



**LOACH  
PILOT**

**Disarming the Contra War**

**Bruce L. Carnegie**

Loach Pilot: Disarming the Contra War  
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*Dedicated to Lady Luck*

*Her presence guides our careers  
and her interventions saves our asses.*

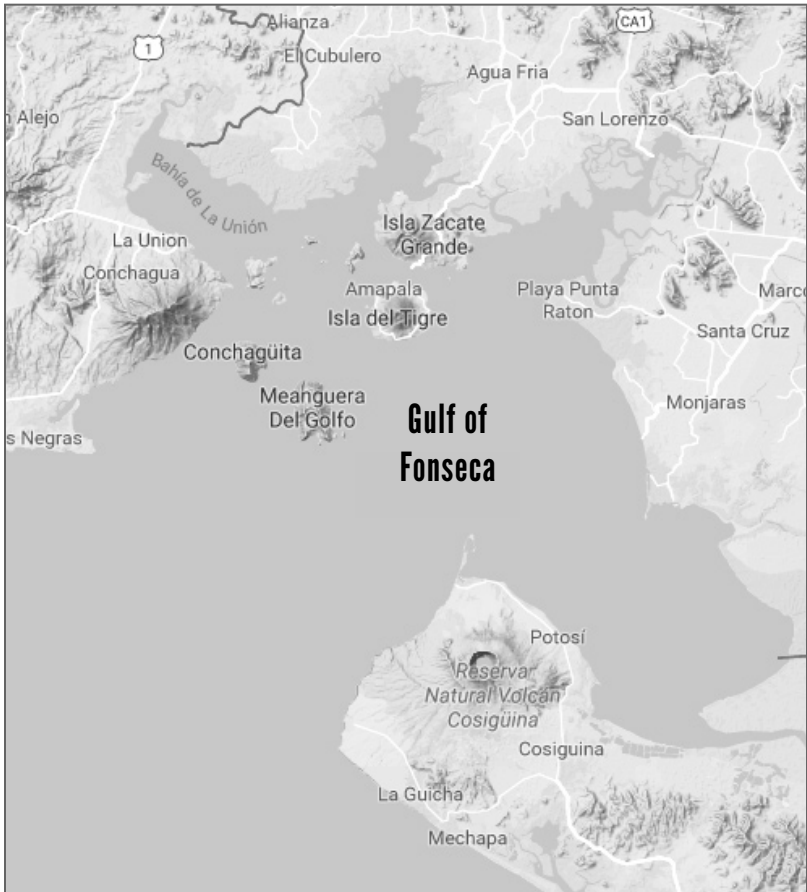
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# NICARAGUA AND HONDURAS



# GULF OF FONSECA



# ABBREVIATIONS

2CFFTS. . . . .	2 Canadian Forces Flight Training School
ATC . . . . .	air traffic control
CH. . . . .	Canadian helicopter
CF . . .	Canadian Forces/Canadian fighter (when referring to aircraft)
CFB . . . . .	Canadian Forces Base
CO. . . . .	commanding officer
CT. . . . .	Canadian trainer
DOpsO . . . . .	deputy operations officer
DME . . . . .	distance measuring equipment
FOB . . . . .	forward operating base
FPB . . . . .	fast patrol boat
FSLN . . . . .	Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional
HF . . . . .	high frequency
HQ. . . . .	headquarters
ICS. . . . .	inter-communications system
LOH. . . . .	light observation helicopter
LTA . . . . .	leave travel assistance
LZ . . . . .	landing zone
MP. . . . .	military police
NOE. . . . .	nap-of-the-earth
OAT . . . . .	outside air temperature
OJT . . . . .	On-job training
ONUCA . . . . .	United Nations Observer Group in Central America
OpsO . . . . .	operations officer
PPL . . . . .	private pilot licence
QFI . . . . .	qualified flying instructor
RCAF . . . . .	Royal Canadian Air Force

ROE . . . . . Rules Of Engagement  
RESO . . . . . reserve entry scheme officer  
SAM. . . . . surface-to-air missile  
SNAFU . . . . . situation normal all fucked up  
Sqn . . . . . Squadron  
SOP . . . . . standard operating procedure  
TOT. . . . . turbine outlet temperature  
UHF. . . . . ultra-high frequency  
UN. . . . . United Nations  
Venbatt . . . . . Venezuelan Battalion  
VC . . . . . Verification Centre  
VFR . . . . . visual flight rules  
VHF . . . . . very high frequency  
VOR. . . . . VHF omnidirectional range



