

The Forgotten Hostages

Contractors Captured In Colombia Tell Dan Rather Their Story

2003 Oct 06

At this moment, three Americans are being held hostage under heavy guard in the jungles of Colombia, hoping for a miracle.

Their story is probably one you don't know much about. But after hearing from them, it is one you will never forget.

They are hostages of a narco-terrorist group known as FARC, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia -- guerrillas with a violent history and a penchant for holding kidnap victims for years, and then, often, killing them.

The Americans fell into the group's hands when their plane crashed in the jungle more than eight months ago. The families of the hostages say the men they love have been forgotten.

They hope that will change tonight, because of what you are about to see and hear from the hostages themselves. **Correspondent Dan Rather** reports.

"To our country, we miss you and we hope we return one day. We're alive and well," says Keith Stansell, 38, a systems analyst.

"We expect to get out of here one day. We can't say for sure," says Thomas Howes, 50, a professional pilot. "But our main concern is the welfare of our families."

"I'm a proud American," says Marc Gonsalves, 31, also a systems analyst. "I look to you guys and I ask for a diplomatic solution to get us home safe, please."

A videotape of the three Americans - Stansell, Howes and Gonsalves - was made by Colombian journalist Jorge Botero. He made the trek deep into the jungles to a steamy, wooden shack.

Botero was escorted inside by a guerrilla commander, where he met the three Americans and recorded a tape to prove that they were alive and well -- and ready to be traded for imprisoned members of the FARC Revolutionary Army being held by the Colombian government.

They are prisoners in a war most Americans don't even know is going on, even though the United States is deeply involved.

Stansell, Gonsalves and Howes are contractors, like some of the thousands of American civilians now in Colombia. Many of them were hired by the U.S. government to search

for and destroy cocaine production.

Drying up the drugs will dry up a source of funding for the FARC, a highly organized guerrilla group now in its 40th year of war with the Colombian government.

The daily search for drugs turned deadly on Feb. 12. The three Americans landed in the middle of it, literally, when their plane crashed in FARC territory.

"We essentially crashed right into the middle of a big group of FARC," says Stansell. "We had no chance to escape. We crashed right on top of them."

The three men, along with American pilot Tom Janis, and a Colombian military intelligence officer, took off for a routine flight over the jungle.

"I heard the engine make a sound as far as quitting. It just quit. It got real quiet," says Stansell. "I looked at Marc, and Marc was looking at me for an answer, so I asked the pilot, 'What's going on?' The pilot, Tom Janis, said, 'Sir, that's an engine failure.'"

"Tommy Janis, the pilot, saw out of his side of the aircraft a postage-stamp-sized open area of green grass," says Howes. "And he decided immediately that was to be the place. My feeling was that there was a good chance we weren't gonna survive the landing."

They hit the ground and Stansell says the airplane opened up as dirt and debris flew inside. The plane lay in pieces in a clearing, and Gonsalves and Stansell stumbled outside.

"When I first looked at the front of the aircraft, I saw Tom and he was unconscious against the window. If you can see on his head, he had large cuts on his head. He had a broken nose, broken teeth, he was covered in blood. I thought initially he was dead when I ran up to the front of the aircraft," says Stansell.

"I leaned against the window and banged on the window. I thought he was dead. My fear was that the aircraft was going to catch on fire and they were going to burn to death. At the same time I exited the aircraft, I heard gunshots and the FARC were on the ground. They shot into the air and they ran up to us as I was trying to get the pilots out."

"I had blood dripping down my forehead from just above my eyebrow," says Howes. "And one of the FARC soldiers with us gave me a bandana to keep the blood out of my eyes."

But the guerrillas could not be trusted. Before leaving the crash site, they separated the hostages.

"The last time that I saw the Colombian and Tommy Janis. When I looked back at both of them, they had their hands up, and they were being marched towards us, but they were still a long distance from us," says Stansell.

The bodies of pilot Tommy Janis and the Colombian military intelligence officer were found near the wreckage. They had been shot to death, execution style.

"We asked the leader of the group what happened, they explained to us that Tommy and the Colombian were dead," says Stansell. "We didn't ask any more questions. We were in fear. We had nothing more to say."

But given this opportunity, the three Americans wanted to send a taped message to the Janis' family about their murdered friend.

"To his two sons, your dad saved our lives. He did not panic, he was incredible, both pilots were," says Stansell. "Neither of them panicked. They held together and they took the worst injuries in the impact."

The three Americans left alive marched on with the guerrillas, deeper and deeper into the jungle.

Howes said it ended up being a 24-day march on foot, on mule and on the back of trucks.

For months, the men had no outside contact – no word of the outside world – until late July, with the arrival of journalist Jorge Botero and his camera.

Botero brought the men magazines and news materials that they hungrily read, trying to catch up on lost months.

