

Historical drama meets stark reality in Nicaragua

Reporter's Notebook

Daniel J. Glenn G is an architecture student who recently returned from his third trip to Nicaragua where he worked as a volunteer architect for five months. This is the first in a series of articles for The Tech relating his experiences.

After his first trip he wrote a similar set of articles called "Notes from Nicaragua" for the Montana State Exponent which won an honorable mention from the Rocky Mountain Collegiate Press Association.

By Daniel J. Glenn

I was killed in Nicaragua. Shot dead by Nicaraguan soldiers on the streets of Grenada, Nicaragua. I went down hard in a swirl of dust with gunfire blasting all around me. A dozen other *gringos* clamored past my aching body, desperately trying to reach the relative safety of an adobe house at street's end.

I lay still under the burning sun, my lungs heaving slowly in the dust. My shirt was soaked in sweat and I felt sharp pains in my hips and legs. Four Nica soldiers lined up behind my body, knelt and fired in the direction of the house. The explosion of gunpowder rang in my ears, and just as I thought I'd taken my last breath, British director Alex Cox yelled, "Cut, ¡otra vez! [one more time]"

I eased myself back on my feet and prepared to die one more time for 15,000 *cordobas* (about five bucks) a day and a fleeting chance at fame. I was working as an extra on the set of *Walker*, a film about the life of William Walker shot on location this spring in Nicaragua.

Colonel William Walker, who is played by Ed Harris, was a US adventurer who led a successful mercenary attack on Nicaragua in 1854. With the financial backing of William Vanderbilt and official recognition by US President Franklin Pierce, Walker declared himself President of Nicaragua.

"President" Walker re-established slavery and made English the country's official language before being driven

out by Central American armies in 1856. Executed in Honduras after a failed comeback in 1860, Walker was largely forgotten in the United States, but in Central America he has remained a lasting symbol of US aggression.

While I wasn't getting shot or yelled at I occasionally had a chance to speak with Alex Cox, who is best known for his films *Repoman* and *Sid and Nancy*. Cox was quick to point out what he sees as similarities between William Walker and President Ronald Reagan, and he was outspoken about the political role of his movie.

Reagan, according to Cox, is carrying on a policy of interventionism in Nicaragua begun by Colonel Walker's invasion in 1854, continued by the US Marine invasions in 1912 and 1926, and Lt. Colonel Oliver North and the Contras in 1981-87.

The *Walker* film uses anachronistic devices such as green plastic sunglasses, a downed airplane, and a troop transport helicopter to connect Walker's world of the 1850s with Reagan's world of the 1980s.

I didn't go to Nicaragua to be in a movie. Like most of the other extras on the *Walker* film, I went to do solidarity work with the people there. My co-worker, Susan Atkinson, and I had only been in Managua a few days when we heard someone was making the rounds of the *hospedajes*, looking for *internacionalistas* to play the role of Walker's infamous mercenary soldiers, *Los Inmortales*, The Immortals.

At 7 am on March 21, Susan and I squeezed into the back of an old Datsun marked "Walker #23" and headed to Old Leon for our first day of filming.

We were driven out to an ancient farmhouse on the edge of Lake Managua. Below the farmhouse a tent was set up with make-up tables underneath and vans filled with costumes and props were parked all around. Hanging out in the shade of trees were a lot of dusty, unshaven cowboys carrying black powder rifles and long knives

along with dozens of dark-eyed Nicaraguans with black mustaches wearing sombreros and loose-fitting white linen uniforms. The Nicas were carrying bayonet rifles and had machetes strapped to their rope belts.

I was hustled over to the costume van and handed a sweaty old costume of dirty blue button-up pants and a coarse long-sleeved shirt, complete with cowboy hat, leather boots, and bandana.

After a quick make-up session that hid my Boston-white skin with Hollywood grime, I strapped on a black powder six-shooter and, transformed into a nineteenth century mercenary, I swaggered over to Susan. She looked at me and laughed saying "Don't forget to take off your digital watch!"

I joined in with a group of veteran extras lined up in a manure-strewn cattle corral, and, on "Action!" we ran down from one side to the other with the Nicaraguan extras on horseback charging us from behind. I was really getting into my role, racing to the front of the pack so my face might show up on the big screen — until someone pointed out that the camera was at boot level. I realized then I'd have to stick around awhile to gain real stardom.

