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RISE AND FALL
OF A
DRUG SMUGGLER

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ALSO BY WILLIAM NORRIS

Nonfiction

A Talent to Deceive

The Man Who Fell from the Sky

Willful Misconduct

Fiction

The Badger Game

Make Mad the Guilty

A Grave Too Many

WHEN PIGS FLY

EVEN BEFORE THE pig flew over the windshield, Andrew Barnes knew he had made a mistake. This was not the runway he was looking for. It wasn't a runway at all. The brown strip rushing towards him in the landing lights of the twin-engine Rockwell Turbo Commander was nothing more than a rutted country lane. The flickering lights that he had taken as threshold markers were actually the headlamps of an ancient truck, jolting along and minding its own business.

"Oh, shit," said Andrew Barnes.

There was no going back. Flaps extended, nose high, the Turbo Commander was committed to landing. The engines screamed in fine pitch as they swallowed the last few gallons of fuel in the tanks. The stall-warning horn blared in protest. On the ground, an astonished Colombian farmer stood on his brakes and lurched into a ditch as the monstrous shape skimmed the roof of his truck and struck the road only yards ahead.

"Hang on tight," shouted Barnes. Paralyzed with fear, his two passengers hardly needed to be told. With a spine-jarring jolt, the main wheels touched and stayed down as the fully

stalled aircraft fell out of the sky. The nose dropped, and they watched with horrified fascination through the windshield as the Turbo Commander began a wild charge down the track. Barnes fought for control, stabbing at brakes and rudder pedals, miraculously dodging the trees and bushes that flashed past the wingtips. And then the road turned. There was nowhere to go.

The aircraft left the path, crossed a ditch, smashed through a hedge, and hurled itself into a farmyard. Startled chicken scattered in all directions.

And a pig flew over the windshield.

With a final expensive crunch, the Turbo Commander plunged its nose into a wooden fence. And stopped.

ANDREW BARNES TOLD me that story on the first day we met. It was not a chance encounter. Some three weeks before I had had a telephone call from Michael Knipe, then foreign news editor of *The Times*. Michael, an old friend from my own days with that once-distinguished newspaper, was calling to do me a favor. At least, he hoped it was going to be a favor. He sounded a trifle nervous.

The Times man in New York, said Michael, had just been interviewing an odd character who was one of the witnesses in the cocaine-smuggling trial of Carlos Enrique Lehder Rivas, down in Miami. The witness was an Englishman, now living in Pennsylvania, who had an extraordinary tale to tell about the cocaine-smuggling business. Furthermore, he seemed to want it converted into a book and had asked the New York correspondent if he knew any good authors who might be interested. The message had been passed on to the Foreign Desk, and Michael had thought of me. Nice of him.

“What do you know about this guy?” I asked. Not a lot, it turned out. Just that his name was Barnes, that he had smuggled large quantities of cocaine for the Medellín Cartel, and he was probably heading for a lengthy spell in prison. From the sound of it, he deserved no less.

At this point I knew no more about the Medellín Cartel than the next man, merely what I had read in the press and seen on television. But it was enough to induce revulsion. By all accounts, these were unscrupulous crooks who had poisoned a continent and amassed a king’s ransom in the process. On the way, they had murdered scores of men who attempted to expose their conspiracy. And some of those men, I now remembered with an odd churning in the pit of my stomach, had been journalists. From the tone of Michael’s voice, clear across four thousand miles, I could tell he was thinking the same thing.

“Just thought you might be interested,” he said rather lamely. “I’ve got his telephone number if you want it.”

Why not? There was no harm in having the option. I scribbled down the number and sat looking at it pensively long after our conversation ended. I wondered about the personality of the man who lay behind that number, and I wondered even more about his associates. I had never met a drug smuggler, at least, not knowingly. Curiosity did battle with prudence, and for the moment, prudence won. I pushed the slip of paper to one side and got on with the rest of my life.

