

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH MARC GONSALVES AND TOM HOWES,
AMERICAN CONTRACTORS HELD HOSTAGE BY FARC IN COLOMBIA, VIA TELECONFERENCE TIME:
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LIEUTENANT JENNIFER CRAGG, (Office of the Secretary of Defense for
Public Affairs): I'd like to welcome you all to Department of Defense's
Bloggers Roundtable for Thursday, March 26, 2009. My name is Lieutenant
Jennifer Cragg, with the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs,
and I'll be moderating this call today.

A note to the bloggers on the line. Please clearly state your name and
the blog or organization you're with prior to asking your questions.

Today our guest is Marc Gonsalves -- if I said that right -- and we are
expecting to have Tom Howes and Keith Stansell on the line in a little bit. And
they're going to talk about their time in captivity with the FARC.

They crashed in the mountainous jungle of Colombia on February 13th,
2003 -- that's probably somebody calling in right now -- and were held captive
by FARC for the next five years. They recently coauthored a book, "Out of
Captivity: Surviving 1,967 Days in the Colombian Jungle." And they will also
speak about their experiences and receiving the Medal of Freedom. This is the
civilian equivalent to the Purple Heart.

With that, I'm going to ask who just recently joined, and I will
turn it over to Marc in a second. Who's joining us?

MR. HOWES: This is Tom Howes.

LT. CRAGG: Great. We were just talking about you.

MR. HOWES: Yeah. I'm a little late. Sorry.

LT. CRAGG: That's okay. I told Marc that more than likely you would
be calling in when I went to my introductions, which is great. And I'm sure that
Keith -- he's -- I don't know if he's on the line yet, but if he does, we'll go
ahead and introduce him.

So without further ado, I'll turn it over to Marc, if you'd like to
start with an opening statement. And then, Tom, you can follow if you'd like.
Please, the floor is yours, gentlemen.

MR. GONSALVES: Okay, great. This is Marc, and I just wanted to say thank you to all of you for having us on. I consider it a pleasure and an honor to be able to participate in this bloggers roundtable.

And I'll just begin by talking about -- about our experience and what we were doing in Colombia. The three of us were working for a company called Northrop Grumman. It's a -- a big aerospace company, and we were contracted by the DOD to perform a counternarcotics mission in South America.

So we were based out of Bogota, Colombia. And we would receive target packages right out of the Colombia embassy, and we would go ahead and fly those targets, collecting data, whatever kind of intelligence we could, against those targets. And those targets usually were drug laboratories, narco-traffickers, clandestine air strips -- anything that had anything to do with the production or the movement of drugs.

So one day back in February of 2003, we were on a routine mission. We actually weren't working targets yet. We were flying en route to a forward operating location where we would be able to pick up some more fuel. And as we were -- just as we were crossing a mountain range, we experienced an engine failure and were forced to crash-land. There were five of us onboard that airplane. There was four Americans and we also had one host-nation rider. We were always accompanied by one -- one national, one Colombian, as a representative, on each mission.

We were flying over these mountains when the engine quit, and my first thought when I heard of the -- that we had had an engine failure was that we were going to probably die in a plane crash in the mountains. Tom can explain better than me, but -- (audio break) -- the pilot at the stick was very experienced.

And he found a clearing -- a very -- a small clearing that was located on the slope of one of the mountains. And he decided to put us there. We crash-landed and all of us survived.

The impact was violent. The fuselage of the airplane was ripped open. Tom and Tommy Janis, the pilots, were both rendered unconscious, while Keith, myself and Sergeant Cruz, the Colombian host nation rider in the back of the airplane, we didn't -- we didn't go unconscious, but we were -- we were banged up. Like I said, it was very violent.

On exiting the airplane, we were greeted with the sound of gunfire. And we were -- immediately saw that we were being -- being attacked, basically, by a group of rebels, a group that call themselves the FARC. They're a terrorist group. They claim to be in revolution against the Colombian government. And in their luck, and against our luck, we crashed right in a middle of a group of these people. It was only minutes before they were there. They had us and they began to take us away at gunpoint.

