

Episode 6: How a retired American soldier became a brutal enforcer for an international cartel.

Among Paul Le Roux's former employees, Joseph Hunter was perhaps the most mystifying. He was also the man whose story had pulled me into Le Roux's world in the first place. And like Le Roux himself, Hunter was often described in larger-than-life terms, a remorseless mercenary who was bred by the U.S. military, then went horribly rogue. On Le Roux's behalf, he'd allegedly arranged the murder of Catherine Lee, the Filipino real estate agent, and bragged about it, critiquing the assassins for their tactical blunders. He was, in the words of one Le Roux employee, "a real hardass"; he picked up the improbable nickname Rambo, and he looked the part. In photos he was a hulking, barrel-chested man with a gaze that alternated between penetrating and vacant. As an assassin he was famous the world over, but the further I delved into Le Roux's empire, the more complicated the story seemed.

A former soldier from Kentucky, the 47-year-old Hunter was one of a few Americans in the upper reaches of Le Roux's operation, which was full of Israelis, South Africans, and Brits. Hunter had enlisted in the Army in 1983 and joined the Rangers two years later. But in 1986, a friend in his unit was killed during a training exercise. Hunter, deeply traumatized by the death, was medically discharged from the Rangers after just eight months. He spent the rest of his 21-year military career as a drill sergeant and sniper instructor, with posts in Germany, Panama, and Puerto Rico, rising to the rank of sergeant first class. By his own description, Hunter also worked as "a special-reaction team commander, serving high-risk warrants, doing law-enforcement training, and providing security for doctors and nurses." Hunter earned both a National Defense Service Medal and a Global War on Terrorism Medal. His home state named him a Kentucky Colonel, an honorific reserved for Kentuckians "unwavering in devotion to faith, family, fellowman, and country."

Discharged in 2004, Hunter returned to his hometown of Owensboro, a city of 50,000, with his wife, his two boys, and a pair of dogs. His mother and sister lived nearby. Law enforcement seemed like a logical next step, so he took and passed the New York City police exam, but decided the city was too expensive. Instead he got a job as an inmate counselor at the Green River Correctional Complex, an hour drive from home.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were at their peak, as were the jobs with private security firms, which promised large paychecks and the chance to see real action. Bored with civilian life, Hunter quit the prison in 2006 and signed on with Dyncorp, a McLean, Virginia, contractor with close ties to the U.S. military. After a two-year stint, he spent another year with a similar outfit, Triple Canopy. (The Panama Papers leak recently revealed that Triple Canopy, which has received more than a billion dollars in U.S. government contracts over the past decade, operated a series of shell companies overseas.) Hunter's assignments included providing security at the U.S. embassy in Baghdad and investigating suicide bombings.

While he was in the Army, Hunter's family had found him increasingly short-tempered. His time in Iraq, by his own account, exacerbated his moodiness and explosive anger. He had trouble sleeping and startled easily.

In 2007, a former soldier introduced Hunter to Le Roux, describing him as a wealthy South African businessman looking for security personnel. Hunter jumped at the chance to leave the war behind. Soon he was traveling the world for and with Le Roux, from Mali to Hong Kong to Brazil—work for which he acquired a fake Zimbabwean passport with the name Frank Robinson and a South African one as Andrew Hunter.

Le Roux employees who crossed paths with Hunter were often struck by his presence. In our chats, Lulu, my source in Africa, told me that he'd met Hunter during one of Hunter's early assignments. Some of Le Roux's employees had either lost or stolen more than \$1 million in a bad gold deal, and Hunter was dispatched to Zambia to locate them and collect the debt. According to Lulu, Hunter eventually "came back with nothing."

Hunter would later claim to have experienced Le Roux's wrath firsthand, saying that his boss had threatened to kill him after Hunter's own gold deal went bad in Mali. Lulu confirmed that threat to me and recalled that Hunter and another employee eventually sorted out the losses with Le Roux.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Hunter was involved with the gold business, one of Le Roux's sprawling gambits on the continent. The operation bought gold at a discount from small-scale miners and then smuggled it out of the country to be stashed away or sold for a profit in the legal gold market. Lulu told me that one of Le Roux's right-hand men, Shai Reuven, had once been robbed of a significant sum when he'd traveled to the country to buy gold. "You can't go to the Congo with a bag full of cash and expect to come out with it," Lulu said. Hunter was hired to make sure that didn't happen again.

