



*On assignment in "Free Nicaragua," Dwight V. Swain, left, and wife Joye visit jungle base of Eden Pastora's guerrillas.*

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Dwight V. Swain

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## HAVE CANE, WILL TRAVEL

By OPAL GERALD

**T**he scene is the jungle-clad San Juan River, boundary between Costa Rica and Nicaragua in Central America. It's barely dawn. Tendrils of fog eddy over the rapids. Rain drips from the heavy foliage.

Now the sound of rushing water and bird calls gives way to the throaty drone of a heavy-duty outboard motor. A 30-foot Indian dugout

careens around a bend, snaking skillfully through the rapids. Slowing, it angles toward the north shore . . . slides onto a narrow beach at the base of a high red clay bank. Half a dozen men wearing green, fatigue-type uniforms and armed with automatic weapons clamber out.

With them comes a strangely out-of-context figure — a man much older than the others, wearing civilian

clothes and walking with a cane.

It's a weird, warped situation. For this is "Free Nicaragua" — specifically a jungle base of the guerrilla band of Eden Pastora, the famed "Comandante Cero," once a top Sandinista hero who now leads a rebellion against the Marxist rule of his former comrades.

The man with the cane climbing the slick clay slope to the insurgent

camp is Dwight V. Swain, OU professor emeritus of journalism, whose somewhat unique view of retirement took him this past summer on a two-month tour of all seven countries in Central America as correspondent for the paramilitary *Eagle* magazine.

Sixty-seven years old, severely limited by chronic bronchial asthma, limping with a torn knee cartilage, blind in one eye and deaf in one ear, he wasn't exactly the typical reporter covering this embattled area.

But Swain just can't seem to retire, in spite of health problems which would keep many people glued to their rocking chairs. "That's one of the nice things about writing," he observes. "As long as you can function at all, you can write."

In fact, this past summer, frequently he found his age an asset. "I feel that many times I was treated with greater respect and granted interviews with people who would have hesitated to receive the hordes of young journalists."

Finding himself in unusual situations is old hat for Swain. A 1937 University of Michigan journalism graduate, he peddled gadgets door-to-door and on street corners during the Depression, blocked sugar beets and weeded mile-long rows of onions, shipped as ordinary seaman on the Great Lakes, reported for assorted newspapers, served as press agent for a mind reader and landed a spot on the editorial staff of *Flying* magazine without ever having been up in an airplane.

When World War II came along, Swain was just becoming a successful science fiction author with frequent cover stories for such magazines as *Amazing Stories* and *Fantastic Adventures*. The Army kept him at a desk job in the publications section of a War Department general headquarters, despite his pleas for an assignment as combat correspondent.

In 1949 Swain became a script writer for the OU motion picture unit, although he had never seen a film script. "They were desperate," he explains straight-faced. "Jim Bragg, director of the OU photo service at that time, later told me he hired me on the theory that a broken-down magazine

writer was better than no writer at all."

The years that followed saw him script more than 50 fact films for OU and independent producers, including a couple of full-length features.

Swain also was still writing fiction, notably cover novels for science fiction magazines, with side trips into the suspense, western, and adventure fields. In 1952, he joined OU's professional writing faculty, teaching on a part-time basis for 20-odd years, eventually authoring *Techniques of the Selling Writer*, a widely acclaimed text.

When severe health problems forced his early retirement, he moved to Mexico, there to "sit on a mountain for five years to learn to breathe again."

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Since retirement, Swain has turned out two more writing texts, science fiction and adventure paperbacks under various pseudonyms, hundreds of book reviews, and articles ranging from tourism to film commentaries. In 1982, with his wife Joye, also a writer, he scripted a three-part television series on the Kirkpatrick museum complex for Channel 25 in Oklahoma City and a film for the Oklahoma Department of Tourism.

Along the way, his family also expanded to include two adopted Mexican daughters and a Costa Rican son.

When assignments developed last spring that would allow the Swains to return to Central America, he jumped at the chance. And so to the San Juan River and illegal entry into Nicaragua.

But Pastora's operation was only one stop on the Swains' itinerary. Their odyssey began in tiny Belize, formerly British Honduras.

"A sad little country," Swain observes. "I kept getting this feeling that what wasn't dust was mud. Geographically, Belize is part of Central America, but culturally it's black and British. Though the Belizeans won independence in 1981, Guatemala would gobble them up in an instant if the British didn't continue to provide them with military protection — Harrier jets, Puma helicopters, a battalion of infantry. On duty while we were there were paratroopers fresh from the Falklands."

From Belize the Swains moved (by way of El Salvador and Guatemala) to Nicaragua and the fourth anniversary celebration of the Sandinista Revolution, with Joye writing tourism articles for the *Sunday Oklahoman* while Swain did his *Eagle* pieces.