Tom wasn't even -- he was conscious at that point, but I don't think he had any recollection of what was happening until minutes later. And I'll turn it over to you, Tom.

MR. HOWES: Yeah, I -- my left shoulder -- this is Tom Howes. My left shoulder slipped out of the shoulder belt and -- on impact, and I swung around and hit my head on the support between the windshield and the side window, and I was knocked unconscious.

Keith, after the crash, came up to take us out of the cockpit, and he thought I was dead, initially. But little by little, I came back to life.

And when my memory came back, I was a prisoner of the FARC. I'd already been strip-searched and there were people -- FARC with AK-47 rifles on either side of me and I was looking up at the -- a Minigun of a Colombian army helicopter. And that began the period of captivity.

There was a -- basically a 24-day march. Am I on? Can people hear me?

LT. CRAGG: Yes. Yes, sir. MR. HOWES: Okay. Yeah. Yeah, I had some funny noises there.

We started a 24-day march in captivity. And early into the march, we were separated from the pilot, Tommy Janis, as, you know, Marc described, did an incredible job keeping us alive on the -- you know, deciding to -- for the -- go for the clearing and to land in this little postage-stamp piece of ground on a slope with a sheer cliff on the far end.

And we came to rest just short of the cliff.

But as I say, after becoming captives of the FARC, we'd been separated from Tommy and the Colombian, Sergeant Cruz. They were separated out, and later it was confirmed that they were murdered -- assassinated by the FARC. And the leader of the group, Sonia (sp), said, "I killed Tommy myself" -- or "I killed him myself" -- kind of a little bit of bravado in front of our troops, I think.

And she said she'd kill us if they found any locator devices or the famous microchip in our blood, because they thought we were straight out of an American movie scene and we could -- would have microchips to identify, you know, our location in our blood, and all sorts of other movie-type things.

The march itself was incredibly difficult. We quite often had to kind of huddle together at night, sleeping on a cold rock or just on the muddy ground to survive the night, to keep enough body heat to make it through the night.

The -- our feet were soon bloodied up. Keith had a couple broken ribs that every time they would start to recover a little bit on the march, he'd either fall off of a horse or something would happen and he'd be in severe pain. His digestive system had stopped working on the crash, and he slowly went downhill for lack of nutrition and dehydration. He had diarrhea, vomiting; and finally got to the point where they -- we didn't know if they would shoot him or not because he couldn't go on.

So -- but we were apparently the three big fish from, you know, the other country, and they were going to try to preserve our lives. And plus I think they kind of marveled at Keith, being a big, rugged ex-Marine; the military appearance that looked like he'd just stepped out of one of the American movies. So they decided to throw him in a hammock and tie it to a pole and proceed up the mountain, carrying him -- but an incredibly difficult march that we didn't realize at the time was just going to be one of many to come.

But the real pain for me started once we arrived at what we called a fixed camp and we had time to rest up and realize the severity of our situation. In our mind -- my mind, I started to eat myself alive, realizing that this was going to be a long but -- possibly a very long, difficult period in the most

difficult of conditions. You know, we were basically locked in a -- in some boxes. Marc and Keith didn't have any windows, just some cracks on the walls. Wasn't long after that that they bombed the area close by, where we had the shockwave from the bombs rattling the leaves around our (hutches ?).

And that was a -- you know, again, into the odyssey. And little by little, mentally, we grew calluses on our brains where we became prisoners. And that was a normal life for over five years -- almost five-and-a-half years.

MR. GONSALVES: Yeah, it was something that was very shocking at first, because we were -- you know, we come from the United States, and really, Keith and I didn't even speak Spanish at the point of the accident. Luckily for us, Tom did, and he served for quite a while as our -- as our translator, relaying to us everything that the -- all the orders that the guerrilla would give to us.