"Hunter seemed very professional actually, wanted to get in, do what he had to do, and get out," Lulu said. He'd encountered him again in Hong Kong and in Manila. "He was quiet, didn't say much, didn't look you in the face," Lulu told me. "He wasn't a cowboy. But he had this dark, ominous presence."

I got a similar reaction when I brought up Hunter with Gil, my source in Manila, who once had a high post in Le Roux's organization. In the two hours that we talked, Hunter's was the only name that seemed to genuinely rattle him other than Le Roux's. "He was a loose cannon," Gil said of Hunter; they'd done several operations together, until Gil refused to work with him anymore. "He was always a very angry person, somewhat disturbed mentally. I wouldn't deal with him because he just wasn't right."

Gil told me that Dave Smith, Le Roux's former head of security, had fired Hunter "because he was considered too hot headed." In 2010, Hunter returned to Kentucky. But Smith's opinion was soon overturned, after Le Roux discovered that Smith had been selling off some of the company's gold for himself. Le Roux had Smith executed, and Hunter returned to the organization in 2011. "Well, Dave got killed for stealing money, and then I took his job," was how Hunter summed it up later for some new recruits. Stealing from Le Roux was, he observed, "the number one thing that will get you killed."

"Everybody says, 'No, I'll take the money and I'll hide. I'm not scared,'" he continued. "If they don't find you, they're gonna get your family. They're gonna get your children, your mother, your father." As it happened, "they" often included Hunter and his men.

Hunter had first joined Le Roux's organization while it was rapidly expanding, but by the time he returned, Le Roux's downfall was already quietly in motion. Soma, one of the three medications that fueled Le Roux's online prescription-drug business, had been declared a controlled substance by the U.S. government. Le Roux was delving deeper into large-scale criminal activities to make up the lost profits, directing an organization rife with paranoia and violence. "That one year, we killed nine people," Hunter told the recruits, possibly exaggerating for effect but, from the killings I've been able to confirm, probably not by much. As the bodies piled up, Le Roux moved underground, and in September 2012, he disappeared entirely.

Then, in late 2012, Hunter suddenly got a flurry of calls and encrypted emails from Le Roux. He had a new project, a big one, involving a group he would refer to only as the "South American partners." Le Roux wanted Hunter to assemble a team of skilled, reliable ex-military men who could handle what Le Roux referred to as "specialist jobs." Hunter knew exactly what kind of work he was talking about.

At the same time, other Le Roux employees around the globe were hearing from Le Roux as he launched himself into several new ventures. One of those employees was Scott Stammers, a security contractor who worked for Le Roux in Manila. A 43-year-old Brit, Stammers sported a shaved head and a goatee, and had retained his English pallor despite several years in the tropical climate. He coordinated gun- and drug-related operations for Le Roux and was skilled at sourcing everything from heavy weaponry to methamphetamine precursor chemicals and the cooks to prepare them.

Le Roux wanted Stammers to help put together a meth deal for his new South American associates. Stammers had previously managed a sizeable meth shipment from Ye Tiong Tan Lim, a balding Chinese man in his fifties with wire-rim glasses who purportedly operated an import-export business, actually a front for a criminal organization in Hong Kong. Now Le Roux wanted Lim to provide drugs again.

Le Roux also reached out to Allan Kelly Reyes Peralta, a 39-year-old Filipino who had once worked as a manager at Sid's, Le Roux's bar in Manila. Peralta's role in the organization was pure happenstance; Dave Smith had met Peralta in the coastal town of Barretto, just outside Subic, when Peralta was the manager of a dingy tiki bar called the Blue Rock Resort. Smith hired him to work at Sid's. (In perhaps the most bizarre chain of connections I encountered, I learned that John Nash, the mysterious figure who was the last person to see two of Le Roux's alleged murder victims alive, had been the head of security at the Blue Rock. Later, authorities discovered that "John Nash" was the identity of a deceased American and arrested him in a dramatic raid just steps from the Blue Rock. Nash now sits in a Philippine prison, refusing to admit his real name or country of origin.)

Peralta had met Lim through his brother and had served as an intermediary between Le Roux's people and Lim for the first meth deal. Now Le Roux wanted him to do so again for the South Americans. Sid's closed in 2009, and by the time Le Roux got in touch with Peralta, he was out of work. Peralta agreed to make the deal.

