrowing experience in San Juan and how I felt arriving in Nicaragua three weeks ago.

We arrive at the Nicaraguan border on the eve of Augusto Cesar Sandino's assassination 50 years ago.

Day is turning into night and the air is full of the afternoon's heat. We feel the soft, persistent wind as we sit in the dirt talking to a Sandanista soldier at the last Nicaraguan border post.

He talks from within the shadows of the makeshift border shack. He speaks with a quiet, strong passion about the history of his country, and about the wider and deeper passage of colonialism and imperialism in Latin America. Behind him we hear a cracking radio broadcast announcing the next day's celebrations. "A Cincuenta Anos--Sandino Vive." After 50 years, August C. Sandino lives. Tomorrow, this will be echoed by more than 100,000 Nicaraguans

We cross from Costa Rica into Nicaragua Libre in warm darkness. Our bus is weaving and bellowing its way to Managua with its cargo of expectant passengers.

Managua is not a beautiful capital city. It is unfocussed, sprawling city, dirty and windy, and still partly in ruins from the 1972 earthquake. But Cindy and I see streets full of vibrant people gathering for the symbolic celebrations. People in all neighbourhoods cluster around fires burning in the streets, preparing for their all-night vigil with songs and slogans.

Through open windows in the humble hospedaje guest house we listen all night to the sounds of singing and chanting.

I think back to 1977, just two years before the revolution triumphed, when I visited a desperately poor country living out its 45 year dictatorship. It was a country at war with a small, upper class governmental elite backed by US dollars and a ruthless army. In 1984, we must ask: what is the revolution in Nicaragua and why is it so dangerous to US interests?

We awake from a restless sleep. Our hospedaje, full the night before with international travellers in Managua for the commemoration, is empty now as we scurry out the door. Outside the streets have been taken over by the people. They carry banners, flags and placards proclaiming the revolution, Sandino and the Frente Sandinista de Liberation National (FSLN). We join one euphoric procession as it merges with another.

The streets are full with people as we fianlly glimpse the Plaza de la Revolocion and the Palacio National. More than 100,000 civilians and soldiers have crammed themselves into position to see the massive stage with its gigantic portrait of Sandino. It is seemingly impossible to step back from the gathering and guage your relationship to anything. The power of all these people goes shooting through your veins. "Patria Libre Morir". A Free Country or Death. Death.

The most significant speech comes from junta coordinator Daniel Ortega who lets the world know that Nicaraguan elections will take place November 4 this year. But the multitude erupts when Ortega calls for the legal voting age to be set at 16 years. "We will never betray the blood of our children," he pledges, alluding to youth who fell in thousands to the Somocista National Guard.

He speaks forcefully about the democracy of Nicaragua. Sandinista democracy, he says, is agrarian reform, education for all people, the right of workers to organize health, literacy, sovereignty and self-domination. "We don't want North American democracy..."

The commemoration of Sandino's assassination finishes as the Managua heat begins to fall. We meet a man at the end of the ceremonies who will become friends with us during our stay. We meet other travellers from the hospedaje. I climb into a tree now vacated by the dozen or so people who had been hanging from its limbs. For close to an hour, I sit up there, just watching people disperse, and wondering at the way revolution moves out to embrace a country.

We go to see a movie that night. Our second night in Nicaragua and we go to the movies. But Alsino and the Condor is an excellent and important work. It is the first full-length Nicaraguan film to be released since the 1978-79 war. It gives an empowered portrait of one boy's path into the revolution.

Alsino and the Condor is the story of a boy who wants to fly like a condor. One night during a storm, Alsino climbs into a hugh tree, and leaps out feverishly believing in his dream to fly. He becomes a young hunchback from the fall. Leaving his village, he wanders with learning eyes through a war-infested country-side. Eventually, Alsino takes up a gun with Sandinista guerrillas and the story becomes an allegory for a country that rises up to overcome its burden.

After the movie we walk to the Plazo de la Revolucion where we heard people might be dancing. But when we get there, it's empty and dark. There's only the wind and a few soldiers. We sit down on a bench together with a few Americans who had gone to the film with us. It feels strange to be in the ghostly plaza. One woman gets up and walks absently around the square. "She's retracing her steps from this morning," says another American. Two Sandinista soldiers wander toward us and we end up talking to them for a long time into the night.

They relate their own stories of the war leading up to the revolution's triumph. They speak of herroism, utter sacrifice, torture, combat and eventually victory. The moment is poignant with the emotion of two cultures meeting.

We could still be sitting there, exchanging our knowledge and experience of North American politics with their comprehension of Nicaraguan politics. They stand waiting for answers to their questions, shifting from one foot to the other, squatting down, standing up again, and lighting one cigarette after another. They are patient and attentive. Everywhere in Nicaragua, we have these conversations. This is a country that is conscience of its political condition. It is a country with a collective memory, rooted in the liberation of many powerless people like Alsino.

After three exhausting weeks in their country, we must begin our departure. We are saying good-bye to our friend Alejandro who we had met that first day in the plaza. We are in our hospedaje room, on our last night in Managua. Alejandro has asked us: "What are your impressions of our country?"

He has already given us his understanding of his country, which he has written on the inside cover of a book, Sandino: The Rebel of America. The book and his words are his gift to us.

By DALE LAKEVOLD
reprinted from the Goliard
by Canadian University Press