But besides the language barrier, there was also a cultural barrier there. To me it was like landing on a different planet, and it's -- everything seemed backwards to me. The behavior of the guerrilla, the food, the jungle itself being such a difficult place to live, you know: quickly learned maneuvering in the jungle is quite hard.

The jungle's filled with things that will pierce, poke, cut you; sting you; tangle up your feet or your head, and just -- it just seems to come life and try to grab you and prevent you from moving in it.

And I would watch how these young guerrillas had become accustomed to this and were able to maneuver and to build things with nothing more than just a machete. But --

LT. CRAGG: But Marc --

MR. GONSALVES: Oh, go ahead.

LT. CRAGG: Oh, no, no, I just wanted to -- you know, just to stop you right there. I don't know if Keith joined us, but I want to at some point turn it over to the bloggers, so they can get -- ask some questions of you all.

MR. GONSALVES: Sure.

LT. CRAGG: Did Keith come on the line? (Pause.)

MR. HOWES: Doesn't sound like it.

LT. CRAGG: Doesn't sound like it? Okay. Well, for now, Marc and Tom, I'm going to turn it over to the bloggers, and we'll continue this discussion. And thank you so much for everything so far.

MR. HOWES: Okay.

LT. CRAGG: So we're going to turn over to David, and then we'll go to Beth and then to Bryant. So David, please go ahead with your first question.

Q Hi. This David Axe with War Is Boring. So my question might seem kind of -- I don't know -- inappropriate, but I just --

MR. : (Laughs.)

Q -- what I'm really curious about is how you deal with the boredom of --

MR. HOWES: It's incredibly painful, the boredom. I mean, at first you don't know how -- I didn't know how to handle it, and I watched Marc taking an hour with a toothbrush to clean the mud out of the treads of his boots that the moment you put them on, you fill with mud again. And I marveled at how he could pass an hour of time and get through a painful hour by doing anything, and I copied him. I'd go and I'd clean the mud out of my treads just to pass the that hour and not think about how desperate the situation was.

But with time, we learned trick after trick after trick. I could travel in my mind. I would pick the most pleasurable possible things and just dream, daydream, about them for hours and hours, or I would plan my day. I'd make a huge thing out of washing a shirt and a pair of pants, and I'd plan out details on the most simple basic thing of washing a pair of pants. I would make a big thing out of anything to eat that time up, because when I find myself -- found myself doing nothing, it was this horrible pain, this desperate pain that you felt. And I would do anything, any game I could play to get out of it.

And chess was one of those actual games that we played for hundreds and hundreds of hours, because we would get so wrapped up in a chess game that we weren't mentally prisoners, we were free.

And the only thing that existed to us during that time was the chess game itself.

And when we were lucky enough to get books, it would be the same. I had a book I read 20 times, over 20. I read it out loud, probably annoying Marc and Keith. I tried to read it as quietly as I could to practice the pronunciation. I looked up every word.

Each person found their own little things to not dwell or wallow in the desperation -- the desperate situation we were in. By little by little, our brains grew that, like, hardness or the callous where we could get up and deal with it and we could just sit there and lollygag for the day, and we didn't need to have quite so many crutches to make it through the day because we were -- we had accommodated mentally to be actual prisoners, and that was -- as Keith and Marc would say, that became our normal life at that point.

This, you know, wasn't overnight. It wasn't months. I think it might have been even years. And probably we were still accommodating a little bit. But it's quite a process.

A good question, certainly not inappropriate.

Q What was the book?

MR. HOWES: It was, in Spanish, "El general en su laberinto." In English, it was "The General in His Labyrinth, by Garcia Marquez. And he's an older man, in his 80s now. And one of the most notable moments after being -- after the rescue was I got a call from him from Mexico. And I was really excited to hear from him. We talked for a while.