Peralta contacted Lim and invited him to meet Le Roux's associates. In early January, Lim and Peralta traveled to Bangkok, where the two South Americans disclosed that they were senior figures in a Colombian cartel, looking for a large amount of high-quality meth. They wanted the drugs to be shipped to Liberia, but they planned to sell them in New York. First, however, they'd need to test a sample.

The request didn't faze Lim. "My boss," Lim said, "only gets [it] from the original source."

That source, Lim had told Le Roux, was North Korea. It was an unverifiable claim but not a far-fetched one. According to a congressional report, the country's contribution to the meth trade dates to the mid-1990s, when heavy rains wiped out its thriving poppy production, opening a lane for lab-made drugs. By 2007, North Korea was producing "10-15 tons per year of the highest quality product for export," the report notes, usually smuggled across the border into northeast China. North Korea's meth manufacturing has long been reported to be either tacitly approved or even sponsored by the state. In 2013, however, the State Department observed that "state-sponsored drug trafficking may have ceased or been sharply reduced, or... the DPRK regime has become more adept at concealing state-sponsored trafficking of illicit drugs."

Lim made a similar point to the Colombians. “The North Korean government already burned all the labs,” he told them, “to show the Americans they aren’t selling it anymore.” But, despite the crackdown, Lim said that his organization had roughly one ton of ultra-pure North Korean meth to offer. “Only our labs are not closed,” he said. The Colombians asked to visit the labs inside North Korea to verify its origins, but Lim said that non-Korean speakers would raise suspicions.

The next month, Lim provided two small meth samples to Peralta, who delivered them to Philip Shackels, a tattooed Brit in the Philippines. Meanwhile, Stammers had been communicating with both the Colombians and Le Roux by encrypted email. The cartel wanted the samples sent to Monrovia, the capital of Liberia, and Stammers took charge of shipping the meth there. Shackels and Stammers sent the samples by FedEx, and Stammers emailed the tracking number to Le Roux. On arrival they tested at 96 and 98 percent pure, respectively. The deal was on.

By March, Joseph Hunter had spent several months collecting and sorting résumés from mercenary fighters around the globe. He forwarded his top picks to Le Roux for approval. Eventually, they settled on three men.

Dennis Gögel was a 27-year-old German former soldier who’d been raised by his grandmother in Stadthagen, a manufacturing city in northern Germany. His mother died of asthma when he was a small child, and his father abandoned him; he’d joined the army, he later said, “to take control of my life.” He’d served in an elite unit, the equivalent of the U.S. Army Rangers, deployed for peacekeeping in Kosovo. Upon his discharge, in 2010, he’d shifted into private security, first in Afghanistan and then in Africa, working as an anti-piracy specialist on boats threatened by Somali pirates. When Hunter approached him about joining what he called “a highly specialized security group to protect and secure high-profile clients,” Gögel recalled that “Hunter and I built a strong bond as he took me under his wing. After a short while our relationship expanded, and I began to view Hunter not only as mentor but as a father figure, something I never had before.”

Gögel, in turn, connected Hunter with another former German soldier named Michael Filter, who had left the service in 2010. He’d bounced around, managing a bakery and doing a bit of roofing. With young twin daughters to support, he “felt useless because he wasn’t able to find a proper job,” his sister Nancy later wrote in a letter recounting the period. Then, in early 2013, Filter got a call from Gögel, who said he knew someone who was putting together a security team. Filter saw it “as a possibility to do something useful and be able to provide for his girls properly,” Nancy recalled.

The third team member, Slawomir Soborski, was a Polish ex-policeman. He’d worked for 15 years in the military and in civilian law enforcement, and would later claim to have “provided protection for President Bush and Pope John Paul II while in Poland.” He had drifted into contract work, and eventually joined the French Foreign Legion, but struggled to

make ends meet. In February 2013, Soborski received Hunter's job solicitation from a friend in the Foreign Legion, and he wrote to Hunter directly. "I am convinced that my experience, commitment, and professionalism, confirmed by my references, will lead to the success of your company and mutual satisfaction," he said. His résumé included such qualifications as "sniper," "close-combat specialist," and "parachutist."

