

NEWS MAKERS One eye on the media

Next Door to the CIA

Martha Honey took on the covert warriors of Central America.

BY WALT SHEPPERD

THE TRADITIONAL separation of the personal and the professional demanded of most journalists has been illusive for investigative reporter Martha Honey. For the past five years, she has been filing stories from an office that she shares with her husband, Tony Avrigan, a television cameraman, in their home in Costa Rica. Many of her stories have focused on the activities of the Central Intelligence Agency, a subject that, for Honey, has come too close to home.

Honey and Avrigan were attracted to Costa Rica in 1983 because it was calm and prosperous and, since 1948, had had no army. "We live in an upper middle class neighborhood," Honey says, "where everyone stays home behind walls and the focus is on family."

But the following year, when the Contra war escalated in Nicaragua, the CIA tripled their number of agents in the couple's adopted homeland, and Honey got a new neighbor—a CIA agent next door.

She remembers "Jack" introducing himself as single and working in research. "It's a common cover," Honey says, "but it wasn't enough for such a family-oriented neighborhood."

"So the agency rented families from the Costa

Rican security force for all their new agents, and when Jack's moved in he just casually introduced them as if they'd been on vacation somewhere." As a matter of neighborhood protocol, the couple never tried to break Jack's cover during his two-year stay, but the ersatz family gave them a constant source of chuckles.

One night in May 1984, however, the CIA connection proved almost disastrous, when Honey got the news of a bomb that had exploded at a press conference called by Contra leader Eden Pastora, killing three journalists—one of them an American. Her husband, Tony Avrigan, had gone to the press con-

ference, and Honey rushed next door to ask Jack for help.

They located the hospital where Avrigan and others injured in the blast were being taken. As it turned out, Tony Avrigan had not died, though his hand was badly mangled by the explosion. At the hospital, Honey remembers, she passed a man posing as a Danish journalist who, she later learned, was the bomber *incognito*, there to view the results of the carnage.

AS A RESULT, MARTHA Honey and Tony Avrigan, journalists, had become part of a story waiting to be investigated—a story that became

larger and larger as connections to American intelligence operations unfolded.

"At a gut level we knew it was a good story," Honey says now. "But we also saw it as an assault on our profession, breaking the sanctity of the press conference as neutral territory."

The couple was further incensed when their initial investigation exposed the official version as an attempted cover-up of the incident. "Government reports blamed the bombing on Basque nationalists who were supposed to have been working for the Sandinistas, and even identified the bomber," Honey recalls. "But we found that the man

they named was under house arrest in France at the time."

Following up the story was a long, hard, and costly process for the couple. "Costa Rican intelligence fed us phony leads, all pointing toward the Sandinistas," she says, "and we spent months tracking them down. I made two trips to Uruguay following leads, and during one of them I found a note left in my hotel room telling me to meet a CIA operative in his office at midnight. When I got there he told me what I was doing could get me killed, then told me to leave."

Continuing the investigation meant working while looking over her shoulder in some situations, Honey says. One of her sources was kidnapped, tortured and killed, and another fled the country, becoming the first political exile in Costa Rican history. After a year, however, the couple's persistence led to a story that Honey says makes Watergate look like a "two-bit



Political journalist Martha Honey today.

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MARIA ESQUIVEL



Martha Honey (center) and husband Tony Avrigan after the 1984 bombing that almost took his life.

burglary": the discovery of Ollie North's "secret army."

HONEY OFFERED THE story to her prestigious list of free-lance clients, and although she had done work for ABC Television, she found no takers in the American media. "When a story involves the CIA or national security," Honey says, "the major American press faces pressure from the State Department and wants it done by one of their own correspondents."

To get this story told, Honey would become an actor in the drama she was reporting.

In October 1985, six months before it was picked up by the American press, Honey and Avrigan released the report of their investigation, titled "La Prensa: Pastora, the Press, and the CIA." The report said the bomb had been planted by a group of CIA agents, Contra leaders, and mercenaries who operated from a Costa Rican farm owned by North American rancher John Hull, who it identified as a CIA operative.

According to the report, the bomb had been planted in an attempt to kill Pastora, who had called the press conference to denounce the

pressure being brought on him by the CIA; the CIA was then financing his military excursions into Nicaragua.

The alleged assassins had assumed, the report said, that American journalists would also be killed, inflaming public opinion against the Sandinistas. Honey said the group also planned to bomb the American embassy in Costa Rica, and to assassinate the American ambassador, thus provoking direct American intervention in Nicaragua. Honey feels that one result of her effort was to prevent the assassination and embassy bombing.

But results closer to home became difficult to deal with. The couple began receiving death threats, which made life anxious for her children, Shanti, 12, and Jody, 7. "Given everything we've been through I think they're doing very well," Honey says. "They're amazingly mature for their ages."

When the report was released, Hull sued the couple for libel. A Costa Rican court dismissed the charges, but the resulting harassment motivated Honey to become a participant in her own story.

"We were vindicated in court," Honey says, "but nothing happened to Hull. We tried to sell the story,

but no one in an official position was trying to stop his activities. Then we realized that through the courts we could get documents unavailable to us as journalists, so we filed a suit to bring the network into court in the United States."

With the help of the Washington, D.C.-based Christic Institute, the couple's case is scheduled to be heard in federal court in Miami this June. It names 29 defendants from the network that they had discovered.

"It's not a pleasant crowd we've taken on," Honey says. It includes a number of covert operatives tied to the government on the list. The suit does not include the names of North or any public official, Honey says, for fear of having the case thrown out for reasons of national security, and to prevent scaring off judges who don't want to rule on activities of the network to which the Iran-Conagate affair has been attributed.

HONEY NOW TOURS the United States, telling her story and stumping for support for the case, which is currently costing the couple \$2,000 a week. "We can't keep up this level of living on the edge," she says. "It's

not fair to the kids." In late March she spoke at SU, as part of the Woman's Studies Program Speaker Series.

She plans to start a book about her investigation, and is trying to do less day-to-day reporting. The decision will probably disappoint her list of free-lance clients, which includes the *Times*, the *Sunday Times*, and BBC radio in London; CBC radio in Canada (for whom she won an award for the best radio documentary broadcast in that country last year); and the American network, National Public Radio.

"I didn't go to journalism school. I feel like I snuck into journalism by the back door," Honey says, reflecting on her 12 years of accomplishments, which began when she won a

Syracuse University fellowship for graduate study at the University of Dar-es-Salaam in Tanzania. Since most of the international media rely on free-lancers in that area, Honey and Avrigan were able to accompany Tanzanian troops into Uganda when they intervened to depose that country's dictator Idi Amin. The trek resulted in a book that the couple produced, titled *War in Uganda: The Legacy of Idi Amin*.

A Syracuse native, Honey graduated from Oberlin College in 1967 with a bachelor's degree in history, earned a master's in Afro-American history at Syracuse in 1972, and completed a doctorate in history at Dar-es-Salaam in 1983.

Whatever future activities she chooses will be guided by the philosophy of journalism she developed during her still on-going ordeal. "The press should be digging at the underbelly," she sums up. "The press should be digging up those things the government doesn't want known."