He shakes his head over Nicaragua's present state. "The people remain friendly enough, but the euphoria I saw there in 1980 following the Somoza regime's overthrow has faded. There's growing bitterness about privation, repression and corruption. However, most Nicaraguans' memories of the Somoza era are still too fresh for them even to think twice about a return to anything that hints in the slightest of the bad old days."

What about Pastora's rebellion in the south and the CIA-backed "Contras" along the Honduran border?

"I don't know enough about the Contras to comment," Swain says. "But Pastora? His 'Free Nicaragua' is a chunk of swamp nobody else wants. His soldiers tend to be campesinos, farm boys out for excitement and money. I doubt they constitute any real threat to the Managua government."

The Swains moved on. Before they were through they had interviewed Lt. Col. Domingo Monterrosa, commander of El Salvador's crack Atlacatl rapid deployment force . . . shown U.S. military advisers at San Vicente some captured guerrilla photos of advanced weapons the advisers didn't know the subversives



*Pictured above with a little girl in Leon, Swain found the people of Nicaragua friendly, but he noticed that the euphoria with the overthrow of Somoza had been replaced with a bitterness about privation, repression and corruption.*



*Former Sooner Magazine editor Dick Smith greets an old friend outside Guatemala City's National Theater.*

had . . . gone into the field with Guatemala's famed Kaibil Battalion . . . observed training of soldiers from all over Latin American in anti-insurgency tactics at the U.S. Army's School of the Americas in Panama . . . discussed the black market in arms with Costa Rica's former defense minister . . . drunk with Nicaragua's Minister of the Interior, Tomas Borge . . . and watched British planes take off on patrol from an air base camp in Belize.

It all added up to a memorable experience, to say the least. Only after he had made his illegal crossing into Nicaragua with the guerrillas, for example, did it occur to Swain's escorts that a 67-year-old man hobbling along on a cane might not be able to run for cover if the band were attacked.

"I had the answer to that all worked out," Swain remarks. "I told them to forget me and take care of themselves. For my part, I figured to fall flat on my face and hope for the best."

He also learned how to stop breakfast conversation in a Guatemala City hotel's restaurant. "All it takes

is an armored station wagon and an army captain in field uniform, complete with pistol on right hip, knife on left, grenades on his belt, and a Beretta submachine gun across his arm. Let the captain get out of the wagon at the restaurant door, stalk to your table and bark, 'Vamanos.' ('Let's go.') I guarantee you'll be able to hear a pin drop."

Another Guatemalan incident had the Swains aboard a light plane ("We were supposed to go by helicopter, but the one assigned to us had been shot down.") on a muddy jungle runway in the Quiche, a province where government and guerrillas are in bloody conflict. When time to leave came the young pilot had trouble with the engine.

A second pilot appeared. "Here. This is how you start it," he explained, manipulating the controls till the engine turned over.

The young pilot thanked him and took off, but Swain was sweating. "Here I was, flying with a pilot who didn't know how to start the plane," he comments. "I was never so scared in my life!"

The tragedy of Central America's

bitter internal struggles was brought home to him on this same trip. Sixty Indians, half starved, sought refuge with the military while he was at the Playa Grande base some seven kilometers south of the Mexican border. Two, a woman and a baby, died in his presence.

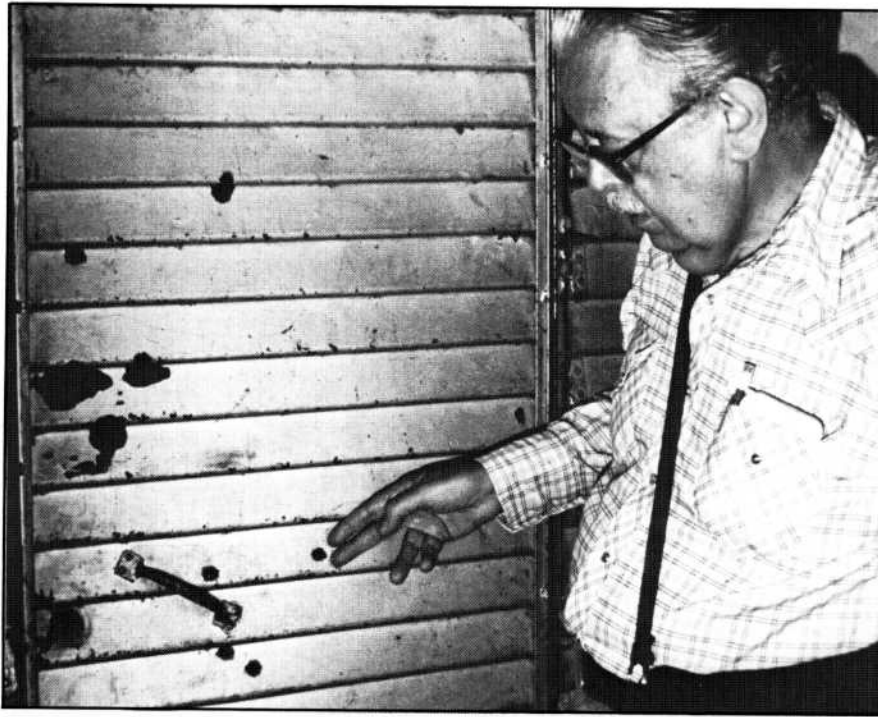
At Suchitoto, in El Salvador, he picked "fresh brass" — the cases of newly fired cartridges — from the cobbled streets, despite officials' assurances that there had been no fighting here in weeks. Street urchins showed wounds received during conflict.