And he sent me an autographed copy of the book, which I treasure. And another person that's very dear to me gave me another copy of it. So I have one in Spanish and one in English right now. And that book had a history. Marc can

probably tell you better than me. But I would try to throw it away, I would give it away, I would abandon it, and it kept coming back for years. And just -- just four months before the rescue, I finally threw it in a trench and put dirt -- or mud on top of it, and that was the end of the book.

Q Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Let's go over to Beth. Beth, you're next. Q Marc and Tom, I want to thank you for joining us this morning. Last night I picked up the book to prepare for today's roundtable, and I have to tell you I couldn't read -- finish the book last night, I was so gripped, and I had to put it down.

So I admire your strength of characters and your resolve to survive. I was really impressed with the fact that you survived this long.

Can you tell me what it was like, that moment when you were rescued, and how your reentry has been?

MR. GONSALVES: You know, I think each one of us had a slightly different perspective of -- well, really of the entire experience. That's, I think, one of the reason that -- one of the things that interesting about our book, because it's told in each one of our voices and in a slightly different perspective.

But I remember and I'll never forget the day of our rescue, because it came as such as a surprise when we were reunited with a couple other groups of hostages. It was 15 of us total. And we were moved to a building that was out in a clearing, and this is something that's -- that was something really we appreciated, to be out from underneath the jungle and to be able to see the light and to be able to see the sky and to be able to look -- see something that was further away than five meters, you know, because your visibility in the jungle is just so limited.

And that morning, the sound of the helicopters, which almost always meant death to us suddenly changed when we saw these big, gigantic machines orbiting overhead and they were painted white and orange, and just the feeling of excitement, wondering, what is this for? Are we finally going to be released? You know, we had heard of a couple other hostages who had been released in the year before us -- or before this. And so there was that hope. What's this all for?

We were moved to a field across -- across -- on the other side of the river that -- where we were staying, and one of those helicopters came into that coca field and landed right there. And a group of humanitarian aid workers -- supposed humanitarian aid workers -- exited the helicopter and they came and started to talk with the -- with the guerrilla and they were greeting each other. And one of those aid workers came to us, the hostages. He was wearing these small, rectangular glasses. And he spoke in Spanish and he said that he was a medical doctor, and he asked if any of us had any immediate problems, and then asked if we were ready to fly -- if we were well enough to fly.

And there was just emotion amongst the entire group. And when you're in a situation of isolation like that, I think we're tuned in to each other's feelings more than anything. And I -- the energy, the feeling of hope and of excitement that was coming from all of us was quite powerful. There was a couple people who were actually in tears, thinking this is the moment of our freedom.

But then there was a surprise when those humanitarian aid workers started to tie our hands together. And each one of us took that as a sign in a different way. I thought it was a bad signal, when they wanted to tie us up. And I refused to let them tie me.

And one of these aid workers came up to me. And Keith was standing next to me. And his hands were already tied. And this gentleman walked over to us. And he had the look of a Hollywood movie star.

His hair was bleach-blond. He had a dark, five-o'clock-shadow beard. He was wearing shaded Ray-Ban sunglasses. He had a bandanna tied around his wrist. He had some jewelry like some earrings and little necklaces and stuff he was wearing.

And he came up to us. And he spoke in English. And he said his name was Daniel and he was from Australia. And it was obvious he didn't have an Australian accent when he spoke in English.

Keith questioned his credentials. And he said, look, we are here to help you, this is for good. And I asked him and said, look, is this for our release, is this for our freedom? And he said, yes. And I said, well, when? And he said, I can't tell you, I don't know. And then he lifted his Ray-Ban sunglasses and he looked at me. And he said, just trust me.

So at that point, I let him tie my hands together and got on the helicopter. And as soon as that helicopter lifted off, it was loaded with 15 hostages, the humanitarian aid group and only 2 guerrillas.

And it wasn't -- it was -- we were just lifted off. I don't think the clamshell door was even shut yet, when there was just chaos on the helicopter. There were just bodies flying. And I thought that a fight had broken out, because of one of the other hostages that also resisted the tie-wraps. I thought that he just might have gone crazy and that there was a fight.