It was not a good time for authoring in the Norris household. In spite of splendid reviews for my last book and the sale of the film rights to Hollywood, there was no prospect of a commission for the next one. I was caught in the usual dilemma of the nonfiction writer: No publisher will sign a contract and pay an advance without a fully researched outline of the project. But research involves time and travel, and time and travel cost

money. That money ought to come from the publisher's advance—it is what advances are supposed to be for—but in practice you cannot get one without laying out large amounts of your own cash long before you see the check. Which is fine if you have it. It was not the first time I had been in this catch-22 situation, but try as I might I could find no way out of it. I ought, I thought, to give up the nonfiction trade and write novels instead. The trouble was, I was not very good at fiction.

My passion of the moment was the Lindbergh kidnapping case. Others, notably Ludovic Kennedy in his excellent book *The Airman and the Carpenter*, had proved conclusively that Bruno Richard Hauptmann was innocent of the crime, but no one had yet been able to identify the true guilty party. I believed I had a clue to his identity through newly discovered evidence, but believing it and proving it were two very different things.

For months, I had been chasing phantoms and spending money I could ill afford in pursuit of the final truth. I had even flown to Scotland to interview Betty Gow, the Lindbergh baby's still-surviving nursemaid, only to have the door literally slammed in my face. In the United States, too, hostility and evasion were greeting every inquiry. I knew I was on the right trail, and that given sufficient time and money, persistence would pay off in the end. Time, I had. Money was a different matter. As the days passed and the crock of gold at the end of my investigatory rainbow grew no closer, I found my eyes drawn more and more to the scrap of paper lying on my desk and the telephone number of Andrew Richard Barnes. Perhaps, after all, it was time to face reality, to put the Lindbergh project on the back burner, and to tackle something that, on the face of it, looked straightforward. Something, moreover, that ought not to cost an arm and a leg to research.

My long-suffering agent in New York was mildly

encouraging. My wife, faced with the prospect of her middle-aged husband associating with ruthless criminals, was appalled. Four years of exposure to American television violence did not help. "These people are worse than the Mafia," she said. "You could get yourself killed."

With some asperity, I pointed out that I had survived more dangerous assignments in the past. I had been under fire in Biafra, Zimbabwe, Angola, and Mozambique. I had been in the thick of the Paris riots in May 1968. By comparison, the prospect of rubbing shoulders with a drug smuggler was pretty small beer.

"You were younger and sillier then," she said.

That did it. I rooted out the scrap of paper and made the call.

Barnes seemed agreeable enough on the telephone, and more than willing to meet with me. The time and place could be of my choosing. I pondered the question. Aside from the fact that his house in Pennsylvania was a three-hour drive from my home in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, did I really want to stick my head in the lion's mouth at this first meeting? At least my own place boasted three large and faithful dogs of fearful mien, plus, as a last resort, the family firearm. There was the small problem of persuading my wife to accept a drug-smuggler as a houseguest, but I hoped, correctly as it turned out, that curiosity might win the day.

"Come for the weekend," I said.

During the intervening days, Betty and I speculated on what our guest would look like. Suave and sinister was the consensus of opinion. Probably slim and dark-suited, with a palpable air of menace. We were certainly unprepared for the shy giant of a man who unfolded himself from an ancient Ford Mustang in our driveway on that Saturday in late April.

Andrew Barnes was big. Very big. He looked down at us from a height of six-foot-three, and his chest strained at the

buttons of his jacket. There was some surplus fat there to be sure, but a hell of a lot of muscle underneath it. The face was bucolic. It was the sort of face that belonged on an English farm laborer, not on a drug smuggler. The eyes were blue and, God damnit, they had a sort of innocence about them.

