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Mercenary or Agent? U.S. Is Asked to Help Free a Son in Angola

Parents of Gary Acker, in Jail
Six Years, Assert the CIA
Was Behind His Mission

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Twice Gary Acker answered what he thought was his country's call.

After graduating from high school in Sacramento, Calif., in 1972, he joined the Marines. He became a corporal, but was released after three years for "psychological" reasons—his father says he got into disputes with officers, and with enlisted men he supervised. Trained only as a machine-gunner, he couldn't find civilian work.

Then in the fall of 1975, at age 21, he saw another chance to serve militarily. An article in the Sacramento Bee told of a man named David Floyd Bufkin who was hiring and training recruits to fight communism in Angola. Mr. Acker called Mr. Bufkin and signed up.

Mr. Bufkin, by his own and other informed accounts, was operating with CIA money and authority, and told Mr. Acker so at the time. The Central Intelligence Agency was recruiting soldiers and supplying equipment for the Angolan civil war. That fall the press was writing about this effort, Congress was debating it, and there is every evidence that Mr. Acker was a part of it.

Now, however, Mr. Acker has just spent his sixth Christmas in an Angolan jail, and the U.S. government doesn't seem to want anything to do with him—or so his parents say, and they are bitter about it. Equally bitter are the parents of Gustavo Grillo, another U.S. resident (though he has claimed Argentine citizenship) who was recruited by Mr. Bufkin and imprisoned in Angola.

"Nobody Does Nothing"

Interviewed by phone from her New Jersey home, Mr. Grillo's mother says, "For six years I go to Washington. The State Department tell me nothing. I don't want to hear any more, 'cause nobody does nothing about my son." Then, angrily, she hangs up.

Mr. Acker's parents are more articulate, have hired a lawyer and have traveled widely to try to obtain freedom for their son, or at least get the government to go to bat for him. So far, though, they apparently have done no better than the Grillos.

The State Department won't discuss the matter. The Angolan mission to the United Nations won't either. The CIA says it "neither paid nor authorized funds to Mr. Acker or other Americans engaged in armed combat in Angola" nor flew them in. But this statement apparently doesn't cover the Acker situation: Mr. Bufkin wasn't a full-time CIA employe, he never engaged in combat, and the men who did—and whom he paid—entered Angola by truck. The CIA won't elaborate.



Gary Acker

The Acker story comes from many sources, whose accounts are consistent. They include W. William Wilson, a St. Louis lawyer who represented Mr. Acker at his trial in Angola; Mr. Acker's parents, who have talked with many people in their search; an affidavit by Mr. Bufkin in a lawsuit a year ago (recently he couldn't be located); Pio Maria Deiana, a fellow prisoner in Angola on spy charges who has been freed and now is a waiter at Elaine's, the fashionable New York restaurant; John Stockwell, who directed the CIA's Angola operation, then left the agency and wrote a best-selling book about it; and Rep. Robert K. Dornan, a Republican of California, the Acker's Congressman, who has avidly taken up their cause. The sources don't include Gary Acker himself, because this reporter has been unable to obtain an Angolan visa.

A Truck From Kinshasa

Mr. Acker and Mr. Grillo were among four Americans and a Canadian who, after being recruited by Mr. Bufkin, entered Angola Feb. 10, 1976, on a truck bought (according to Mr. Stockwell) with CIA funds. They arrived from Kinshasa, Zaire; Mr. Bufkin had stopped to check in with the CIA station there, which was overseeing the Angola operation.

Mr. Stockwell says the Bufkin group was paid through Holden Roberto, the leader of an Angolan faction. "We were giving Roberto big fistfuls of green, \$5 million, and he used that for a lot of things, including hiring mercenaries, including Bufkin," Mr. Stockwell says. "We knew Bufkin was recruiting. We never signed a piece of paper with him, but he was flown into Angola in CIA planes. He stayed at one of our safe houses. He met with our chief of station" and was briefed on combat missions, Mr. Stockwell says.

Mr. Stockwell also says that the recruits

were "lied to" about their safety. Mr. Roberto's forces were already in panicky retreat, and in Mr. Stockwell's words the recruits' situation was "downright suicidal. They had very little chance of coming out. It wasn't someplace you would send your kid brother."

Just three days after they arrived, Mr. Grillo and another American recruit, Daniel Gearhart, a father of four from Maryland, were captured while on patrol together. The next day, Valentine's Day, the remaining Bufkin recruits went looking for their missing comrades. One, George Bacon, a former CIA paramilitary officer, was killed. A second, Douglas Newby, a Canadian, was fatally wounded. The third, Mr. Acker, was wounded and surrendered—without ever firing a shot, he has said. Mr. Bufkin stayed safely behind and returned to Zaire.

Mr. Acker was arrested by forces of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), which, behind a phalanx of Cuban armored troops, were routing Mr. Roberto's rival group to the north. The MPLA's base of popular support was around the Angolan capital of Luanda, and it has controlled the Angolan government there since independence from Portugal in November 1975, though it continues to meet resistance from Unita, a rival group with popular support in the south of Angola; Unita also got CIA help at one time.

The three surviving American prisoners, along with 10 British mercenaries who apparently also were paid by Mr. Roberto with CIA money, were tried in Luanda in proceedings that some international observers criticized as unfair. Mr. Acker's parents say they asked the U.S. to supply legal counsel but were refused. Mr. Wilson, a friend of the slain Mr. Bacon's who had just finished law school, agreed to defend Mr. Acker for expenses only.

Four of the 13 defendants, including Mr. Gearhart, the father of four, were executed. Of the rest, Mr. Acker got the lightest sentence: 16 years in prison on charges of being a mercenary.

His parents receive occasional letters. But his father, Carl Acker, a retired fireman, says, "He told us when he was first captured that he couldn't tell us what was going on. He just asks about the family and so forth, but he gives us no information other than that he's fine physically."

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