

Escapee gives glimpse of captives' harsh lives

Three U.S. defense contractors held by Colombian guerrillas survive on small pleasures amid jungle harshness.

The Miami Herald
Jul. 11, 2007

U.S. captives in Colombia

- **Marc Gonsalves, 35:** Lived in Big Pine Key, Fla., originally from Bristol, Conn. He has one teenage daughter.
- **Keith Stansell, 43:** A Georgia native, he has twin boys born in Colombia after he was captured. He has two teenage children in the United States.
- **Thomas Howes, 54:** Grew up in Cape Cod, Mass., has a young son.

WASHINGTON --

Every night for 12 hours, the three U.S. civilian Pentagon contractors leftist Colombian guerrillas have held since 2003 are chained by their necks to each other or to a tree.

If the Americans behave, their captors remove the chains during the day. If they don't, the chains remain, sometimes for weeks. And if government troops approach, they're forced into long marches to flee the area, according to a Colombian who once shared their jungle prisons.

Police officer Jhon Frank Pinchao was held by guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, better known as FARC, for more than eight years. He escaped in April, and has been providing a rare glimpse into the harsh lives of Keith Stansell, Marc Gonsalves and Thomas Howes.

In an interview with The Miami Herald, plus other media accounts and court transcripts, Pinchao told of the monotony of a tightly regimented routine made slightly less intolerable by the camaraderie among the FARC's captives, some sports activities and occasional messages from loved ones.

Pinchao was in Washington to testify in the federal trial of Ricardo Palmera, a FARC leader also known as Simón Trinidad. A jury found Palmera guilty Monday of conspiracy to kidnap but failed to convict him Tuesday of terrorism and other charges.

U.S. prosecutors Tuesday offered to ask for a lighter sentence for Palmera if the three Americans are freed soon. The FARC is offering to release several dozen of its kidnap victims if the Colombian government frees 500 jailed rebels, among other demands.

Slender and dark-skinned, Pinchao, 34, shows few scars from captivity but struggles to remember dates. He was moved so often from one FARC camp to another that many events seem like a blur.

FIRST MEETING

Pinchao saw the three Americans for the first time about three years ago, in a camp the hostages called *Caño Caribe*. They stood out for their beefy builds and accents. The Americans were housed in a separate structure and had little interaction with Pinchao.

A few years later, Pinchao and the Americans were moved to a different camp where he learned that they were flying an anti-drug surveillance mission in 2003 in the FARC stronghold of southern Caquetá province when their plane crashed.

Howes was the pilot, while Stansell handled the electronic equipment that detected coca-processing labs and Gonsalves took aerial photos. Another American and a Colombian were killed on the ground by the FARC. The Americans were civilian employees of a subsidiary of Pentagon contractor Northrop Grumman.

After a period of separation, the Americans and Pinchao were taken to yet another camp and spent several months together before he escaped. When they arrived, the Americans looked weary from a two-week trek through the jungles. Stansell complained of back problems and Gonsalves came down with hepatitis, which the guerrillas treated with a diet low on salt and sugar.

The group of victims held in that camp included Ingrid Betancourt, a former Colombian presidential candidate. The 13 hostages lived in a jungle clearing just off a river, Pinchao said.

Betancourt was treated harshly because of her "feisty" personality, he added. Just before he escaped, she was chained round-the-clock for arguing with a guard. He told the Colombian media that she tried to escape five times, and that the guerrillas did not allow her to communicate with the Americans. Despite her harsh treatment, Betancourt, 45, was in good health, exercised a lot and read.

The Americans entertained their fellow prisoners and guards with family anecdotes and said they yearned to go back to their old jobs, Pinchao told The Miami Herald.

He added that relations between the guards and hostages were "what you would expect" given the circumstances: correct but distant. He has told Gonsalves' mother, Jo Rosano, that her son had learned Spanish and befriended one of his guards.

The highlights of the prisoners' lives are the predawn programs by commercial radio stations that broadcast messages from relatives of kidnap victims. Each captive is allowed to carry a transistor radio, but it is taken away if security forces are nearby.

"The only thing that made us happy was hearing from our families," Pinchao said.

CHAINS REMOVED

The chains were removed at 6 a.m. After a quick coffee, there was time to read, write or play some sports. Breakfast was usually chocolate milk and soup or corn bread, he said. Bathrooms were trenches dug in the jungle.

Lunch consisted of pasta or rice and beans. Once or twice a week they were given fish, and on rare occasions, meat. They got some wine on special occasions, like Christmas. And in the afternoon, the captives were allowed to swim in nearby rivers or water tanks and sometimes played volleyball.

The Americans taught the other captives English for an hour every day. Howes told jokes and was a good swimmer. Stansell was the chattiest, and Gonsalves "had a warm heart," Pinchao said.

At 6 p.m., the captives were again chained at the neck in pairs, six feet apart. Their evening entertainment: the radio. They slept in hammocks or improvised beds known as *chontas*.

Howes took in a dog, which the group named Tula. She smelled so bad, Pinchao said, that one of the captives preferred to use a scarce ration of shampoo on the dog rather than himself.

CAPTURE

Pinchao was captured on Nov. 2, 1998, when a FARC unit overran his police station in Mitú, deep in the Colombian Amazon in the southeast.

His treatment by the FARC wasn't too bad at first. But after hard-line President Alvaro Uribe stepped up military operations against the rebels in 2002, the prison regimen became harsher, Pinchao said. He was moved from jungle camp to camp every three to six months.

Pinchao, whose son was born soon after he was captured, said he planned his escape for two years. He found a way to break his chain, waited for a rainy night and took off. After wandering in the jungles for 17 days, he stumbled, dehydrated and hungry, onto a government security outpost not far from where he had been captured almost nine years before. Uribe has appointed him "ambassador of the hostages."

Asked how he made it through his long captivity, Pinchao said, "The will to live allows you to bear difficult situations."