

Aguacate revisited: Tracing two missing Americans

by [Joseph E Mulligan](#) in the [August 30, 2000](#) issue

Aguacate, the Honduran base built by the Reagan administration for the Nicaraguan contras in the early 1980s, faded from the limelight in 1988 when the contras and Sandinistas signed a cease-fire agreement. But in recent months church delegations, international journalists, and relatives of Honduras's "disappeared" have been traveling the 130 miles from Tegucigalpa to inspect the now virtually abandoned base, guarded only by an eight-man squad from the Honduran army.

Near the base's 8,000-foot runway, a lone building stands in the midst of trees and shrubs. The one-room brick structure seems to have a small basement, covered over by a concrete slab with embedded iron rings; tapping one's foot on the concrete indicates a hollow space below. The walls of the room show splatterings of blood; four samples taken by the Honduran human rights prosecutor have been identified as human blood. Many names of those once held in this rustic cell are scratched into the walls, including a "Mario." This was the pseudonym used by Chicago-born James Carney, a Jesuit priest who served as chaplain for an armed revolutionary group entering Honduras from Nicaragua in July 1983.

The human rights prosecutor has cordoned off several suspect plots of land at Aguacate, including two sunken holes where bones have been found. It is generally known that part of the base is a cemetery for the contras and perhaps for some of their Sandinista captives. Once the Organization of American States declares the area free of landmines, Honduran investigators and foreign forensic anthropologists will sift through the earth in search of human remains—and perhaps find those of Father Carney and others of his group.

Several years after the disappearance, Honduran deserters in exile began to testify that Carney and others in the column had been captured, tortured and thrown out of helicopters. The late Florencio Caballero, a former sergeant in the Honduran army, told the *New York Times* that he personally had interrogated Carney (June 5, 1988).

In 1988, during a special hearing of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, then-Senator William S. Cohen asked Richard Stolz, CIA deputy director of operations: “Can the CIA confirm the manner and death of Father Carney?” Stolz replied: “No, sir. . . . We do not know the answer to that. I spoke to Ambassador [John] Negroponte briefly Tuesday and again yesterday and the best information that anyone seems to have is that he probably died of—that a number of them were released and they were in the jungle somewhere and died.” Did Stolz mean to say that Carney was among those captured and released?

At the Iran-contra hearings in 1987, Cohen quoted Walter Lippmann in explaining the reasons for the joint congressional hearings: “The great virtue of democracy—in fact its supreme virtue—is that it supplies a method for dragging realities into the light, of summoning our rulers to declare themselves and to submit to judgment.” As secretary of defense, however, Cohen has presided over a shameless defiance of President Clinton’s orders to provide information to human rights officials in Honduras. The small number of documents declassified by the Pentagon—and those few heavily blacked out—thwarts democracy’s methods for “dragging realities into the light.”

Carney was accompanied by another U.S. citizen: David Arturo Baez Cruz, a native Nicaraguan who had become a U.S. citizen and had served in the Green Berets for 11 years before returning to his homeland in 1981 to support the Sandinista revolutionary government. His father had been killed and “disappeared” by Anastasio Somoza’s National Guard.

Baez Cruz was first identified in a “secret telegram” from U.S. military intelligence in Panama in 1983 which stated that the Green Beret, serving as the column’s communications officer, was “killed in action.” The telegram was declassified and presented to the Honduran human rights commissioner in early 1998 in response to his request for U.S. documents which could shed light on human rights violations in Honduras.

“The U.S. Government in 1997 and 1998 reviewed and declassified thousands of pages of official documents related to alleged human rights abuses in Honduras during the 1980s and provided them to Commissioner [Leo] Valladares,” the State Department declares in its “Honduras Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1998,” published in February 1999. Not mentioned, however, is the fact that almost 50 percent of this material is blacked out, including paragraphs in sensitive sections

in which Father Carney is described as having been captured by the Honduran military, tortured and dismembered. In 1997 the CIA acknowledged that this version of Carney's fate "cannot be ruled out." (The official Honduran army version in 1983 was that perhaps Carney had starved to death in the mountains. The army presented the priest's stole, chalice and Bible to his relatives, but said they had not recovered his body.)

One declassified CIA page presents a report by an unnamed Honduran soldier who says that he carried Father Carney's head in his knapsack. Also, Honduran newspapers recently quoted a peasant leader as saying that Honduran military officers told him that Carney's head is preserved in a jar of alcohol in what is now the country's Ministry of Defense building. The human rights prosecutor vowed to investigate such stories.

The CIA inspector general's report on the agency's activities in Honduras in the 1980s, released in October 1998, shows huge swaths obliterated by magic marker (as did previously declassified documents) but leaves intact some very revealing information. According to the report, "the Honduran military committed hundreds of human rights abuses since 1980, many of which were politically motivated and officially sanctioned," and "CIA reporting linked Honduran military personnel to 'death squad' activities." The report admits that "the CIA's record in reporting human rights abuses was inconsistent. In some cases, reporting was timely and complete; in other cases _____ information was not reported at all _____ or was mentioned only in internal CIA channels and not disseminated to other agencies." (The underlines indicate material blacked out by U.S. censors.)

Friends and relatives of the two missing Americans, in a March 1999 letter to President Clinton, said they hold the U.S. Embassy and the CIA responsible for fostering a climate of impunity which gave a green light to Honduran security forces to torture, execute and "disappear" persons. "By their admitted silence, U.S. officials were guilty of complicity in gross violations of human rights, including the inalienable rights of POWs captured in Olancho in 1983," the letter charged.