Barnes came towards us, a battered leather case in one hand, brushing the hair from his eyes with the other. He wore it long with a pronounced fringe, as though in memory of the Beatles, and I became aware that the dogs had stopped barking. They were crowding round him, sniffing his legs and showing every sign of pleasure as he bent down to pat them. Great, I thought. The one time I invite a criminal to my home, and you silly bastards fawn all over him. But they were right. For all that he had done, and it was plenty, there was no harm, no violence in Andrew Barnes. A dog's judgment is not often wrong.

We shook hands, and I made a mental note that his grip was firm and dry. The hands themselves, though, were surprisingly small. Smaller than my own. It was as though they had stopped growing in his early teens, while the rest of his physique burgeoned into manhood. It was not the only thing about Andrew Barnes, I was to discover, that betokened arrested development.

His voice, too, was a surprise. I had expected an English accent, perhaps similar to my own. But what came out was a sort of mid-Atlantic twang, neither one thing nor the other, but more American than not. His speech, like his whole manner, was diffident. Courteous and gentlemanly—an odd word to use in this context, but totally appropriate—but with a sheepish air about him. As we stumbled through the formalities and finally sat down in my study to begin the first of many interviews, I came to realize that he was more nervous than I. Every few seconds he would take a comb and pass it through his perfectly

ordered hair, like an errant schoolboy facing his headmaster and wondering what to do with his hands.

But he could talk. Oh my, how he could talk. At first, as names and dates and places poured out in an unrelenting stream, I began to wonder if he was not too articulate. Was it possible that this was a well-rehearsed tale being recounted for my benefit, a fictional farrago concocted with the object of making big bucks out of the book? If so, I thought wryly, this guy is singularly ignorant about the rewards of authorship, let alone the Son of Sam laws.

Slowly, I came to realize two things. First, his astonishing power of recall was largely due to the fact that he had just spent weeks and months being grilled by agents from the FBI and the US Drug Enforcement Administration, not to mention sundry lawyers while he stood on the witness stand in Miami.

Second, and more important, Andrew Barnes was using me as a confessor. In terms of his atonement, going to jail and paying the price was not enough. He was inwardly driven to tell the story of his misdeeds in the utmost detail to the widest possible audience. There was no altruism in it. He was not out to educate the young and prevent them falling into the same trap.

At root, he neither knew nor cared whether his revelations would have any effect on the long-term future of the drug trade. All that mattered to Andrew Barnes at this point in time was to get the whole thing off his chest so that he might, one day, make a fresh start. In short, he needed to cleanse his soul.

I am no psychologist, still less a priest, and the reader must judge as the story unfolds whether such a public *mea culpa* is justified. When it comes to evil intent, having got to know Andrew Barnes rather well, I will vouch for the fact that he is not in the same league as the man he met on a Florida airfield on December 26, 1977.

A DEAL WITH THE DEVIL

“CALL ME JOE,” said the handsome young Colombian who greeted Barnes at Fort Lauderdale airport. It was not his real name. That, he said, was Rubin Montes. That, too, was a lie, but on that day, Andrew Barnes could not have cared less. Barnes was twenty years old with a wife, a baby son, and an ancient C-46 cargo plane that was eating him alive.

He was very, very broke. The important thing about Mr. Rubin Montes was not his name or his veracity, but the fifty hundred-dollar bills he was offering for Andrew’s services, with the promise of much more to come.

It had been a long time since Barnes had held that sort of money. He knew what he had to do for it, and that was fine with him. To fly down to Colombia, pick up a load of marijuana and return, seemed no big deal. Everyone was doing it. True, it was technically illegal, but that only mattered if you got caught. And Andrew, who knew a dozen ways of flying into Florida undetected, had no intention of getting caught. If the morality of drug smuggling bothered his conscience, it was a small voice and quickly stilled. At that moment in time, pursued by creditors and

with bankruptcy looming, Andrew Barnes would have struck a deal with the devil.

Which, in a way, is precisely what he did.

