

## Contractor figured in Charlotte plane crash

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*By Taft Wireback, Staff Writer*  
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GREENSBORO -- The investigation at TIMCO marks the second time in as many years a negative spotlight is shining on a Florida contractor that allegedly put illegal immigrants into the aircraft-maintenance plant in western Greensboro.

The labor contractor, Structural Modification and Repair Technicians or S.M.A.R.T., also figured in the January 2003 crash at Charlotte of US Airways Express Flight 5481, which killed all 21 aboard.

A post-crash inquiry by the National Transportation Safety Board partly attributed the fatal accident to a S.M.A.R.T. mechanic-in-training who improperly adjusted controls.

In the TIMCO investigation, one of S.M.A.R.T.'s officials, Jorge Ruiz-Alonso, also known as Jorge Ruiz or George Ruiz, is charged with giving fake documents to an illegal immigrant in October 2000 so the foreigner could work in the TIMCO facility as a S.M.A.R.T. employee.

Five of the 24 people arrested March 8 at TIMCO on immigration charges, including Ruiz-Alonso, were S.M.A.R.T. workers, said Brian Peterson, vice president of the Edgewater, Fla., company.

The arrests two weeks ago were part of the federal government's "Operation Tarmac," an effort to get illegal immigrants out of such security-sensitive settings as airports, nuclear power plants and other utilities.

Peterson said the two incidents in North Carolina since 2003 are not indicative of S.M.A.R.T.'s general character nor its skill in providing temporary aviation workers.

"We've been in business for over 15 years and have provided probably a million man-hours (of maintenance) without an incident," Peterson said.

But TIMCO has severed its seven-year relationship with the company because of the criminal allegations involving Ruiz-Alonso, said Dave Latimer, a TIMCO vice president.

"We just can't have that in our business," Latimer said, adding that it would take many reforms for S.M.A.R.T. to be reinstated.

"They're certainly out for now," Latimer said, noting the Florida company was discharged last week when allegations emerged against Ruiz-Alonso. "Never say never, but I would not see it (reinstatement) happening any time soon."

Another six of the 24 alleged illegal immigrants were on TIMCO's own payroll as permanent workers.

But Latimer said that happened inadvertently despite his company's best efforts, not through the outright fraud of which Ruiz-Alonso is accused.

Latimer said TIMCO would eject any other labor contractor implicated in the investigation. Two weeks ago, federal agents said they were looking into 10, including S.M.A.R.T.

S.M.A.R.T. executive Peterson said that Ruiz-Alonso, 60, a Venezuelan living in Greensboro, had been with his company between five and eight years.

Ruiz-Alonso did not work on aircraft at TIMCO, but as a "field coordinator" for S.M.A.R.T. who screened temporary workers the Florida contractor placed at TIMCO in exchange for fees.

Latimer said TIMCO believes it is in "pretty good shape" now for having removed all illegal immigrants from its payroll and those of its other labor contractors.

Federal agents said in a complaint against Ruiz-Alonso that they searched his home at 7104 W. Friendly Ave. and his S.M.A.R.T. offices in the TIMCO complex at Piedmont Triad International Airport.

They found at least one of the allegedly falsified documents in S.M.A.R.T.'s files, investigators said.

Peterson said S.M.A.R.T. was "very surprised" by Ruiz-Alonso's alleged misdeeds; the company did a thorough background check before hiring him and had no idea he was here illegally.

In the Charlotte crash, Flight 5481 was rising rapidly when it went into a fatal sideways maneuver 37 seconds into takeoff Jan. 8, 2003.

The NTSB said a S.M.A.R.T. mechanic learning on the job in Huntington, W. Va., had incorrectly rigged the plane's elevator cables governing up-and-down motion. Pilots lost control.

TIMCO was not involved. Another aviation-maintenance company was cited for not checking the work.

Federal safety inspectors said the plane also crashed because airline workers loaded it too heavily and distributed excess weight improperly.

TIMCO and S.M.A.R.T. are part of a controversial aspect in modern-day aviation called outsourcing, in which major airlines no longer do substantial amounts of their own maintenance.

Instead, they send it to companies like TIMCO, which call on labor contractors such as S.M.A.R.T. to provide temporary staffing as needed.

Critics believe that maintenance was better when most was done in-house.

Supporters say the only difference is lower costs for airlines.

Part of the lowered cost stems from using temporary workers who can be hired and let go as a company's needs rise or fall.

Peterson said his company could not control whether a field employee such as Ruiz-Alonso might violate federal laws and hire an illegal immigrant to work at TIMCO without the headquarters' knowledge.

"He's no longer employed with us," Peterson said of Ruiz-Alonso, adding that the company has "zero tolerance" for violation of the nation's immigration laws.

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