I looked and I saw one of the guerrillas with a pistol in his hand. And then I heard shouts, in Spanish, we're army, we're army. And every -- each one of us, I think, took that differently. When I heard the shouts, people shouting that they were the army, I didn't believe it. To me, it did not register.

And I looked over at the guerrilla that had the pistol. And I could see all of these humanitarian aid workers subduing him. They were -- they took the pistol away from him. They were trying to tie him in tie-wraps. And he was fighting and resisting them. And that's when I realized that it was true, they were the army, and a miracle had just happened. We had been rescued.

MR. HOWES: If I could add a couple things about the rescue, God, still it's fascinating to me.

I think they wrote three books on it in Colombia.

But some time before, Ingrid Betancourt showed up in our camp, kind of out of the -- out of the blue, and we understood that that was a -- kind of a test command by the good guys, by the Colombian government. They had inserted orders into the FARC hierarchy, and they carried them out, and they put Ingrid in with the three Americans. And that was the basis for getting us out of

there, by being able to inject orders into that terrorist organization that -- and again, it's a communist, military terrorist organization where you follow orders or get severely disciplined or die.

So the order was given to get a -- get a group of prisoners together, total of 15, and they would be transported by helicopter to another location to see the top dog, the top commander of the FARC, and a foreign -- I don't know, humanitarian. We weren't sure what kind of organization -- again, a bogus order.

They were scared. They didn't like it -- in my opinion, anyway; I can't say for sure -- but my opinion is, from what I -- and the little interaction we had with our concentration-camp commander, I am assuming he did not like that order at all, but he followed it, just by that hard-line chain of command. They left all their troops behind, and two of the -- the top commander, the front commander of that zone, and our concentration-camp commander, who had a high standing in that front, climbed on board the helicopter, almost totally disarmed. I know their long guns were taken away. I think one pistol -- I think just one pistol got on board with Cesar, the front commander. And he was disarmed in the struggle.

And I was trying to calm down a friend of mine, a young policeman, a very decent guy named John Jairo Duran that had always calmed me down and said, you know, "Tom, don't get along with the FARC. I tried it. They were getting to the point where they said they would kill me one night.

And I decided" -- he said to me, he said, "I decided that, you know, it's better to get along and get a couple little extras and not -- you know, save your moments where the security will be lowered and your life won't be in such a high threat."

And here he is on the helicopter, and here's a young guy that maybe has never flown in his life, I don't know, but not -- certainly not in the last 10 years, because he had been a prisoner for over 10 years. He has really had it. I mean, he had gone over his limit.

And so I'm trying to calm him down, you know, saying, "Hey, we haven't been on a flying machine in five and a half years; this can't be bad. It may not be great, but we may get something as big as a radio or get to talk to some foreigner." Anything would have been huge to us. I didn't expect a rescue. But he calmed down and they -- we were -- he allowed them to tie wrap his ankle. So we had ankles tie wrapped and wrists tie wrapped.

And when the helicopter broke ground, he lunged forward at the front commander, and I thought, oh, my God, he's at it again, I better, you know, kind of hold him back. And it was just a blur for me. And he had realized at that point, and I hadn't, that it was a take-down.

And at the moment of, you know, take-off for the helicopter, all the bodies began to fly and there was just, you know, flying bodies throughout the cabin of the helicopter. And in the middle of that I heard, like Marc said, the Colombian army. And I felt like some of the time in captivity my brain would go into slow motion and it would take a while to react to things, but it was immediate, where it was like an arrow that penetrated the center of my brain, said "It's over" in a split second. Five and a half years is ended in less than a second. It was just the instant I heard those words.

