

Private U.S. Operatives on Risky Missions in Colombia

By JUAN FORERO - The New York Times

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After their tiny plane crashed deep in the jungles of southern Colombia, three American civilians on a mission to search for cocaine labs, drug planes and, occasionally, guerrilla units were taken hostage by Marxist rebels.

A year later, the men's families say the captives have been all but forgotten. Some say that is the way American officials and the men's employers want it to be.

The three Americans -- Marc Gonsalves, Keith Stansell and Thomas Howes -- worked cloaked in secrecy for two subsidiaries of Northrop Grumman, the huge military contractor, in an arrangement used increasingly by the United States government in conflict zones from Colombia to Afghanistan.

The men's families and critics of American policy here say the case sheds light on a shadowy world of secret operations that employ private contractors in deals that make it easy to skirt public scrutiny and for all to wash their hands if something goes wrong.

"My complaint about use of private contractors is their ability to fly under the radar and avoid any accountability," Representative Jan Schakowsky, an Illinois Democrat, said. "Now we're finding out that because of their low profile, and so little scrutiny, they are able to avoid liability or responsibility for these individuals."

American officials and executives at Northrop Grumman bristle at the suggestion that they have not done all they can to secure freedom for the men. Diplomats say there is probably little that they can do.

The American ambassador here, William B. Wood, said that "nothing at this mission has a higher priority than the well-being and safe release" of the crew members, according to a letter sent to the families of the missing men before Christmas.

Jack Martin, a Northrop Grumman spokesman, said in an e-mail message that the company

was closely cooperating with the government to ensure the release of the three Americans and "remained in regular and frequent contact with the hostages' families."

But in interviews, family members were aggrieved at what has become a painful and protracted episode that could have implications beyond Colombia. "They're not acknowledging these men, and nobody cares," Jo Rosano, the mother of Mr. Gonsalves, said last month in an interview in her home in Bristol, Conn. "They say, 'We're doing all we can.' But what are you doing?"

The number of Americans working in Colombia for private contractors has nearly doubled in two years to 400, the congressional limit. Hundreds more are citizens of Colombia and other countries. American law also allows up to 400 military officials in Colombia.

There are now two dozen American companies here, with the contracts for antidrug programs worth \$178 million last year. They spray coca fields, operate eavesdropping devices, organize alternative development programs, repair airplanes, assess intelligence and advise the Colombian Defense Ministry.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, more than 70 American companies and private individuals have won up to \$8 billion in contracts in the last two years, according to the Center for Public Integrity in Washington. Much of their work is shielded from the public, critics say, noting that their deaths are not even added to the American body count.

American officials, here and elsewhere, say using contractors saves money, provides essential services and specialists and frees military forces that are already stretched thin. They also say the three men taken captive were working within the legal limits set by the Congress.

But critics say that for American policy makers, the political risks surrounding Washington's deepening involvement in Colombia's conflict made using contractors preferable to placing American forces or intelligence officers in similar jeopardy.

The mission of the three men whose plane went down last Feb. 13 was to fly their single-engine Cessna, its underbelly loaded with sophisticated photographic equipment, over vast jungle tracts to search for illegal drug activities and, sometimes, guerrilla movements.

The intelligence was then shared with the Colombian armed forces in Washington's two-pronged fight against drug trafficking and a 40-year Marxist insurgency.

After the crash, in Caqueta Province, the rebels killed two other survivors: an American pilot, Tom Janis, and a Colombian intelligence officer. Weeks later, on March 25, a plane on a mission to track the captives hit a tree. Three more Americans were killed: Tommy Schmidt, Ralph Ponticelli and James Oliver.

The men were part of a team of a dozen or so pilots and technicians overseen by the American military mission in Latin America, the Southern Command, based in Miami. Their operation was dubbed the Southcom Reconnaissance System, and Northrop Grumman held the \$8.6 million contract for the work.

As the program became increasingly successful, several former pilots and others familiar with the program said civilian managers pushed flight crews farther over the jungles, often at night and sometimes 300 miles from their base.

Their mission expanded, too, from locating targets in the illegal drug trade chosen by the American Embassy to keeping a look out for leftist guerrillas, including those of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC.

"The mission is certainly not to look for the FARC," but rather drug traffickers, said one former pilot. "But it's hard, as you know, to separate the two."