Between the three of them, Hunter felt he was ready to get to work for the South Americans. He wrote to Le Roux that Soborski and Gögel in particular were "two highly qualified individuals that will get a lot of stuff done for us."

Hunter and Gögel, in turn, exchanged a series of charged-up emails about the job.

"I full understand what 'Ninja' means and I'm available for your request!" Gögel wrote. "See you soon, I'm ready to go Hard."

"I told the client you are my number 1 guy for this job, so don't let me down!!!" Hunter responded.

"Ready to rock hard!" Gögel replied.

In March, Hunter traveled to Phuket, Thailand, and met Le Roux's South American contacts at one of Le Roux's houses, a one-story stucco ranch with a red terra-cotta roof near the Loch Palm Golf Course. Afterward, Gögel, Soborski, and Filter arrived for their first in-person meeting. Hunter had told them to dress like tourists for the trip—"nothing military police looking"—and had wired them expense money for their tickets.

Once everyone was present, Hunter disclosed the identities of their clients: two men from a Colombian cartel, associates of Le Roux's, whom they would know only as "the Boss." Hunter told them that the Colombians had said "you're gonna see tons of cocaine. You're gonna see millions of dollars. You're gonna see gold."

The team's work could include collecting money from people who hadn't paid the Colombians, carrying cocaine, or "bonus work," the term within Le Roux's organization for paid assassinations. "Once a mission is received, that mission becomes sacred to you," Hunter told them. "You will accomplish it to the end at all costs."

For the next hour, Hunter delivered a sermon extolling mercenary life under the Boss, pausing only for the occasional "yeah" from his team. "It's just like a military mission," he said. "You see James Bond in the movie and you're saying, 'Oh, I can do that.' Well, you're gonna do it now. Everything you see or you've thought about, you're gonna do. It's, it's real and it's up to you. You know how the government says, 'If you work through the government, ah, if you get in trouble, we don't know you?' Same thing with this job. No different, right? So that's how it is. Same thing you do in the military, except you're doing for

these guys now? If you get caught in war, you get killed, right? Unless you surrender, if they let you surrender, or if you get, you know, the same thing. This is—everything's just like you're in war enemy territory now."

Hunter's soliloquy wandered from dramatic recounting of his own exploits to detailed instructions on kidnappings and assassinations. "When we did it, we did it all," he said. "We hand-grenaded, threw it, hand-grenaded the people's houses. We ah... not kidnapped a guy, but we conned him to come with us. We put him in the ocean, shot at him; he gave us the money back. Ah... assassinated people. Ah, what else we did? We smuggled gold. We smuggled weapons. Ah... We took weapons from Jakarta to the Philippines on the ship."

"You gotta use your head," he continued. "You never know what the scenario is gonna be. If you gotta kidnap somebody to recover funds, you know how you gotta plan a kidnapping, right? Knock the fucking... you knock the guy out in your minivan or your SUV. You already gonna have a place to hide, right? A place to hold him. You just gotta drive there and get to the place, and then once he's inside the building it's no problem. You're gonna handcuff him and all that shit, and then I'm sure he's gonna give you the money, right, or arrange for the money right away. If you have to waterboard him, it's easy, you just put a wet towel on his face and pour water on him about, you know, 15 to 20 seconds till he talks."

Ultimately, he told them, it was each man's decision whether he could handle the demands of this kind of job. "They're going to come back tomorrow," he said of the Colombians. "If you're here tomorrow, you're in."

The next day the Colombians returned to the house, where the whole team awaited them. The cartel representatives were similarly explicit in their expectations. "You do whatever you have to do," one of them said. "If we call you and say, 'This fucking guy ain't gonna pay,' that's it. We want you to be magicians.... You disappear people."

At first, though, the Colombians had more pedestrian jobs for the crew. They announced that they were moving a large shipment of drugs from Thailand to China and needed "counter-surveillance" on the operation to determine whether the Thai police were monitoring the boat. Gögel, Soborski, and Filter traveled to Koh Samui, a port city on an island off the coast of Thailand, and photographed the vessel as it sat docked in the harbor.

Hunter remained at the Phuket house, in close communication with Le Roux and the Colombians. After five days, Hunter told Le Roux that, based on the reports, he was not impressed with the Colombians' ship's crew. "The guys are continuing to watch the boat. No detection of any surveillance as of yet," he wrote. "No one comes out of the cabin during the days. The Captain is going to another boat every night and picking up some guys and then they go out partying."

