

Authorities Identify Remains Of Two American Contractors

By Steve Fainaru
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U.S. authorities have recovered the remains of two American contractors, the latest grim development in one of the longest-running hostage dramas of the [Iraq](#) war.

The [FBI](#) identified one of the two men as John R. Young, 44, of Lee's Summit, Mo. Young was the team leader of a private security convoy ambushed in southern Iraq on Nov. 16, 2006. Five guards -- four Americans and an Austrian -- were seized in that attack.

The second man was identified as Ronald J. Withrow, 40, of Roaring Springs, Tex. Withrow was abducted Jan. 5, 2007, but reportedly had been held with the five other men, who worked for Crescent Security Group, which is based in [Kuwait](#). Withrow worked for JPI Worldwide, based in [Las Vegas](#).

The abductions threw new light on the lawlessness and corruption in Iraq's booming and scarcely regulated private security services. The case took a macabre turn last month when severed fingers of five of the six missing men were delivered to U.S. authorities in [Baghdad](#). Only Young's finger was not among them.

The fate of the remaining hostages is unknown. Sources familiar with the investigation said that U.S. authorities had recovered three unidentified bodies and were in the process of recovering one more. The bodies were found near the southern city of [Basra](#), not far from where the convoy attack took place, the sources said.

Mark Munns, whose son Josh, 25 and a Marine veteran, worked for Crescent, said he had become extremely pessimistic. "I know 99.99 percent that my son is dead," he said in a phone interview from his home near [Redding, Calif.](#)

The FBI expressed its condolences and said the investigation was continuing but did not mention the other hostages. "This is an open investigation, and the FBI, working with our partners in the Hostage Working Group in Iraq, will continue to aggressively investigate every available lead in order to identify, apprehend, and bring to justice those responsible for this heinous criminal act," the bureau said in a statement.

Young's mother, Sharon DeBrabander, said FBI agents delivered the news Sunday night at her home near [Kansas City](#). She said she was stunned, in part because Young's finger had not been included in the grisly package sent to U.S. authorities in February.

"I never dreamed it was John because they hadn't found his finger," she said. "It just knocked me for a loop. I looked at them like, 'What are you guys doing here?' It was 8 o'clock on Easter night."

In some ways, DeBrabander said, the news was a relief. "I felt like a weight was lifted a little bit," she said in a phone interview. "Sixteen months is a long time to wonder where your kid is. Of course I wanted it to turn out differently, but I felt grateful that at least I'd be getting him back." DeBrabander said the FBI had not provided information about when her son was killed or how he was located.

Patrick Reuben, a [Minneapolis](#) police officer whose twin brother Paul was Crescent's medic before his capture, said he expected to receive additional information about the other hostages this week.

Francis Cote, whose 25-year-old son Jonathon, a former [U.S. Army](#) paratrooper, is also missing, said he had called DeBrabander to offer his condolences. "Our hearts go out to the two families that have lost their loved ones," said Cote, a computer technician from Getzville, N.Y. "We have become close friends during this whole thing."

Cote added, "We are anxious to find out more news."

The other hostage is Burt Nussbaumer, 26 and a native of [Austria](#).

Private security firms expanded rapidly in Iraq because of chronic troop shortages and the insurgency. [The Pentagon](#) estimates that at least 20,000 hired guns operate in Iraq, but other estimates place the number at nearly 50,000 or higher. Crescent operated out of a Kuwait City villa and sent convoys into Iraq almost daily.

On the day of the ambush, Crescent sent out seven guards to protect a convoy of 37 tractor-trailers and failed to register the mission with a ground-control center in [Baghdad's Green Zone](#). Among other things, the command center helps mobilize an emergency response by the military in case of attack.

About 40 assailants -- some wearing business suits, others in [Iraqi police](#) uniforms and masks -- descended on the convoy after it stopped at a fake checkpoint.

Attempts to reach the company's managing partner, Franco Picco, by telephone were unsuccessful.