Less exciting but more pleasurable was his discovery that the U.S. Embassy's first secretary/press attache was Don Hamilton, ex-Oklahoman with seven years on the *Tulsa World*.

An especially heart-warming contact brought Swain together with one of his former students, Dick Smith, editor of *Sooner Magazine* in the 1950s. Smith is a leading theatrical producer/director in Guatemala City.

Swain's reactions to the countries visited are pointed:

*Costa Rica:* "When I lived there in



Swain inspects bullet holes from automatic weapon fire in Suchitoto, El Salvador, where "the day is the army's, but the night belongs to the guerrillos."

1980, Costa Rica was the closest thing you could find to a democracy in Central America. Its great pride lay in its high literacy rate — 90 percent — and the fact that it had no army. Social services held high priority. Even now, when I broke a rib in Nicaragua, San Jose's social security hospital X-rayed me and did a patchup job for only \$24.

"Today, the whole country has a bad case of jitters lest Nicaragua's troubles engulf it also. The Civil Guard carries rifles. Officials kept asking us, 'Why doesn't the United States come down to Nicaragua and throw out the Sandinistas?'"

*Honduras:* "Practically the definition of an underdeveloped country. By all accounts, U.S. training operations constitute a gigantic gravy train for the Honduran oligarchy. But that doesn't mean the rank and file of

Hondurans like what they see as U.S. domination of their country."

*Guatemala:* "If I were looking for a place to live in Central America, Guatemala City would rate high. It's both friendly and cosmopolitan, with all the amenities anyone could ask for.

"However, the country itself has long been in a state of war, meeting leftist rebellion head-on, brutally. The coterie in power recognizes that something must be done and done quickly, but it's difficult to find a solution to their problems, and some hardliners can be typified by a statement one made to me: 'So what's wrong with a military dictatorship?'"

*El Salvador:* "There's a saying here, 'The day is the army's. The night belongs to the guerrilleros.' Tragically enough the left probably will win, largely because the right has adopted murder as a prime political policy."

*Panama:* "Business is king here. But along with Panama City's luxury hotels and glamour boutiques you find slum neighborhoods I was warned not to walk through even in daylight. The unemployment in Colon makes it a dangerous cesspool. Even the Canal is growing shabby,

and in the end the Panamanians may choke on the very national pride that made them take it over."

And the future?

"I have the feeling that Central America constitutes a no-win situation for the United States. The combination of ignorance, poverty and blood-drenched power politics is such that no real change is likely. The cost of any attempt to control the situation certainly would be tremendous both in lives and in money; the world's reaction, devastatingly hostile."

What about communism and the domino theory?

"On a temporary basis I suppose almost anything may happen. But I have faith that in the long haul the diverse brands of Marxists you find in Central America will fall to fighting for power among themselves. After all, why should they behave any differently than Communists elsewhere — as witness the Soviet Union's inability to control Albania and Yugoslavia, let alone China. Central America's revolutionaries aren't likely to prove any more amenable."

How did Swain's dubious health fare in the course of two months of less-than-luxury travel?

"When I began to have trouble, I just stopped and rested. There were days in Panama when I couldn't even wake up. Once in Nicaragua I didn't have the strength to pull myself up onto a bus. There were no cabs to be had, but a friendly woman gave us a ride not only to the Tourist Department, where we were headed, but also to lunch at a fine restaurant and then on to our hotel. She also contributed a wonderful quote about the new government: 'It's the same old circus. Only the clowns have changed.'"

Now back in Oklahoma, Swain is eager to finish his series for *Eagle*. "I'm retired," he points out. "It's time I started taking it easy."

But then, more often than not, he adds, "If I were to go back, though, next time I'd take two canteens. You need lots of water in the tropics." Or he starts looking wistfully at midget electronic typewriters and wondering if they would blank out in the jungle the way his digital watch did.

Some people never learn.



**"Even the Canal is growing shabby; in the end, the Panamanians may choke on the national pride that made them take it over."**