"I just learned that we invaded Iraq and I didn't know that because we've had no news. Nothing for five and a half months," says Stansell. "We've known nothing. Imagine just sitting in a box for five and a half months, nothing, no news, nothing."

As they went through news reports about their own situation, they learned something heartbreaking -- that a friend of theirs had died looking for them a month later. Their plane crashed, killing all three men on board.

"This is the worst thing I've ever gone through in my life. I've never gone through anything worse," says Stansell. "You sit, day in and day out, and I look at my friends here and at the end of the day here, we think to ourselves, 'We're alive another day. We will be alive tomorrow? Do we have a future? Can we see our families.'"

The three hostages talk about their families throughout the tape. And Gonsalves watches a videotaped message from his mother, brought in by Botero.

Then each of the men taped a message to send home:

"Mom, I've got your message, and I thank you for doing what you had to get that message sent to me. I love you, too, and I want you know that I am being strong," says Gonsalves.

"I'm not being hurt or tortured. I'm just waiting to come home. Shane, I love you, and I'm waiting to tell you that I think about you every day. Just wait for me, baby. Joey, Cody and Destiny, I love you guys..."

"Santiago, Tommy ... I love you, dearly. Steven, Sally, Dad, I love you very much," says Howes. "I'm OK. My health is good. They treat us with respect, and I'm waiting for the day that I can return to you all. I love you all, thank you."

"To my father and my brother, Frank. I love you, brother. I hope you're OK. To my dad, I hope you're still alive," says Stansell. "I love you very much. To my fiancée, Malia, I love you very much. I love you. I miss you. To my daughter and son, Lauren and Kyle ... I love you and miss you very much. If I come home, that's great. If not, keep living. Everything will be all right. Keep your chin up. Keep going."

Stansell's fiancée, Malia Phillips, and his 15-year-old daughter, Lauren, have watched his message home. *60 Minutes II* talked to them about it this past weekend.

"He always taught me to just keep on going. To be a survivor," says Lauren. "I think that's what he was passing on ... I just want him home ... He's the only person that I could honestly ever cling to."

Malia said she's concerned that her fiancé and the two other men have been forgotten, and that the U.S. government hasn't done enough win the hostages' freedom: "Our government owes it to these guys to do something. Put some pressure on the Colombian government to open up a dialogue, or to do something to get these guys back home. Marc and Keith are former military. I mean, they've served their country. I think the government owes them that much."

60 Minutes II went to the State Department and talked to Anne Patterson, who was the ambassador to Colombia when the Americans were captured.

She says the U.S. is working hard to free them: "We have reached out to the FARC through many intermediaries - through the Catholic church, through the Red Cross, through non-governmental agencies, through third country governments, to try and persuade them to release Keith, Marc and Tom. And they haven't done so. So our policy is try to arrange some sort of a solution, to persuade the FARC to release them. But we have failed so far."

Why have those efforts failed? "Because the FARC is a group of ruthless terrorists who are going to hold these people for political gain," says Patterson.

60 Minutes II asked **CBS News Consultant Gil Macklin**, a retired Marine major with years of experience working in Colombia, what can be learned about this group from the videotape.

Macklin said he recognized a high-level FARC commander talking with the Americans.

“His name is Mono Jojoy [Jorge Briceño], and he’s a pretty barbaric character,” says Macklin. “I think it outlines a pretty clear picture that these are high-valued assets that the FARC now holds.”

On the tape, the men say they have been treated well. And again and again, they send the message that they want a prisoner exchange: their freedom for that of FARC members now held by the Colombian government.

However, the hostages say any rescue attempt is doomed, and for them, would be deadly.

"I love the U.S. I think it is the greatest country in the world and I'm a proud American," says Stansell. "And if I die here, I die here. But I will tell you this. You're not coming to get us and we're gonna get out unscathed. This isn't a movie. This is real life. I don't believe a rescue is possible."

Somewhere in the jungles of Colombia, three Americans are being held under heavy guard -- homesick and running out of hope.

The men are hostages of the FARC, a revolutionary army trying to take over the country. FARC wants to trade the Americans for prisoners that the Colombian government is holding.

But after almost eight months, freedom still seems far away.

"I 100 percent miss my family. I'm kind of a hardass, I apologize. But in my life, the two things that hit me in my heart are my children and my fiancée," says Keith Stansell.

Life as a hostage means day after day of fear, grief and boredom.

"A day in the life of a captive? Empty, that's what would sum it up for me," says Thomas Howes.

"We haven't been allowed to play chess or that sort of stuff together. So Marc and I have made a deck of cards out of notebook paper. I pass hours and hours. If I have a morning when I'm just not a happy person, I'll play solitaire until the unhappy feelings go away. Switching off the mind, and just passing the hours."

That's why the arrival of journalist Jorge Botero and his camera was so important to these men. Some of the news that Botero brought in was about the company they had been working for. The three were employees of California Microwave, a company contracted by Northrop Grumman to do the drug surveillance flights over Colombia.