In a section with repeated references to the capture of the guerrilla group's leader, the CIA report cites _____, who "believes that the Embassy Country Team in Honduras wanted reports on subjects such as this to be benign 'so as to avoid Congress looking over its shoulders' and to keep Congress satisfied with the ongoing implementation of U.S. policy. _____ also says he believes that the draft 1983

_____ report was 'suppressed' by elements within the Embassy, including _____, for political reasons. Reporting murders, executions and corruption, says _____, would reflect negatively on Honduras and not be beneficial in carrying out U.S. policy."

The report quotes a U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency analyst as saying: "Analytical attention was focused on the Olancho Operation for only a two-to-three-month period and, by April 1984, the issue was forgotten at the Embassy." This is corroborated by an August 1985 handwritten memo by someone in the embassy: "Fr. Carney case . . . is dead. Front office does not want the case active. . . . We aren't telling that to the family."

In his concluding remarks the CIA inspector general cites a source who said on November 22, 1983, "that the Ambassador was particularly sensitive regarding the issue and was concerned that earlier CIA reporting on the same topic might create a human rights problem for Honduras. Based on the Ambassador's reported concerns, _____ actively discouraged _____ from following up the information reported by the _____ source." The next two and a half pages are totally blacked out.

On the 16th anniversary of the disappearance of his nephew, Arturo Cruz Sr., a former member of the Sandinista Nicaraguan government (ambassador of Nicaragua to the U.S.) and later (having defected) a director of the contras, made a statement which was distributed to the press after a memorial mass for the disappeared in the cathedral of Tegucigalpa on September 27: "I am the uncle of David Arturo Baez Cruz. His father, Adolfo Baez-Bone (my brother-in-law), was captured and murdered by the Nicaraguan National Guard under the dictator Somoza in 1954. I fear that his son met a similar fate in Honduras. The governments of Honduras, Nicaragua and the United States should do everything possible to see to it that truth is told in the case of my nephew, David Arturo, and the other disappeared persons, and to condemn and abolish the military practice of murdering prisoners."

The CIA report offers a clue as to the fate of Cruz's nephew. It cites an October 1983 document from an office (name blacked out) stating that "it had received information indicating that PRTCH (Revolutionary Party of Central American Workers-Honduras) guerrillas who had been captured by the Honduran Armed Forces in Olancho Department had been summarily executed by Honduran Army officers after being debriefed. Among those executed was Reyes Mata, his Deputy Commander 'Comandante Zapata,' and a Nicaraguan advisor who had accompanied

the guerrilla force.” José María Reyes Mata, a medical doctor, was the leader of the revolutionary column.

In various places the CIA report states that Dr. Reyes Mata was murdered by one or more Honduran military officers. In each case the name or names are blacked out. According to the *Washington Post* (November 4, 1998), a U.S. official said the U.S. would provide “amplifying information on the incident through government-to-government human rights channels.” Senator Christopher J. Dodd (D., Conn.) was quoted in the same article as saying that the CIA and other U.S. agencies have an obligation to turn over “all relevant information that may shed light on an individual’s involvement or responsibility for the murder or disappearance of Reyes Mata and others killed in Honduras.”

Arturo Cruz Sr. wants to know whether “the Honduran government has asked the U.S. government for the names of these murderers and whether ‘the Nicaraguan advisor who had accompanied the guerrilla force,’ cited . . . as one of those executed by Honduran officers, was my nephew, David Arturo Baez Cruz. What additional information, if any, does the U.S. government have about my nephew? When did U.S. government officials or agents first learn of the presence of David Arturo Baez Cruz and Father Carney in the guerrilla group, and when did they first learn of their deaths?”

The relatives of Father Carney also issued a statement on the 16th anniversary of the disappearance, noting that the inspector general’s report stated that “according to _____, during the 1980 to 1984 period when executions had been carried out, each execution had to be approved by the Honduran Armed Forces Commander and the President of Honduras.”

The relatives then asked: “Did the president of Honduras approve the execution of Dr. José María Reyes Mata and of U.S. citizen David Arturo Baez Cruz? And if Father Carney was captured alive—a hypothesis which the CIA says it cannot rule out—did the president approve killing him? We note with interest the fact that the Honduran government has initiated the process of excavations at Aguacate, the former military base where remains of political prisoners may be found. We urge the Honduran attorney general to continue this investigation and to bring it to a successful conclusion, finding the remains of Father Carney and of Mr. Baez Cruz and of others in the same group at Aguacate or wherever they may be.”

On June 23, 1999, Representative James McGovern (D., Mass.) and 20 other U.S. representatives, along with Senator Carl Levin (D., Mich.), sent a letter to President Carlos Flores of Honduras, asking him “to take whatever steps and actions may be necessary to help identify the sites where Father James Carney and David Arturo Baez Cruz are presently buried. If you so desire, we will urge the U.S. government to provide any technical support you might request to facilitate this process.”

In August 1999 Thomas Gumbleton, auxiliary bishop of Detroit, and three U.S. religious women visited Aguacate, where they also learned of a land dispute between peasant groups and the military. Gumbleton, who had made several previous trips to Honduras in relation to the Carney case, stated: “I am outraged that the CIA and the Defense Department have not adequately complied with President Clinton’s declassification order and have not seriously cooperated with the Honduran system of justice. About half of the material released is blacked out. Our government must be more cooperative in releasing more information concerning the two missing Americans and . . . disappeared persons of Honduras.”

In late September Carney’s brother, Patrick, and I visited Aguacate and spoke with top Honduran civilian officials in Tegucigalpa, who expressed their commitment to carry the investigation forward to its ultimate conclusion. Friends and relatives of the two disappeared Americans similarly commit themselves to encourage the digging for remains in Honduras and to continue urging the Clinton administration to unearth pertinent information in Washington.