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

THIS IS A PERSONAL ACCOUNT OF MY EXPERIENCE AS A LOACH PILOT IN the Canadian Forces. More specifically, it focuses on the flying that I did while deployed on a United Nations mission in Central America at the end of the Contra War. My tour there lasted from mid-January 1990 to the end of July 1990, and most of the flying was concentrated around the Honduran/Nicaraguan border. During my 33-year flying career, I have seen a lot of weird stuff, had a few hair-raising experiences, and I have a plethora of fond memories. But, when asked what it was like to fly in the Royal Canadian Air Force, the stories that I come back to again and again are the encounters that I had during those six months in Central America. The people that I met and worked with, the places that I saw, and the situations that I was confronted with, were the most exciting of my career.

To the best of my recollection, this book is a true story. The people and places are real; the geography is accurate; the situations and missions are factual. However, I have changed the names, nicknames, personal descriptions, personal traits and, in some cases, the association of the character to the anecdote in the book in order to protect the privacy and anonymity of the actual people.

I want to thank my parents for scrutinizing the narrative and coming up with constructive ideas for the book—in particular my mom, who spent countless hours proofreading each page. I

would also like to thank my son, Steven, for his suggestions to improve the format. Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Cathy, for all of her steadfast support during the making of this book. The many evenings that we spent together, with me reading to her while she listened and made encouraging comments, are the reason this journey became so enjoyable.

# PROLOGUE

I WAS BORN IN THE SIXTIES AND GREW UP IN RICHMOND, B.C., CANADA, where aviation became a part of my life at a very young age. My father was an air cadet as a kid, and an aero engine technician in the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) in the 1950's, and he always had a passion for flying. When I was six, he took my older brother and me to the Abbotsford Airshow where I got my first glimpse of ear-splitting air force fighter jets tearing up the sky. By the time I was eight, my father had purchased a floatplane, which we flew to remote locations throughout the lower mainland near Vancouver. At the age of twelve, someone in our neighbourhood had enrolled in the Canadian Forces (CF) as a pilot and was flying T-33 trainer jets. I remember standing in a large field adjacent to our school one sunny day when he performed an impromptu flyby of our neighbourhood. He went right over my head at what seemed to be a very low altitude and a very high speed. As he passed directly over me, the sound was deafening and I could feel a shockwave resonate through my chest. I thought that was about the coolest thing I had ever seen. From that moment on, I gave up on my childhood dream of becoming a professional football player, and I decided I wanted to be a pilot in the air force.

By the time I had reached the age of seventeen, we had moved to Vancouver Island, and my father had sold the floatplane and purchased a Piper Tri-Pacer. My two brothers had now

lost interest in flying, and my mother was mostly an occasional fair-weather passenger. So, it was generally my dad and I who would go up to “bounce” the circuit in Victoria or fly over to Vancouver to catch a BC Lions football game. During my last year of high school, I began my formal flight training at the Victoria Flying Club. I had saved just enough money to pay for the first ten lessons and then, while working at a variety of odd jobs, was able to finally complete the course about two years later, thereby earning my private pilot licence (PPL).

While enrolled in university in 1983, I joined the Canadian Militia, or Artillery Reserves – 5th Field Battery (now a Regiment). I really wanted to join the Air Force Reserves but, at the time, they didn’t have an Air Reserve Squadron in Victoria; so, I figured firing a howitzer was the next best thing. The Artillery Reserves also had a Reserve Entry Scheme Officer (RESO) program that was tailored to aspiring officers who were attending post-secondary education. The deal was that I would be trained as a second lieutenant along with the regular military artillery officers during the school summer break, and I would work with my reserve unit on weekends during the school year. I found the experience to be invaluable. The leadership skills I learned as a twenty-two-year-old Gun Position Officer (GPO) in charge of forty other soldiers stayed with me for the remainder of my service.

In 1985, I transferred from the reserve force to the regular force as a pilot in the CF and began my flight training in Portage la Prairie, Manitoba, in December of that year. Upon successful completion of basic flight training, I was posted to Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, for advanced flight training. After that, I was posted back to Portage to attend an advanced helicopter course. I was finally awarded my CF wings in April 1986 and posted to 427 Squadron in Petawawa, Ontario, to become a Loach Pilot. My

childhood dream had come true.

