# The "Pablo Escobar Plane Wreck"

## Norman's Cay, Exuma

### Part 2

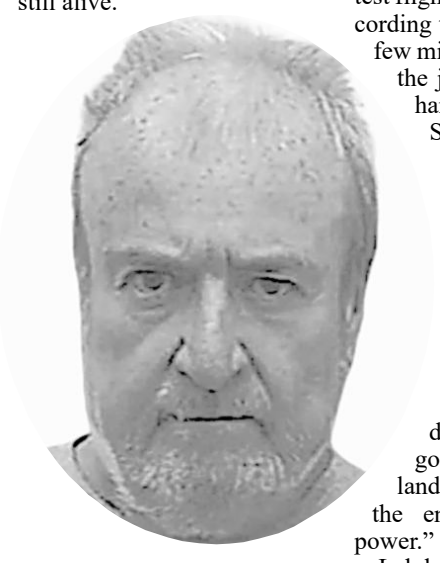
By Eric Wiberg

ON Saturday November 15, 1980 at Norman's Cay, Exuma, a young British pilot with a wife and newborn took a risk by flying his 36-year old warhorse aircraft from the US to The Bahamas in an effort to sell the large plane to the owner of a small island and small airstrip. The pilot was the son of a colonial policeman father, was born in Malaysia in 1957, and was educated at posh boarding schools in the UK. His name was Andrew Richard Barnes, but he was known as "British Andy" on Norman's and to the prospective client, Carlos "Joe" Lehder of the Medellin Cartel.

As described in this column last Friday, the 22-year-old Andy presented Joe with a note from airplane dealer Charlie Bush, offering the plane for $95,000. Joe said "no," but that Andy needed to get his old Smith Curtiss C-46A-45-CU Commando off the island, as it was getting in the way and drawing negative attention from pilots and the US and Bahamian governments. Joe sent his childhood friend Kike to ride shotgun and report back via radio.

On the outside hulk of the aircraft the letters "CCQ" were painted clumsily above the windows. This was probably painted by Lehder and his group, as, according to Reed & Beeler in their book *Buccaneer* (Angel Fire Rising, 2013), Lehder's friends "had a school brotherhood that they referred to as 'CCQ.' This was an acronym for 'Cannabis Club of Quindío,' an exclusive club named after their shared fondness for pot." According to Wiki, Quindío is a region in the west/centre of the Colombia that has as its capital city Armenia, Lehder's hometown. Lehder's father was a German industrialist and hotelier in the region, and it's possible that his trusted friend, Kike, was a member of this close-knit club.

In his memoir, *Snowbird, the rise and fall of a drug smuggler*, by William Norris (2021, CamCat Publishing) Barnes poignantly refers to the end of the old plane as the 'Death of an Old Friend.' This version is the only account by the pilot who survived the crash and who owned the aircraft, despite the fact that it contradicts so many others. It also dovetails roughly with Lehder's own recollection, who admits blocking the runway with equipment. So we read with interest this 'final word,' by British Andy himself who, like Lehder, is still alive.



**ANDREW** Barnes, AKA British Andy, from an arrest photo in 2017.

**Photo:** Devon and Cornwall Police/BBC

Using December, not November, as the month of the accident, biographer Norris summarises that "it was all the fault of Andrew Barnes and a bulldozer driver who failed to do his job." Lehder was upset that the unwelcome C-46 flown in by Andy needed repairs, and he wanted it out of the way. But it could not be tested until the runway was extended to accommodate a larger plane with bigger (more profitable) payload. A bulldozer and dump truck stopped work prematurely and had left "a pile of sand six feet high" at the start or threshold of the runway.

Andy and Barbara Barnes noticed that Joe Lehder was snorting a lot of cocaine, was irritable and tense, and was always followed by armed German bodyguards. Andy says Joe interrupted his team while they were repairing the plane. "I want to see it all move today," he is reported to have said. Though he objected to flying in a strong crosswind from the southwest, Andy obliged.