On tape, Stansell tries to explain contract business to his captors: "The government of the

U.S. awards contracts to big companies. And they send people down here to work and that's what we did. California Microwave Systems is a small company that is controlled by Northrop Grumman, which is a very big company. And we are employees."

What the three men didn't know was that ten days after their plane went down, California Microwave handed over the mission, their contract, to a newly formed company named Ciao.

The three learned this from a press release Botero brought them, which Stansell read to his friends: "Three years ago, the Pentagon awarded a contract to conduct surveillance in Colombia to California Microwave, a subsidiary of Northrop Grumman. Shortly after plane went down, California Microwave transferred the contract, along with the planes and pilots, to a new company called C-I-A-O ... chow."

When their captors overheard the hostages talking about the new company, the FARC made it clear that the new name sounded suspiciously like the CIA.

"C-I-A-O. This happened after the crash. We don't know who these people are," says Stansell. "We're civilian contractors."

60 Minutes II went to Northrop Grumman and asked about its new subsidiary, Ciao, which is now apparently in charge of planes and pilots in Colombia.

Northrop Grumman would not answer our questions, and no one would answer the door at Ciao's small headquarters in Maryland.

Northrop Grumman did, however, issue a statement saying the company will "continue to use every means available to us in seeking the release by the FARC of these three civilian non-combatants so that they might be safely reunited with their families."

On the tape, the hostages take pains to tell the company not to forget them or their families.

"I have a message for the company that we work for, just remember one thing when you see the three of us here. We did a good job for you. Just take good care of our families. We see here in the press release that our contract has been changed to a company that we don't know about after our crash," says Stansell.

"I understand the business side of it. But for those of you in our office and those of you in our old company that know us, maybe we won't make it home. But remember, there are three people here with a family. Please do the right thing for our families. Have some integrity. Stand up and do what's right for our families. Take care of us."

Northrop Grumman has continued to pay the mens' salaries, and stay in touch with the families. But there is criticism of the way the State Department ran the drug surveillance - using civilian contractors for the high risk work of flying over the Colombian jungle.

Was the program as safe as it could be?

"We put a lot of faith in that motor and it failed. Would we ever do it again? I don't think the three of us would ever again fly a single engine in the mountains of Colombia," says Howes.

When Anne Patterson was the U.S. ambassador to Colombia, she oversaw the civilian contractors working there -- including the three men captured after their plane crashed, and the three other Americans killed in another plane crash while they were out looking for the hostages.

Did Patterson know that single-engine aircrafts should not be used for these kinds of missions?

"Sure, we heard that. Of course, we heard that. But the Cessna has an excellent safety record. It's been used in many, many parts of the world," says Patterson. "Colombia is an incredibly dangerous place. The spray planes for instance, they have been shot at 100 times this year. We're in a very risky operation. I want to be clear about that. What we're doing is very dangerous, and regrettably, accidents happen."

It is no accident that thousands of Americans are now working in Colombia. The U.S. has pumped billions into what's called "Plan Colombia," and the program has landed the U.S. in the middle of the Colombian mess.

President Uribe of Colombia was in the United States again just last week, asking for more financial help in his war against FARC. So far, he has refused to negotiate with the guerrillas or meet their demand for a prisoner exchange. Just today, the U.S. State Department decided to up the reward for the Americans to \$5 million.

The U.S. fight against drugs in Colombia is important, according to former Republican Congressman Bob Barr, who was sent there on a fact-finding mission.

"The State Department is accountable because they are the ones calling the shots in Colombia, and we really have to demand that the State Department do more than put a happy face on what's going on down in Colombia," says Barr. "You know, the time for smoke and mirrors is gone. We're spending a lot of money. We're losing lives, we're losing aircraft down there and we have American hostages. And the current team in terms of having the state department in charge of the military aspects of the war against drugs down there has proven not to work. It's time for a change."

"I think the American people ought to be very angry. They ought to be upset. The families of those hostages ought to be angry and Congress ought to be," adds Barr. "Congress ought to be asking some very tough question and demanding some very good answers."

In the tape, the captors make a plea to the U.S. government not to send in a rescue team to save them. Instead, they ask for a negotiation.

"We would never do anything to put their lives at risk. Let me say that right away," says Patterson. "Because I did just watch the tape and I found it frankly very, very moving indeed. We would not do anything to put their lives at risk."

But in the jungles of Colombia, the hostages wonder if anything at all is being done.

"Since the crash, has there been any progress in the talks for an exchange for us? Any talks at all occur," asks Stansell.

"I'm not a politician and I don't understand all the politics. But I would say this. I would ask for a diplomatic solution. And I would ask to be exchanged so we could go home. I'm tired of death. I have friends of mine that have died. I've seen death. I don't wanna look at it anymore. I like life. That's what I want."