And from then on -- I have repeated this many times to many people, but I'd look at my watch in a half an hour, an hour, an hour and a half, and I'd always go back and think, okay, I know we're free, but am I sure? I've had dreams longer than this; a half-an-hour dream I've dreamed longer than that. An hour. I could have had dreams that have stretched longer than that. And that was my yardstick to measure. I wanted to get to a point where I couldn't possibly have had a dream longer than this period of freedom that we're feeling, so I could just -- a hundred-percent sure that it was reality. You can't imagine when you have little hope for so long and suddenly it's over in a heartbeat, you end up in a euphoria that, for me, I didn't ricochet off the surface of the Earth for about a month and a half.

I just floated in a euphoric condition for that long. But you always come back to reality, I think. So that's -- (chuckles) -- and we all have.

Q And how has return and reunion been? How has your reentry into your former lives been?

MR. GONSALVES: I think we're really fortunate with that, because we were treated as if we were active-duty military. We were immediately flown to San Antonio and we were asked if we wanted to enter into a reintegration program. And it's a program that they took from the Vietnam era, which is devised -- was devised to help the prisoners of war re-acclimate to civilization again. And so each one of us went ahead and did it.

It was -- you know, it was a clear positive choice to go in and let the doctors review us. We had full medical checks, psychological checks. We had -- each one of us had a psychological team assigned to us as well as medical doctors. And we just basically took baby steps into reality.

One of the first things we did was made contact with each one of our families, and we -- and then we later had short visits with our family members. And each day, we would take another step towards civilization. We would go out into town, go to a restaurant. I'll never forget the day we went to the Harley Davidson shop.

And then after about nine days, we went home. And we've been, again, just re-acclimating. I, myself, just started -- I just came back to work last week. That's when I came off of my high cloud, my euphoric cloud. It was time to -- time to go back and start producing again.

So -- but it's been, as Tom always calls it, the five and a half years of our captivity was a real lesson in appreciation for all things in life. I remember about a week after coming home I had to go to the hospital and have an MRI done on my back, on my injury from the plane crash. And I was told by the -- by their office to arrive a half hour early, which I did. I was actually a little earlier than that.

But by the time they actually saw me and had me -- and put me in the MRI machine, I had been waiting for two-and-a-half hours. But I think the people there must have just thought I was crazy, because while I was waiting there in that -- in that waiting room, they had a little TV screen, and I was watching Phelps in the Olympics winning all the gold medals, and I was just so happy. You know, I was just so happy to be there.

And then when I got -- I got to the room, the MRI room, and I was inside that machine, the assistant asked if I'd be okay, you know, sitting there

and not moving, and I said, "You know what? It'll be easy." And I just sat there. And I hear -- I was listening to the "Whap-whap-whap" sound of the MRI as it's taking its photos, and I was just thinking, "This is incredible. You know, only three weeks ago, I was in the jungle. I was chained by the neck to Keith. And now, here I am, you know, in just split seconds," like Tom described, "taken out of that environment and brought back to where I belong, back here in the United States."

LT. CRAGG: Let's -- thank you, sir. Let's go ahead and get to Bryant, and then also, Tech Sergeant Randall. They haven't had a chance to ask any questions.

Bryant, let's go ahead.

Q Hi. It's Bryant Jordan, military.com. I want to ask you about these people who took you prisoner. How -- you said they were communist guerrillas, but how -- were they -- are they real communists, or were this just a fig leaf over basically drug running?

MR. HOWES: Well, let me -- I'll take that one. Marc, you can add or chime in on that, also. (Chuckles.)

MR. GONSALVES: Okay.

MR. HOWES: My opinion is that it probably started out with a -- you know, the -- a philosophy I don't think we care much for, the communist philosophy, you know, and it came -- sprung out of the poverty -- maybe before the '50s but, you know, back in the '50s I know Marulanda became a player. He was a top FARC. And in '64, they officially, as far as I know, became the FARC, Forcas Armadas Revolucionarias da Colombia.