Andy said it was early in the morning, and the work crews had just begun moving sand around when he asked Joe to have them move the dune out of the way before they landed. "I told him that when we land we are going to use every inch of the strip," Andy said.

The "entire population of the island" (about 35 people) watched as they took off. The test flight lasted two hours, according to the pilot--not just a few minutes--and the man in the jump seat on the left-hand seat was Steve Stephens, who was working on wiring.

"Stephens [was] a former Air America pilot who had flown in covert operations for the CIA in Laos and Cambodia, was an expert on short-field landings in the C-46," the memoir details. "They were going to try a full-stall landing at 70 knots with the engines at maximum power."

Lehder apparently wanted the plane to fly to Colombia the following week and they were tuning out any last issues (Lehder said he sent Kike his Colombian friend on the flight, but that he never wanted to buy the plane).

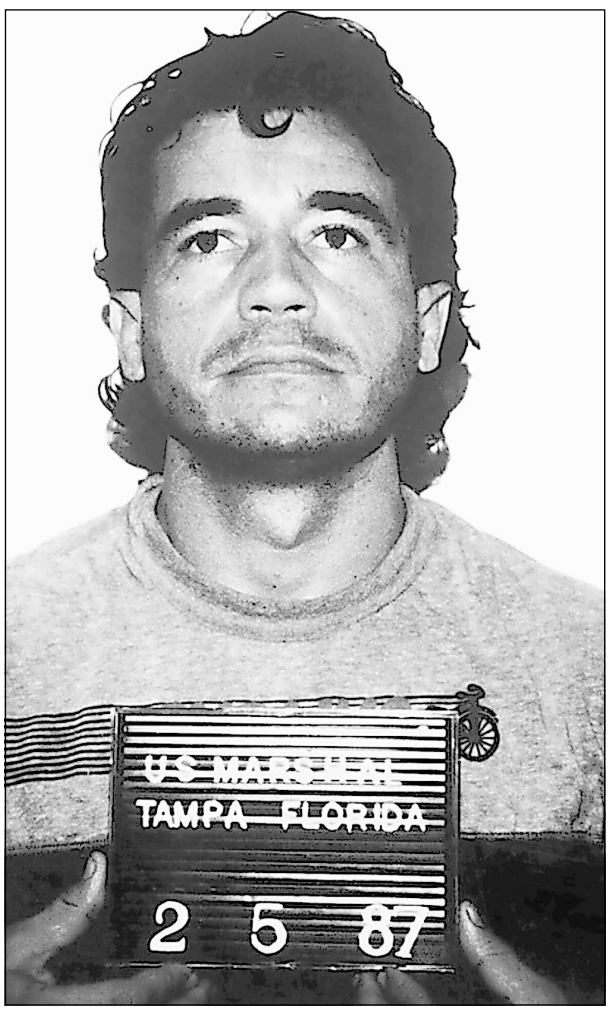
Barnes chose to land from North to South due to there being a seawall on southern end of the runway. He wanted to begin with the wheels lowered without a problem. "The main wheels touched at the very end of the tarmac," he recalls. But "it was a pity that someone had forgotten to move the pile of sand. The big aircraft shuddered as though it had run into a truck. It bounced high in the air, making a recovery and landing impossible."

Though they managed to recover and remain airborne, "they didn't realise that when the landing gear struck the pile of sand, the port wheel had been badly damaged."

Very quickly the aircraft exhibited existential failures: the left wheel wouldn't retract and, in attempting to do so, severed critical hydraulic and oil lines. This caused the left engine to fail and the wheel to stay lodged in the wing. The right wheel, meanwhile, refused to go up, and was six feet of spinning rubber which turned sideways and caused drag. (If this had caused a fire, the magnesium alloy wings would have simply melted off. But there was no fire.)