By the end of 1989, the decade-old Contra War against the Sandinistas was winding down, and it looked like peace was inevitable. The United Nations formed a sub-unit, called the United Nations Observer group in Central America (commonly referred to as ONUCA), which consisted of a group of unarmed military “observers” who would monitor the territories of the five Central American countries. Their mission was to organize and conduct mobile patrols to monitor and report on troop movement along the main roads and border areas between Honduras and Nicaragua, as well as to investigate allegations of weapons use in the five countries which made up Central America.

Canada was tasked to provide some of the military observers, a support unit, and an air wing consisting of four Kiowa Scout helicopters and four Twin Huey Utility Transport helicopters. The Canadian government agreed to the UN’s request and passed the tasking on to the RCAF, who in turn assigned the tasking to 427 Squadron. I was one of the first pilots selected to deploy and was later given the additional duty of deputy operations officer, which meant that I would be the first to be shipped out on the “advance party.” On January 18th 1990, I departed on an Air Canada flight from Ottawa to Miami, and then transferred to a Tan Sahsa flight from Miami to Tegucigalpa, Honduras. This is the story of how I became a Loach pilot in the RCAF and the missions that I flew on my first operational deployment in Central America.



## 1 - IN THE BEGINNING

I STILL REMEMBER MY FIRST RIDE IN A KIOWA HELICOPTER. I WAS A brand-new second lieutenant in the artillery reserves, serving on a six-week combat exercise in Wainwright, Alberta. We were sharing the tented bivouac—or army camp—with a detachment of Kiowa “scout” helicopters, which were operating in support of the Canadian Armoured Corps, otherwise known as a Leopard tank unit. We were on one side of the camp, the Kiowa helicopter pilots were on the other, and we rarely met or spoke to each other. The pilots who flew these machines were known as “Loach” pilots; Loach, pronounced *Lowch*, is derived from the acronym LOH, or light observation helicopter. At the time, I revered these pilots as true warriors who could perform godlike manoeuvres with their combat green helicopters. I was envious that they got to go flying every day, while I sat in an operations tent toiling away at paperwork and radio updates.

The LOH used in Canada was a Kiowa helicopter and had a similar role to the Hughes OH-6A helicopter used by the United States Army in Vietnam, or the Gazelle helicopter used in the U.K. Army Air Corps. They were used for roles such as observation, reconnaissance, command & liaison, and artillery fire direction. The Kiowa was basically a modified Bell-206 Jet Ranger helicopter with military mission kits bolted on. These kits—such as rocket pods, a 6-barrel Mini-TAT Gatling gun, or a Night Sun

spotlight system—were utilized to better support the troops on the ground. The pilot would sit in the right seat of the aircraft and fly, and an observer would sit in the left seat of the aircraft to read the map and employ the weapons. The aircrew loved flying this aircraft because it was fast and agile, and it was flown mostly at or below treetop level. The regulations at the time allowed them to go as low and as fast as possible, as long as they were “clear of obstacles,” which meant—just don’t hit anything.

During one of my few days off at the bivouac, I made my way over to the helicopter detachment operations tent to see what the chances were of getting a ride. As luck would have it, the Kiowa flight commander was sitting at his desk in the operations tent and was quite happy to have a visitor—any distraction was a welcome distraction in order to take his attention away from the mind-numbing paperwork through which he was thumbing. He was a crusty old major with a slightly-longer-than-regulation haircut, an overgrown bushy moustache and a slight pot belly that pressed against his dark green flight suit. The ops tent was crudely decorated with a foldup table which doubled as a desk, some fold up chairs, and a scheduling board that was “hand-draulically” amended with a grease pencil. These guys were known to have the ability to pack up camp and move quickly in the heat of battle, and I could see by looking around at the sparse accommodation that this was true to form. I introduced myself, explained what I was doing there, and asked if I could go for a ride on anything that he had flying that day. He walked me over to the Ops scheduling board and we had a look at the daily flying program to determine what might be a suitable ride for me. Pretty much all the missions for that day were tactical, low-level sorties that would not be suitable for a passenger unaccustomed to this type of flying—he wouldn’t want me getting sick on the aircrew during a fire mis-