I think maybe in the early days they had the actual philosophy intact, but they found themselves one of the clandestine armies that were in the biggest cocaine production area in the world. But they had become, I think, contaminated before that with extortion, murder, theft, kidnapping. And then you throw in the -- this incredible drug industry.

And the philosophy they still play out to the lowest-ranking members, and they swallow it, but it's basically -- it's converted into an absolute criminal organization. And you see the hypocrisy throughout the organization when the -- you know, they look for equality; the communists, you know, share everything; blah-blah-blah- stuff. It sounds good on paper.

And in reality, with human nature, it's -- you see people that grab control in every little camp. And they rule it with an iron fist.

The people beneath them have no freedom whatsoever. They sign up for life. There's no escape. It's basically slavery. They'll be asked to work any time, day or night, any task that the boss asks. And you do it till you either take a bullet or you just wear out, where you're unable to do anything.

If you try to escape, if they catch you, they'll kill you. If you get to a village, it could be a FARC village, they'll kill you. They'll kill your family.

You could be so lucky maybe as -- the best you could hope for, I think, is to have no family members, although I'm not sure they actually have that much

luck, going after the family members, but to have no family members and get to a big city. And that would be the ideal thing, for a FARC member.

You know, I'd tell them that, you know, the only hope -- there's no future in this organization. It's criminal, it's death, it's slavery. The only hope is reinsertion. And I know that the Colombian government -- it's hard to fulfill every promise they make.

But if the message gets to these guys, I'd like to tell them that maybe they don't fulfill every promise, but at least you have a life. And they're making a huge attempt to reinsert these people into a normal civilian life again. And that's their only hope for civilization.

There is no hope for civilization in that organization. It's corrupt from the top to the bottom, the bottom to the top. The philosophy is dead. They're a cancer on the face of Colombia and the region.

MR. : And I think that the leadership of the FARC, they know that the ideology is gone. That's not what they're after. But they cling to it, because it serves two wonderful purposes.

Just as Tom's describing, they're able to recruit these young troops by selling them this dream of utopia. And they basically make a promise: Hey, come on and fight for us, and we're going to have true equality, fairness; you're not going to have to work; everyone's going to get paid the same. So these young, ignorant kids, they have no education. They're easily tricked into doing this. But the other side of it is, and the other purpose that this cover story serves is, that's just what it is, like you asked, a fig leaf.

It is, it's a cover story. And by it, they hide behind their actions. And they try to justify their crimes by saying, hey, we do this; we extort people for money because we view them as enemies of the revolution. Or we are trafficking drugs because we need to fund the revolution. We're fighting for the good cause.

But again, you know, just like you said, it is a fig leaf. It's not reality. You know, please, show me one positive thing that the FARC has done for Colombia.

MR. HOWES: There's nothing.

MR. GONSALVES: There's none.

LT. CRAGG: And Tech Sergeant Randolph, do you have any follow-on questions?

Q Good morning. Yes, ma'am, I do. This is Tech Sergeant Monique Randolph from Air Force Live blog. First, it's kind of a two- part question. The first one is, who were the first Americans that you came into contact with after your rescue, and what was that meeting like? And then, also, how did it feel to step off that C-17 on American soil for the first time?

MR. HOWES: Well, I -- I'd like to -- I missed the first part of that question, so I'll answer the second. There was a General Keith Huber, just a wonderful man, an Army general in charge of the base out there where we ended up at the medical center, Brooke's Army Medical Center. And you know, he had an interesting comment, or question, for us a few days later. He said, "Do you

guys know what you were talking about when you walked into the hospital?" You know, and we said, "No. God knows what we were talking about. We were just in the euphoric stage." And he said, "You guys marveled at how flat the floors and walls were."