Barnes managed to keep the plane aloft using just flaps and elevator controls, but with no ailerons and with Stephens in support. As they flew south off the runway they looked at Norman's Cay as a safe haven to land on but quickly ruled it out: people and aircraft and cars littered the runway, and houses lined it. With a high likelihood of fire and lack of control, it was too likely the plane, its crew, spectators and homes would be ruined.

They had no choice as they slowly banked left with one engine, other than to ditch in the shallow waters of the lagoon east of the main resort. And that's what they did.




**CARLOS** Lehder extradition photo from February 5, 1987.

**Photo:** Wikipedia

**THE** author standing on top of the Norman's plane in the 1980s.

**THE** author peering into the cockpit window of the crashed plane.

Barnes commented wryly on the incident. "The C-46 ditches well. It has this huge lower belly. The thing takes to water beautifully. We didn't even get our feet wet."

Flying only on trim tabs and elevator controls, with alarms blaring throughout the cockpit, Andy writes that "we got the wings level … and just went in, expecting to flip. But we hit the water so hard that it snapped the landing gear off. It had bled down, but it hadn't locked down, and when we hit the water it gave it a bit of leverage to snap it. If it had been locked down we would have been in real trouble."

They were picked up by a boat sent by Joe from the island, whisked to shore, and embraced. Then began the irreversible retreat of Barnes, Lehder, and drug smuggling from Norman's Cay.

"The wreckage, perfectly intact, now sat in that shallow lagoon like a beacon. It might as well have been a neon sign proclaiming 'Here be Smugglers!'" as Norris said. Since the aircraft was registered to Charlie Bush in Florida, the US federal authorities (NTSB) and Bahamian investigators were clambering all over it within a day or two, and they couldn't help but notice the unusual security and cargo arrangements on the small island.

As a postscript, few would argue that Andy Barnes is an shining pillar of virtue and nobility in his own country. The local press in Devon, England, where Barnes returned in the late 1990s after entering US witness protection program, and the BBC reported on his post-Norman's exploits. "[He] moved into a flat owned by his family in Topsham and worked for 18 months at a religious bookshop. In July 2001 he set light to the 15th century building housing the bookshop, causing £200,000 damage. He also set light to a boat after the owner refused to sell it to him, and was jailed for four years. He was a well-known figure in Exeter, Exmouth and Topsham, regaling people with tall stories of his exploits as a drug-smuggling pilot." (BBC.com, 7 Apr. 2017).

BBC further reports how Barnes was then "jailed for trying to kill his unwanted lodger with an axe as he slept. Andrew Barnes, 61, hit Luke Down with four heavy axe blows to his head, leaving him with brain injuries and close to death."

Unlikely to now leave jail, Barnes' 80-year-old C-46 relic will no doubt outlast him.

The irony of the Norman's Cay plane wreck of 1980 is that it's both the symbol of the drug-smuggling-heyday in The Bahamas and the peak tide of that trade. Arguably and ironically, this poster child of cartels and cays ended up being its undoing: it attracted attention, and that same attention – starting with a visit by the NTSB in the US the following day – in turn destroyed it.

It was a selfie on a clifftop that went horribly wrong.

**COUNCIL OF LEGAL EDUCATION**
NORMAN MANLEY LAW SCHOOL
8 RING ROAD, P.O. BOX 231, KINGSTON 7, JAMAICA, W.I.

**POSTS OF TUTOR**
**Norman Manley Law School & Legal Aid Clinic**

The Council of Legal Education, Norman Manley Law School, invites applications from Attorneys-at-Law qualified to practice law in the Commonwealth Caribbean for the posts of **Tutor (Teaching and Learning)** at the Norman Manley Law School, 8 Ring Road, and its Legal Aid Clinic, 18 Gibraltar Hall Road, UWI Mona Campus, Kingston 7, Jamaica, W.I.

Further details of the positions are available on the Law School's website at www.nmls.edu.jm.

To access, go to **Staff**, select **HR Department**, then **Job Opportunities.**

The closing date for receipt of applications is Friday, March 6, 2026.

**Only shortlisted applicants will be contacted**.