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Severed fingers of Redding man, other hostages surface in Baghdad

By Christina Jewett and Todd Milbourn - cjewett@sacbee.com

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The parents of a 25-year-old Redding man who is being held hostage in Iraq absorbed news of a gruesome development Wednesday: Their son's finger was among five received by U.S. officials in Baghdad.

Authorities confirmed Wednesday that Joshua Munns' finger and four others had been received, but would not say when or how. The FBI is investigating, but would not comment.

Munns' parents say that despite the discovery they are confident their son is alive.

"Moms have connections to their kids, and I just don't believe that he's not alive," said Munns' mother, Jackie Stewart, who lives in Ridgefield, Wash.

"We'll never give up on these kids," added Mark Munns, Joshua Munns' father, who lives in Redding. "They're too smart, they're too tough and they're good kids."

Munns was one of four Americans and one Austrian working for Crescent Security when they were kidnapped Nov. 16, 2006, in southern Iraq.

The men were seen in videos released in December 2006 and January 2007, but Wednesday's report was the first development in the case since then.

Authorities confirmed that the fingers belonged to Munns; Jonathan Cote of Gainesville, Fla.; Paul Johnson Reuben of Buffalo, Minn.; Bert Nussbaumer of Vienna, Austria; and Ronald J. Withrow, an American who was kidnapped separately from the others.

On the day of the attack, Munns was a gunman in a lookout vehicle escorting a convoy of 37 trailers across the Iraq desert, according to an account written by a former Crescent Security employee who escaped the kidnapping.

Jackie Stewart said Crescent Security provided the account to one hostage's family.

The convoy happened upon what they thought was a police checkpoint, contractor Andy Foord wrote. It turned out to be an ambush.

Militia members dressed as police and toting AK-47s dragged the Crescent employees from their SUV. They handcuffed the men, pushed their faces into the dirt and screamed, "You are going to die, (expletive)."

The witness narrowly escaped when there was no room in the getaway trucks.

The men were whisked away in pickups and not heard from until the first video was delivered to news organizations a month later. In both tapes, the men deliver scripted pleas to remove American troops from Iraq.

Stewart said she could stand to watch the video only a couple of times. To the average viewer, Munns appears deadpan and gaunt. To his mother he appears angry, she said.

"At this point, I'm concerned about his mental state, what he's been through," Stewart said.

Joshua Munns grew up in the small town of Anderson, near Redding, playing baseball and growing to a lanky 6 feet, 4 inches tall.

His mother said he exuded a kind of calm that attracted children and animals. He was engaged to a high school sweetheart who rescues dachshunds.

She said after her son shed his braces he stood out as a beaming, happy-go-lucky guy.

When he returned from his tour as a Marine Corps sniper in Iraq in 2005, though, Josh Munns spoke little about the experience.

"I noticed the smile was gone for a long time," she said.

Home from Iraq, Munns installed pools and lived with his fiancée in Redding. He was getting ready to enter a police academy in Nevada but went to work for Crescent Security in Iraq to earn just enough for a down payment on a home, Mark Munns said.

Since the kidnapping, the hostages' families have met to share information and participate in weekly briefings by the State Department.

"For 18 months, we've heard the same thing: 'There's nothing new,' " Munns said. "It's almost like it's not worth the dime to call."

The family members have begun to "pursue our own leads," he said, and one man went to Iraq in an unsuccessful effort to find the hostages.

Mark Munns said he hasn't heard any indication that the captors have demanded anything.

A twist in the case emerged when the Crescent Security report was released. Eyewitness Foord wrote that he recognized one of the masked militia members as a former Iraqi Crescent employee and surmised the group had been set up.

"This thing is so bizarre it's brilliant," Munns said. "No one can figure anything out."

Munns said the families of the hostages were abuzz early Wednesday with the first reports about the fingers from an Austrian news story. He said it's hard to sift the facts from the rumors about the men. Still, he remains hopeful.

"If anyone can get out of it, these young men can," Munns said. "They're that good. Other than that, prayer. God is it, we've got no choice."

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