After the Koh Samui job, the Colombians wanted the team to travel to Mauritius, an island nation in the Indian Ocean just east of Madagascar, to provide “counter-surveillance of several important meetings.” Hunter drew up a budget, \$15,000 for expenses, including travel and international driver’s licenses, plus a “telephoto lens that can reach 100 meters for facial recognition and plate numbers.”

That April, he dispatched the team. The first meeting in Mauritius was between the Colombians, an arms buyer named TC, and Scott Stammers and Philip Shackels. TC was in the market for guns, which Stammers had agreed to provide, sending along a “sales package” that included photos of machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades. In exchange, the Colombians wanted Stammers to buy 15 surface-to-air missiles. Gögel, Filter, and Soborski kept watch outside as the three parties finalized the deal.

The next day, Stammers, Shackels, and the Colombians met with a pair of Serbians. The topic of that meeting, as Le Roux explained to Hunter in an email, was “some product that we lost recently in the South Pacific.” He was referring to the disappearance of the *JeReVe*, Le Roux’s boat, which had washed up on a reef in Tonga in the fall of 2012 with \$120 million worth of cocaine and a dead Slovak onboard. The loss seemed to have sent Le Roux into deeper hiding; after he had made arrangements for the boat to depart from Ecuador, none of his associates ever saw him again.

Now Stammers was looking for a new supplier to replace Le Roux’s lost shipment. The Serbians said they were interested in funneling 700 to 1,000 kilos from South America to Australia, Stammers told Le Roux afterward.

Hunter’s team returned to Thailand, and he conducted a full debriefing; in the manner of a football coach reviewing film, he “pointed out some minor mistakes,” he reported to Le Roux. “I will send you a slide show of some of the surveillance they did, so you can see their work.”

Looking over the surveillance photos, Hunter noted that he “knew two of the guys there for the meetings”; that is, he recognized Shackels and Stammers, whom he’d met before within Le Roux’s organization. Yet Hunter had no idea that the two men had also come to Mauritius on Le Roux’s behalf. Later, that detail struck me as an extraordinary example of the compartmentalization that I’d heard Le Roux required, something his employees must have been accustomed to. Here were two major operations, involving the same Colombian cartel, yet Le Roux’s teams seemed to have little or no awareness of one another’s involvement. Their paths crossed without a whisper on Mauritius. The same wouldn’t be true when they crossed again later.

In mid-May, Stammers and Shackels returned to Thailand to meet with the Colombians about the logistics of the meth shipment. Lim had told them that he’d been forced to move his stockpile out of North Korea and to the Philippines for safekeeping. The shipment would

travel from there to Thailand, then on to Liberia. For the Thai portion of the trip, Stammers brought on a man named Adrian Valkovic, a former member of the French Foreign Legion who worked in private security and was the sergeant-at-arms for the Outlaw Motorcycle Club in Bangkok. Valkovic, whom Stammers called the “ground commander” for the shipment, would be marshaling eight armed comrades from the club to protect it.

In a meeting with Lim and Peralta, the Colombians proposed starting off their relationship with a 60-kilo shipment of meth, at \$60,000 per kilo.

“My friends, can you do the 60, a little bit, a little more, like 100?” Peralta asked.

The Colombians agreed, and over the next few months, the group held a series of meetings in Thailand to sort out the details. In emails about the arrangement, they referred to the drugs as “car parts.”

In the spring of 2013, Hunter proposed adding another member of Le Roux’s organization to his crew. Tim Vamvakias was an American who’d grown up in a violent household in San Bernardino, California, dreaming about a career in law enforcement. He’d joined the Army during the Gulf War, left to study at the University of California at Santa Barbara, then returned to active duty as a military policeman. An expert K-9 handler, he’d worked in bomb detection and on a SWAT team. He left the military, hoping to join the police force in Phoenix, but he failed a physical due to an unspecified health condition. He fell into a depression, got divorced, and signed on with Dyncorp and then another security contractor, using dogs to hunt for improvised explosive devices in Afghanistan. Eventually, his health cost him his job again. Unemployed and temporarily homeless, he’d joined Le Roux’s organization sometime in the late 2000s, connected through a colleague from his contracting days.