And I thought about that quite a bit. It's kind of -- to give you a reality check -- how far we were off this planet for so long, that we would marvel at something basic -- as basic as a flat floor and a flat wall. We had been -- as Marc said, we were on the "planet of the apes" for five-and-a-half years. It was a totally different planet that we -- we had escaped, or been rescued from. I don't know if that answers your question, but --

MR. GONSALVES: I'll try to answer the first part. First contact with Americans, I think, for each one of us was after coming off the -- the helicopter in which we were rescued, we were then guided to a jet -- the ex-presidential jet, Colombian presidential jet, and we were loaded onto that aircraft. And at the entryway of the stairs leading to the door, there was a couple of -- of U.S. Army Special Forces soldiers there as guards. And that was the first American that I had contact with. And I remember the sight of that beautiful flag patched on his shoulder, and I just remember feeling an immense amount of pride to see and to talk and to hear the voice of another American again. It was a(n) overwhelming emotion.

Q Okay. Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: And with that, we're running out of time.

But I wanted to turn the floor back over to Marc and Tom, if you'd like to close with any closing thoughts. And I'll get back with the bloggers that are on the line in case they any -- they had any follow-on questions. I'll pass them to (Brie ?). So with that, Marc or Tom, if you want to close with some thoughts.

MR. HOWES: (Off mike) -- say just one thing. There were two FARC that were captured during our rescue. Enrique (got those ?) aliases and nicknames for him and Cesar, the front commander.

There's a recent Supreme Court decision not to extradite the two for crimes related to our kidnapping, and we feel sad about that -- or sad and disappointed, I guess, is a better word -- because I'd like to see, when Americans are kidnapped -- and really, anybody kidnapped anywhere -- they face justice.

Revenge I don't have time for. I look for a positive life. But justice, I think, is important for the crimes that'll happen in the future, or maybe to avoid some. And any kidnapping that can be avoided saves a huge amount -- avoids a huge amount of misery.

I would have liked to have seen those two brought to justice here in the United States for -- long term, sending a signal to the world, "Hey, you do the crime, you will face justice." I also feel sad for Colombia, because I love the country, as I've said many times. I love the people. There's a very small percentage that are criminals in the country that stain the reputation of the rest. And I would like to see those that commit the crimes in Colombia face justice -- adequate justice -- not disappear into the jungle and commit the same crimes all over again a short time later, as has been the case with some of the people that have been on the extradition list to the United States.

And I'm a thrifty guy. I don't like to waste the money on them. But what price do you put on freedom, is the old saying. You have to -- you have to protect your freedom. And sending the message out you don't do that to Americans, Colombians or anybody, that's what has to be done.

MR. GONSALVES: I would just like to close out, as a person who has worked for or with the DOD in one form or another, I just want to remind all the listeners, viewers, that sometimes, you know, I realize when you're working at your desk or wherever it is, you may lose sight or forget that there is a real enemy out there.

And, you know, just as a reminder, as somebody who's lived and breathed it, you know, there is an enemy out there. That's why we're here and we're doing what we do. And, you know, just never forget, when you're working your mission, whatever it may be, that it's real, that it's important, you know, and that we need you. Because here, you know, in this country, we want to stay free and we're counting on you guys.

I think that I'm very proud to be back here, in the United States, very, very proud of our military. And every time I have the opportunity to work with them or be a part of the mission, you know, it's just a great honor. And again just wanted to thank you all for having us today.

MR. : And I'd like to just say for one second also that, you know, they make heroes out of us. We're not the heroes. But heroes are the ones that quite often go about their business in the military. And they do the job and walk away quietly. And nobody hears about anything they've done.

There were a group of them that stepped off that helicopter in Colombia. There's a lot of them in this country. And we never had a clue to what extent that everybody in the military, in the U.S. and Colombia, did for us during that process. And my heartfelt thanks go out, to everyone in the U.S. military and all those in the Colombian military, for everything they've done for us.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you to both Tom and Marc for being our guests today, on the DOD Bloggers Roundtable for this Wednesday, March 26th. Just a note: The story will be available on the Bloggers page, off of Defense Link, as well as the transcript from the call and the audio file.

Thank you, gentlemen. And thank you to the bloggers on the line.

END.