After two weeks of running, shooting, sweating, falling, and, mostly, waiting, my short-lived film career abruptly ended with a sprained finger gained during a glorious yet off-camera fall. Cox saw my bandaged hand and ordered my death in the next scene; fear of law-suits I suppose.

I learned that we extras are one step below costumes and props, which are expensive and irreplaceable; we're neither. But I enjoyed playing cowboy for awhile, and I think the Nicaraguan extras had fun too. I hung up my costume and got back to the more serious business of building houses. The Nicas put away their white linen and their black-powder rifles, put on their olive-green, and grabbed their machine-guns — back to the mountains to fight the latest *inmortales*.

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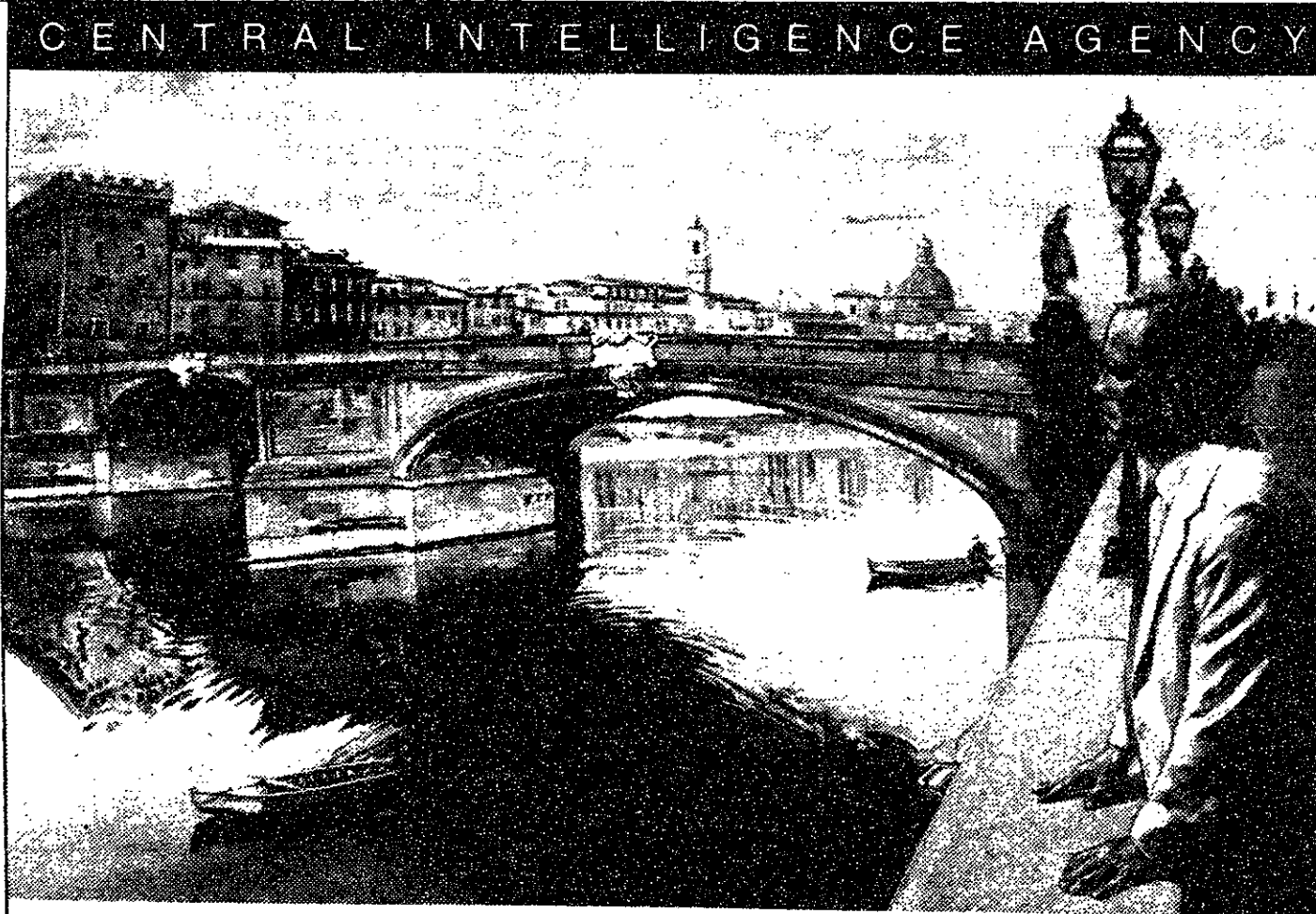
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