Now 41, with slicked-back hair and prominent eyebrows, Vamvakias had been stationed by Le Roux at a stash house in Texas. For \$7,500 a month, Vamvakias guarded a large supply of tramadol—one of the three main prescription drugs that helped float Le Roux’s online pill business. (In 2011, Le Roux had decided to fulfill orders by smuggling pills from Mexico.)

Hunter thought Vamvakias, whose nickname was Tay, could be of more use on the security team. Le Roux agreed to a transfer and a raise, \$10,000 a month with Hunter’s crew, Le Roux said, as long as he was willing to engage in “bonus work.” “I told Tay previously that his salary would be 10K starting the 1st of May,” Hunter wrote to Le Roux on May 6. “He has confirmed that he will do bonus jobs.”

In May, the Colombians had another task for Hunter’s team: more counter-surveillance, this time of a plane in the Bahamas that was scheduled to deliver 200 kilos of cocaine to the U.S. Vamvakias arrived in Thailand to join the team, and Hunter made him leader of the mission.

Around the same time, Le Roux informed Hunter that he and the Colombians had found a

snitch in their organization. On May 30, Le Roux wrote to Hunter at an address for Jim Riker, one of Hunter's aliases, about someone leaking to the DEA and the Australian Federal Police:

From: john <john@fast-free-email.com>

To: Jim Riker <mrtiberius2@yahoo.com>

Sent: Thursday, May 30, 2013 12:50 AM

Subject: Re:

... the situation is our contact in the f b i in ecuador has been looking into the jereve incident for us, the man who is responsible has been providing tips to the d e a and a f p, he is a boat captain that is working for us, he does jobs for us mainly in the caribbean and in africa, he was the one who handled the jereve for us, and leaked the info to the u.s agent, him and a particular agent are problems for us, this is a priority job that will pay allot of money, i need your suggestion on the best way to handle it, I need your input on what is needed to fix this issue asap as we already lost 3 shipments and allot of money, please be advised he does not know anyone except his handler but he knows some of our boats, so we need to get this issue resolved before we loose more money, sis this something your team can handle? or should i assign it to my south african guys, the jobs will probably be in africa as the captain is based there

"My guys will handle it," Hunter replied, meaning Vamvakias and Gögel. "Are you talking about both the Captain and the agent or just the Captain?"

"Both are a problem, both need to be handled," Le Roux replied. He also laid out the incentives: "Informer is 200 000 and 500 000 for the agent," he wrote. Hunter would get \$100,000 for organizing the hit.

"They will handle both jobs," Hunter replied. "They just need good tools."

In Hunter's budget and detailed equipment list for the operation, he outlined what that meant:

From: Jim Riker <mrtiberius2@yahoo.com>□

Date: 7/6/2013 11:02 AM□

To: "john@fast-free-email.com" <john@fast-free-email.com>

Hey,

Here is a list of items needed for the job. It includes everything that they can think of, because they don't exactly know the plan and how it will be executed, that's why it's so much.

Two Submachine Guns with silencers (Mac 10, MP5, P90, MP7,,,something small)
Magazines for the Weapons

Two .22 pistols with Silencers **(these are a must)**

Magazines and ammo for these

One 308 Rifle with Scope and Case for it

Ammo for it

Two Level 3A Concealment Vests

2 GPS's for the evac (one for each guy)

2 Black Guy Masks (like the ones we have, but all ready in county)

2 Two way radios preferably with ear pieces and push to talk capability

2 Motorcycles at least 250cc with helmets that have a black tinted visor

2 Cars or SUVs with tinted windows

Stolen License plates for both motorcycles and Cars

Once they are in place and have a plan additional items might be required depending on the assesment

In June, the team, absent Hunter, traveled to the Bahamas for the surveillance job. It was a leisurely gig, and Soborski posed for photos on the beach in Nassau, shirtless and with a drink and cigar in hand. The crew scouted out a surveillance location behind a chain-link fence off a runway at the Nassau airport and watched through a car window as the bags of cocaine were loaded onto a small private plane. Once the plane departed, they called the Colombians with a report.

After seeing off the plane, Vamvakias met with the Colombians at a hotel. They had brought along photographs and dossiers on the DEA agent and snitch and explained that they wanted the job done in Liberia. Vamvakias texted Hunter that the Colombians were insisting that Soborski and Filter be involved in the mission, as well. "My first question is whether our pay will be the same," Vamvakias asked.