The name of the devil's agent was Charlie Bush, a rogue and scoundrel of the old school. To young Andrew Barnes, the sixty-five-year-old Charlie was a romantic father-figure, a self-taught pilot from the barnstorming days, who made his fortune wheeling and dealing in old airplanes after World War II. He was kind to Andrew, as Fagin was kind to Oliver Twist, and whenever the flier needed help or money, the doors of Bush Aviation on the southwest side of Fort Lauderdale International Airport were always open.

Charlie Bush's legitimate business was extensive. At any one time, up to two hundred aircraft could be found parked on his half-mile ramp. He repaired aircraft, large or small. He sold them, chartered them, and operated a cargo business back and forth between Florida and the Bahamas and Caribbean. He had six full-time employees, and sometimes as many as thirty temporary workers. For a man partially crippled by polio, it might have seemed enough to keep him busy, without engaging in anything more illicit. But not for Charlie Bush. Charlie, to quote Andrew Barnes, was "a savvy old cat."

If the young Englishman was suspicious, even before the introduction to Montes, that his benefactor was not all that he appeared, he could hardly afford to say so. His much-needed spare parts, even engines, were supplied on credit. His aircraft was fueled on the promise of payment later. The washing facility was free. Charlie was a crook, but it didn't show. Not at first. Why, the man was a pillar of the community. He had even signed on to a program that gave jobs to convicts on work release, acting as their parole officer. Why no one in authority ever realized that this was akin to

putting a fox in a chicken coop is one of life's greater bureaucratic mysteries.

Obligation was the name of the game. Charlie Bush had a simple philosophy: Be generous to young pilots and keep them in your debt. One day, the debt can be called in.

For Andrew Barnes, that time came on the day after Christmas 1977. Some weeks before, at the urging of Charlie Bush, he had taken his old C-46 to Canada. It was a journey of some necessity. The C-46 had been grounded with engine trouble, denying Andrew his only means of making an honest living, and Charlie, good old Charlie, had stepped in to help. He had guaranteed a \$33,000 note to enable Barnes to buy one reconditioned engine and borrowed the same amount on his own account to purchase a second.

Naturally, he had not done this for nothing: Andrew had to transfer the title of the aircraft to his name, and, just for good measure, Charlie slapped a \$60,000 lien on it. The sums did not add up. Andrew nurtured the unworthy suspicion that the old man had pocketed \$27,000 somewhere along the line. But he was in no position to argue.

Still, at least the C-46 was finally airworthy again. By now, however, the bank was shouting for its money, and Charlie got wind of the fact that a repossession crew was on its way. He told Andrew to take the airplane to Canada, and take a lawyer with him. There was just one thing he had to do before he went—take a check ride in a pressurized Aero-Commander. Charlie gave no explanation for this odd request, and Andrew did not ask. He went ahead and did it.

The bid to save the C-46 from the clutches of the bank was successful. Barnes obtained a restraining order from the Ontario Supreme Court, and the frustrated repossession crew who had pursued him to Canada were forced to leave empty-handed.

By now it was almost Christmas, and Andrew was anxious to be home with his family. He returned to Florida, arriving in Fort Lauderdale on Christmas Day, to find a message from Charlie Bush.

“Come at once and bring your overnight bag,” it said. “I’ve got some real good flying for you.”

Andrew went next morning. His wife, Barbara, drove him to the airport that day in the decrepit van that was their only transport.

And there he met Rubin Montes.

Montes, to preserve his alias for the moment, had been referred to Charlie Bush by a friend of Charlie’s named Lee Cameron from Burbank, California. Cameron ran his own fixed-base operation in Burbank, flying twin-engine Beechcrafts and DC-3s. Like many others in the aviation business, he knew that Bush was heavily involved with drug smugglers.

Though he had not been convicted at that time (he was to go to prison in 1986, at the age of seventy-four, after being caught with three kilograms of cocaine and \$100,000 in his car), Charlie was already selling and chartering aircraft to the smuggling fraternity, servicing them, and providing crews. He was clearly the man to supply Montes’s needs.

