

For Missing Guards' Kin, An Agonizing Conclusion

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BLOOMINGTON, Minn., March 29 -- Relatives of five private security contractors abducted in [Iraq](#) gathered at the [Comfort Inn](#) near [Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport](#) this weekend. Their 16-month nightmare had reached an excruciating and prolonged conclusion that began with the delivery of five fingers to U.S. authorities last month and continued late Saturday with the identification of another victim.

Since last Sunday, the [FBI](#) has identified the bodies of four of the five missing guards and another American contractor who was apparently held with them. The guards worked for [Kuwait](#)-based Crescent Security Group and were protecting a convoy of 37 tractor-trailers on Iraq's main highway when they were seized Nov. 16, 2006. Crescent, which was later banned from U.S. bases for possessing illegal offensive weapons, symbolized a murky, scarcely regulated side of the Iraq war.

The ordeal is still not over. The fifth guard, Jonathon Cote, 25, a former [U.S. Army](#) paratrooper from suburban Buffalo, remains missing. U.S. authorities have told his family they are aware of a body near the southern city of [Basra](#), but its recovery appears to have been delayed by fighting between Shiite militias and Iraqi and U.S. government forces there.

"I don't know which is worse, to know that your child is gone or to be waiting like this," said Cote's mother, Lori Silveri, as she sat at one of several tables pulled together to accommodate the relatives at a steakhouse Friday night. "I still don't have any closure."

Silveri looked around the tables. The crowd included 5-month-old Ka'Leah Reuben, who was conceived and born while her grandfather, Paul Reuben, 41, a former suburban [Minneapolis](#) police officer, was in captivity; and Maria and Franz Nussbaumer, the mother and brother of Bert Nussbaumer, 26, whose body was identified Saturday. The Nussbaumers had traveled from Gmunden, [Austria](#).

"These people are all so brave," Silveri said, sobbing.

Three times in the past week, FBI agents visited or called Jon Cote's father and stepmother at their home outside Buffalo. On each occasion, the agents informed the Cotes that at least one of the missing guard's colleagues -- but not their son -- was dead.

"At this point, I assume the worst," said Francis Cote, who did not attend the Minneapolis gathering. Asked how he dealt with the uncertainty, he said: "My wife and I have a strong

Christian faith. We pray to God for strength. And our relationship with each other is strong enough so that when one of us falters, the other person can be there for them."

Meanwhile, relatives of the four guards whose bodies have been identified said that the FBI still has not told them how and where the men were killed and that the lack of information has prolonged their grief. They said U.S. authorities have told them it may be weeks or months before autopsy reports can be provided.

"We haven't been able to find out anything," said Sharon DeBrabander, whose son, John R. Young, 45, was identified last Sunday. "I think it's important; we ought to know. What happened to our children? What was going on the last few days or months of their lives? We want to know how they were treated. We want to know how they were killed."

"I figured this would be a closure for us, but it's not," DeBrabander said Saturday afternoon as she smoked a cigarette in front of the airport hotel. "It just opens up another can of worms. There's too many questions unanswered. And we're going to keep at it until we get our answers."

Richard Kolko, an FBI spokesman, wrote in an e-mail that the agency's "Victim Assistance specialists will be providing the preliminary information as soon as it is available directly to the families. More detailed information will be provided to the families when the medical examiner's reports are completed."

The gathering here had been planned months ago to allow the families to meet and compare notes. The relatives met in a conference room for about four hours Saturday to hear a presentation by a Minneapolis man who claimed to possess information showing that investigators had missed several opportunities to secure the hostages' release.

The five guards were abducted at a fake security checkpoint near Basra by at least three dozen heavily armed men wearing [Iraqi police](#) uniforms, business suits and masks, according to two Crescent guards who were left bound inside a truck.

The five guards were last seen when a video filmed by their captors and date-stamped Dec. 21 and Dec. 22, 2006, was aired Jan. 3 last year. At the time, the men appeared to be in good health.

Two months later, the [U.S. military](#) barred Crescent personnel from all U.S. bases after the company was found in possession of illegal offensive weapons, including rocket launchers and grenades.

[The Pentagon](#) has estimated that at least 20,000 hired guns work in Iraq for more than 100 companies, although some estimates are much higher.

Some relatives said they believed U.S. authorities never took the investigation seriously and failed to follow up several leads, possibly because the guards were not directly employed by the government. Mark Munns, whose son Joshua, a 25-year-old former Marine, was pronounced dead Wednesday, said he and the families had not decided what action to pursue. "I'm going to

wait and see," he said. "Right now I'm so pissed off that [the government] let our kids hang out to dry like this."