In early August, Stammers, Lim, and the Colombians decided to do a dry run of the meth shipment using a container of tea. Their emails in preparation contain an absurd but highly serious debate about which type of tea to use; the team selected a cheap variety of Oolong since "it is just for a test run for the 100 car parts," the Colombians pointed out, and they were going to throw it out anyway. Soon after, they set the ship on its way from Thailand to Liberia.

In mid-August, while the tea was still en route, Stammers met with the Colombians in Phuket and laid out "Operations Plan Alpha," complete with photos of the docks where the meth would be loaded, maps of its route Liberia, and details about where and when the boats would stop overnight. The plan included a \$15,000 contingency to bribe a "Political Safety Asset," whose supposed purpose, Stammers noted in an encrypted email to Le Roux, was "to be active in case an incident arises and political weight is required to smooth the way" in the Philippines. "This person is the wife of the National Police Director General," he claimed. The Colombians, meanwhile, were to transfer \$6 million for the meth to Hong Kong as soon as it arrived in Thailand.

They would send the drugs via yacht from the Philippines to the Thai port of Laem Chabang, where they'd be moved onto a larger ship for the trip to Africa. Valkovic, the "ground commander" in charge of providing motorcycle-gang members for security, proposed that the transfer take place in a marina, under the cover of a photo shoot. They had considered making the transfer at sea, but Valkovic advised that it was too dangerous because U.S. naval ships regularly anchored in the bay. "Americans," he said, "have their eyes everywhere."

In Thailand, Hunter's team met with the two cartel representatives to finalize arrangements for the assassination of the DEA agent and the snitch. Even though they'd worked together for eight months, Hunter had the pair searched and took their electronic devices, then insisted that the meeting be held outdoors as an extra precaution against being recorded.

Hunter, Gögel, Vamvakias, and the Colombians reviewed the assassination plan step-by-step. (Soborski and Filter had instead been assigned to travel to Estonia to provide security on a weapons deal.) They studied photos of the targets, discussing how to enter and leave the country undetected. Gögel and Vamvakias would have both cars and motorcycles at their disposal. Hunter had purchased the "black guy masks" mentioned in his email: latex

masks specially designed to conceal the wearer's race. They'd tried them on, Gögel said, and even when they closed their eyes the masks "were blinking with us.... Even with real hairs and everything. That's perfect stuff."

Gögel would lead the planning of the murder—"you run the show," one of the Colombians told him—and suggested that with the right weaponry, they could make the job look like a robbery. "I think we'll probably have to gonna get up close to 'em," Vamvakias noted. "You know what I mean? To make sure it gets done." Among the weapons that Hunter had suggested, they settled on German-made MP-7 machine guns. "If I can get those MP-7's, that'd be awesome," Vamvakias said. "That'll guarantee whatever gets in that kill zone goes down."

In late September 2013, the meth was ready to leave the Philippines. On the 24th, Lim and Peralta convened at a hotel in Patong Beach, in Phuket, to await its arrival. The next day, Stammers, Shackels, and Valkovic sat down for a final logistics run through with the Colombians. "All the main players are now on the ground," Stammers emailed Le Roux, "standing by for meet coordinates and time."

The coordinates never came. Instead, officers from Thailand's Narcotics Suppression Bureau swept in a few hours later and arrested all five men.

Six miles away, at Le Roux's Loch Palm villa, Joseph Hunter was awaiting updates on the Liberia job when a dozen commandos from the NSB arrived, led by the deputy police commissioner. The size of the arrest team was probably overkill; Hunter was the only team member home, apparently unarmed. They handcuffed him and led him outside, then sat him on the ground by the front door while cops and police officials posed beside him. In images that would soon run in newspapers around the world, Hunter appears expressionless, his hands cuffed behind his back. He is dressed in cargo shorts and a T-shirt with a *Springfield Unathletic Dept* logo and an image of Homer Simpson asleep on a couch. When I first saw the photos, beneath headlines about Rambo's plot to assassinate a DEA agent, they almost looked staged in their absurdity.

Five thousand miles away, at the same time, Soborski and Filter were picked up by local authorities at a hotel in Tallinn, the capital of Estonia. They'd been doing reconnaissance in advance of a supposed meeting about a weapons deal. The men were transported to a former Soviet prison; the cops roughed up Soborski enough that he would later require abdominal surgery.