The Colombian already had an aircraft: a gaudily painted Rockwell Turbo Commander Shrike, with “Summit Trucking” emblazoned on the side. It was owned by Nestor Castrion, a Colombian of mixed Indian descent and a seasoned drug smuggler whose proudest claim was the paternity of thirty-two children.

Castrion was to accompany Montes on the drug run, taking with him a Christmas cargo of toys for his offspring, but neither could fly the plane. They needed a pilot.

Charlie Bush sold them the services of Andrew Barnes, who

had so thoughtfully been checked out on that very type of aircraft a few weeks before.

As far as Andrew was concerned, it was not a hard sell. Charlie knew the state of his finances down to the last blob of red ink. He also had good reason to believe that the young pilot would have little scruple about breaking the law.

Charlie explained the proposition: The load would be marijuana, and he would be paid \$50,000. For subsequent trips, there would be an increase of \$10,000 each time. The old man pushed a well-stuffed envelope across the scarred desk in his hangar office. "Give that to Barbara," he said. Andrew took the envelope to his wife, waiting in the van, and told her to count the contents.

The men drove to the other side of the airfield, where work was being carried out on the Turbo Commander. Charlie Bush had cautiously refused to have it standing on his own ramp, in case something went wrong and he should be implicated with the smuggling operation.

There was a fourth man in the group, a certain Larry Greenberger, who was to be responsible for the Florida end of the transaction. Greenberger was to unload the marijuana and drive it away from an airstrip at De Land, some miles inland from Daytona Beach. It was all arranged.

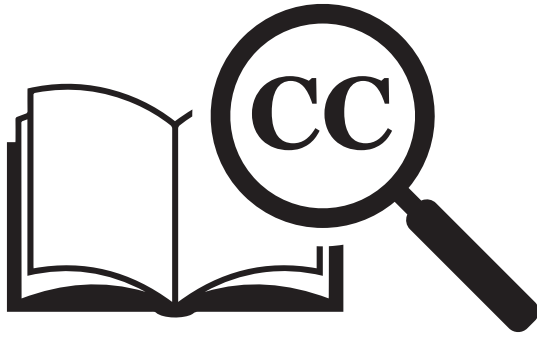
Montes was anxious to be off, but the Turbo Commander was not ready. Mechanics were installing a long-range tank inside the cabin to hold the 120 gallons of extra fuel necessary for the long flight, and the work was taking longer than expected.

Andrew was worried. It began to look as though they would be arriving in Colombia after dark, at which point he would be faced with the problem of landing on a small illegal airstrip of unknown location, length, and surface. It was downright

dangerous, and he said so, urging postponement of the trip until the next day. His suggestion was not well received.

Montes and Greenberger began to apply pressure. It had to be today, they said, or not at all. Government officials and the military in Colombia had been bribed to turn a blind eye when the “merchandise” was moved out to the airstrip; the owner of the strip had been paid \$100,000. If the flight did not go ahead on schedule, all that would be wasted. Andrew Barnes might not be wasted, but he certainly wouldn’t get paid.

Barnes needed the money enough to risk his life. “To hell with this,” he said. “We might as well go.”



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A DECADE OF CRIME, TREACHERY, AND ADVENTURES OF THE MEDELLÍN CARTEL.

Andrew Richard Barnes survived crashes, gunfire, treachery, and betrayal and still lived to tell the tale. *Snowbird* explores the heinous crimes and dangerous expeditions of the man who flew the first cocaine shipment for the Medellín Cartel into the United States.

As a young pilot with a family at home and little money to spare, Barnes was coerced by promises of wealth to make these daring excursions. After his first trip in 1977, he realized there was no going back and continued the dangerous flights for over a decade.

Investigative journalist William Norris sits down with Barnes to recount his experience smuggling drugs for the Colombian cartel. As a pilot himself, Norris includes anecdotes of aircrafts and flying intertwined with Barnes's captivating drug smuggling adventures.



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