Kolko, the FBI spokesman, wrote, "As with every case where Americans are kidnapped, whether in the US or overseas, the FBI fully investigates these matters in order to identify, apprehend and bring to justice those responsible."

Since the men were abducted, the families have each received one \$3,500 payment from Crescent. The guards' monthly salary was \$7,000; Young, as team leader, made \$8,000. Munns said that Crescent "owes our kids over \$130,000 in back pay, and I'll be goddamned if they ain't gonna pay it. We're gonna get it out of them."

Paul Chapman, Crescent's media liaison, said in a telephone interview from Kuwait City that the company had insured the guards through [Lloyd's of London](#). Their beneficiaries, he said, will receive \$300,000, although it was unclear whether the payments will be made to the company or directly to the families, he added.

After the video appeared, nothing was heard from the hostages or their captors for more than a year. According to relatives, the captors never demanded ransom. Every Monday, the [State Department](#) held a conference call to update the families, but Munns said the calls contained so little information that sometimes he would "set down the phone, walk away and come back 10 minutes later."

Then, in mid-February, the FBI informed the families that U.S. authorities had obtained DNA and fingerprint evidence. The agency did not describe what the evidence was. "They never said that it was cigarettes or bottled water," DeBrabander said. "We all assumed it was something like that."

On March 12, the source was revealed as parts of five severed fingers that had been delivered to U.S. authorities in [Baghdad](#). The grisly package contained no further information. Two of the fingers were so badly decomposed that identification required additional analysis. But the development was seen by relatives as potentially positive because U.S. authorities said they were unable to determine whether the men were alive or dead when their fingers were removed.

That optimism began to recede March 21 -- Good Friday -- when the families were told that two bodies had been recovered. DeBrabander said she was pulling out of her driveway with a friend around 8 p.m. on Easter Sunday when she spotted two well-dressed FBI agents -- a man and a woman -- getting out of a car in front of her house in Lee's Summit, Mo., near [Kansas City](#).

"Oh, Nancy, I know why they're here," DeBrabander, crestfallen, told her friend.

When she returned after taking her friend home, the agents were sitting with her husband, Dennis, Young's stepfather. They told them Young's body had been identified. The DeBrabanders asked how and when he had been killed, but the agents said that was all the information they had. Dennis said the agents told them that "the FBI policy is a need-to-know policy."

Sharon DeBrabander said she demanded three pieces of information: how her son died, when he died and where.

"I said: 'I'm not asking, I'm demanding. Give me answers,' " she said. "I said: 'I don't care what your bosses say, I'm demanding this. I'm his mother. I carried him nine months. You-all didn't.' "

Young, an Army veteran, had worked for more than a decade in his uncle's carpentry business before joining Crescent. He was nearly killed in 2006 in Baghdad when a bullet came through his window and ripped through the collar of his armored vest. He decided to continue working.

"This is me," he told a [Washington Post](#) reporter two weeks before his capture. "This is me."

Young's body was identified with that of Ronald J. Withrow, 40, of Roaring Springs, Tex. Withrow had worked for JPI Worldwide, a [Las Vegas](#)-based telecommunications company. He was reportedly seized Jan. 5 last year at another checkpoint staged by abductors, also near Basra.

"When they called and said they had identified the remains of Ronald Withrow and [John Young](#), I felt guilty because at the same time I breathed a sigh of relief," said Keri Johnson-Reuben, Paul Reuben's wife. "Then the next sentence out of her mouth, which made me physically sick, was that they've recovered three additional bodies and one that they were still attempting to recover."

Johnson-Reuben said she was barely able to eat for the next three days. "Then Wednesday at 8 p.m., the 26th, they came to my house and they told me, 'They have identified the remains of your loved one, [Paul Johnson-Reuben](#), and the remains of Joshua Munns.' At which point, I fell to my knees and threw up twice -- I had been throwing up since Friday. I was sick to the point where I hadn't eaten or drank anything, and my anxiety attack was so severe a friend took me to the hospital. I spent a couple hours in the ER."

On Saturday, Reuben's twin 17-year-old daughters, Bree and Casey, sat in the Comfort Inn lobby. Bree balanced her new baby on her lap. Casey said that in her last conversation with her father, he'd told her how he had narrowly escaped a car-bombing. His voice was trembling, she said.

"I was like, 'Dad, just quit your job right now, just leave.' And he said, 'No, I have to do one more mission.' And that one more mission cost him his life."

Staff researcher Julie Tate in Washington contributed to this report.