That same morning, Vamvakias and Gögel stepped off a plane at Roberts International Airport in Monrovia ready to assassinate the DEA agent and the snitch. The Colombians were supposed to be expecting them, ready with the weapons, masks, and vehicles they'd

need to carry out the job. Instead, as the two men disembarked, a group of Liberian police were waiting, and the would-be assassins were quickly transferred into DEA custody and flown back to New York.

It was a year to the day since Paul Le Roux had made the same trip, with the same result.

Three days later, the Department of Justice held a press conference in Manhattan to announce the success of the sting operation involving Hunter and his assassination squad. The Colombian cartel representatives had been DEA informants, expertly directing a manufactured plot.

“The bone-chilling allegations in today’s indictment read like they were ripped from the pages of a Tom Clancy novel,” said Preet Bharara, the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York. “The charges tell a tale of an international band of mercenary marksmen who enlisted their elite military training to serve as hired guns for evil ends,” Bharara said. He unspooled a condensed version, from the early meetings with the fake Colombians, to the latex masks and the guns, to the point when, as he put it, “the DEA had seen more than enough.”

I watched a video of the press conference back in 2013, as transfixed as the rest of the world by what sounded like an extraordinary criminal and a brilliant investigation. But there was something confounding about the narrative, something that nagged at me. How had the DEA known that these men were prime targets for a sting operation involving the murder of an agent and a snitch? Was the agency hanging out fishing lines around the world, advertising assassinations in the hope of finding someone willing to bite? The story seemed to stop with Joseph Hunter, the sui generis international hit-men squad leader. But what special insight had put the DEA onto him to begin with?

The situation grew even more confounding two months later, when the DEA announced the arrest of Stammers and company in connection with the meth deal. “This investigation continued to highlight the emergence of North Korea as a significant source of methamphetamine in the global drug trade,” DEA administrator Michele Leonhart said in a press release. Curiously, there was no mention that the two cases were related. Only the *Washington Post* made the connection: An anonymous law-enforcement source told the paper that the North Korea meth defendants were “part of a sprawling international drug trafficking ring led by a former American soldier, Joseph Manuel Hunter, who has separately been charged with conspiring to murder a Drug Enforcement Administration agent.”

I wouldn’t find out for another two years that the official’s statement had perhaps been a calculated bit of misinformation; the government, of course, knew all along that there was someone above Hunter. But even at the time, the arrests generated as many questions as answers. One of those answers lie buried in the indictments of the two cases, soon unsealed at the federal court in the Southern District. Both referred to an unnamed

additional person in the sting, labeled variously as a “narcotics trafficking partner” or just “Individual-1.” Whether this was the same mysterious figure in both cases was impossible to tell. I puzzled over the potential connections for a few weeks and then, as the cases settled into the years-long grind of the federal court system, put them on the shelf.

Over the ensuing months, the six defendants in Thailand and the two in Estonia were all extradited to New York City. Each member of Stammers’s group faced multiple charges of conspiring to import methamphetamine to the United States. Hunter, Gögel, and Vamvakias were accused of graver crimes: conspiracy to murder a federal law-enforcement agent, among others. Soborski and Filter were hit with drug charges related to the Bahamas cocaine shipment for which they’d provided surveillance.

Awaiting trial, the defendants were left to grapple not only with the potential for significant prison time, but also the fact that everything they had planned had been a hoax, an elaborate piece of theater put on at the expense of the gullible and the greedy. There was no agent or snitch, no New York buyer for 100 kilos of the purest North Korean meth. Nor was there any cocaine on the Bahamas flight they had so carefully surveilled. The Phuket house had been wired for sound and video by the Thai police at the request of the DEA, a hard drive tucked under the kitchen counter. The “Colombians” had managed to record the other meetings by wearing wires—wires that Hunter had failed to detect. All of the teams’ email communications, with their macho posturing and detailed ops plans, were being simultaneously collected by the DEA’s Special Operations Division.

Perhaps the strangest fact of the whole charade, however, was something that Hunter and Stammers must have realized immediately but the world would wait years to find out. Paul Calder Le Roux, the man they alternately feared and admired—the man who’d brought them all into this scheme to begin with—had been in U.S. custody the whole time. What’s more, he had been playing the lead role in the show.