By 2002, pilots began to worry about what they perceived to be the lack of power and speed of their planes -- the single-engine Cessna Caravan -- for a country as big and mountainous as Colombia.

"Pretty soon you're exceeding your limitations," said another flyer, who added that the \$150,000 annual salary motivated pilots to accept increasingly dangerous missions.

Two pilots, Paul C. Hooper and Douglas C. Cokes, wrote letters in November and December of 2002 to Northrop Grumman warning that flying single-engine planes was a recipe for disaster. The letters, first revealed by The Los Angeles Times, suggested that the Cessnas be replaced with twin-engine Beech King Air 300's.

Northrop Grumman and American government officials declined to comment when asked about the warnings.

"We had 60 some years of flight experience between the two of us," Mr. Cokes said in an interview, "and the handwriting was on the wall."

The planes were not replaced, and the two pilots resigned. After the two crashes, which temporarily halted the program, Northrop Grumman resumed the operation under a different name, the Colombia Surveillance System, using twin-engine planes.

Today, family members say they still have not received a full explanation of what happened. In January the families of the crewmen killed in the second crash receive a half-page, double-spaced summary from the Southern Command saying the plane hit a ridge and suggesting pilot error.

But conflicting information exists, with an embassy official saying recently that engine failure may have caused the plane to dip just before reaching the 4,400-foot rise.

"It's been sheer hell," said Ralph Ponticelli, the father of one of the pilots killed. "We are just not satisfied."

Family members also remain confused about the contractual obligations of the men's employers. All of the pilots and crew members had begun working for California Microwave

Systems, a subsidiary of Northrop Grumman. After the first crash, the program was transferred to a newly created company, CIAO Inc., former pilots and family members said.

Family members, former pilots and a high-ranking official who worked with contractors for years in Colombia contend that the contract switch was aimed at shielding Northrop Grumman from liability.

"There are veils," said John McLaughlin, the former head of the State Department's airborne program in Colombia, in charge of the spraying of coca crops. "If you have to go through this company and that company to try to recover, it puts some people off."

Efforts to reach CIAO -- which has an office in Maryland, according to documents -- were unsuccessful. Phones were either disconnected or went unanswered.

Northrop Grumman, in a statement, declined to answer a list of questions regarding details of the program and requesting a response to the relatives' claims.

The company did say it had been working with California Microwave "to support the families of the three crew members who lost their lives and to ensure they receive all the benefits to which they are entitled."

But the relatives are far from satisfied.

"We hear that Butch went to work for CIAO three days after he was assigned to Colombia," said Betty Oliver, the mother of Mr. Oliver, who is known as Butch. "And consequently CIAO does not recognize who is working for them. Grumman does not recognize he worked for them. So who did he work for?"

Mr. Schmidt's wife, Sharon, and Mr. Ponticelli's parents said they had since been trying, with no luck, to obtain \$350,000 death benefits. Both families received notices from an insurance adjuster saying they could not be paid benefits because the men had not worked for Northrop Grumman when they were killed.

"They say they terminated him and so therefore they have no legal responsibility," Ms. Schmidt said. "The reason they had done this is because they had been made aware, in writing, that serious concerns had been raised about the use of single-engine planes."

As for those taken captive, the FARC is using them as bargaining chips for a prisoner exchange and has hidden them well. Though American forces tracked the Americans after their capture, the trail has since been lost.

"The intelligence picture has, candidly, dried up," General James Hill, commander of American forces in Latin America, told a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on Oct. 29. "We get very little intelligence on them. We do not know exactly where they are."

What little is known of their fate comes from "Held Hostage in Colombia," a documentary by two

American producers, Victoria Bruce and Karin Hayes, featuring interviews with the hostages conducted by a Colombian journalist, Jorge Enrique Botero.

"I don't want more deaths," Mr. Stansell, sitting with his fellow crew members as armed guerrillas stood by, said in the documentary, excerpts of which were shown on "60 Minutes II." "I don't want to die. I don't want anybody dying trying to get me out of here."

The families are demanding negotiations to secure the release of the captives, but American policy forbids talks with the FARC, which the State Department has labeled a terrorist group.

"The Americans are truly making no effort to get them out," said a Western diplomat. "The Americans could be there 10 years."