Absolute Fear

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Episode 4: How the programmer became an insatiable tyrant.

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On August 20, 2009, Mar Supnad, a 31-year-old reporter for the *Manila Bulletin,* got a tip from a police source: A large shipment of illegal weapons had been seized from a ship off the coast of Mariveles, a port city in Bataan province, three hours west of Manila. When Supnad arrived at the site, his contacts told him that the day before, a local fisherman had alerted customs officials to a suspicious cargo ship anchored near the coast. When three port officers motored out to the vessel, they noted that it lacked a national flag, although the word “Panama” was painted on its hull.

They boarded the ship, called the MV *Captain Ufuk,* and questioned the captain, a South African named Lawrence John Burne, who explained that the rest of the 13-member crew were from the Republic of Georgia and spoke no English. One officer noticed 20 large unmarked wooden crates on deck.

When Burne was unable to produce a cargo manifest for the boxes, the officer called his superiors. Soon, a team of customs agents arrived on board with reinforcements from the Philippine National Police and the coast guard. In three of the crates, they found 54 assault rifles. A fourth contained 45 bayonets and 120 empty gun magazines.

Supnad’s sources told him that “at least 16 boxes had already been unloaded and fetched by other, smaller crafts,” he recalled recently, as we sat together in the headquarters of the governor of Bataan. In interviews with authorities, Supnad learned that this cache of weapons had filtered out into the country. It was an election year in the Philippines, and officials feared that the influx of guns might portend a rash of political terrorism. Some believed that the weapons were destined for rebel groups operating in the southern part of the country, including militants from Abu Sayyaf, a terrorist group linked at the time to Al Qaeda. The news of the illegal shipment, Supnad told me, “exploded like a bomb.”

On a December morning last year, I drove from Manila to Bataan to see Supnad after I read his reporting on the gun shipment. The events that followed the interception of the *Ufuk* struck me as a turning point in Paul Le Roux’s history. They mirrored his shift from a kind of gray-market entrepreneur, making hundreds of millions of dollars in online pharmacies, to an insatiable tyrant atop a global crime cartel of his own invention.

The MV *Ufuk* affair was, as well, the nexus of the kind of indiscriminate violence that would become Le Roux's hallmark, and the beginning of a chain of events that would culminate in his downfall. Mar Supnad himself would become a player in that story—and nearly pay a very steep price.

On the morning of my visit, Supnad was at his side job, as the media adviser to the provincial governor. He has closely cropped black hair and a pair of wire-rim glasses, and wore a bright orange and black checked shirt with a pen clipped between the buttons. Despite a perpetual furrow between his eyebrows, he exuded a preternatural cheer, even when describing the deadly consequences of his story. "As you know, our job is to expose, no matter whose toes we step on," he told me. "As journalists we get threats, intimidation. But it's what we must do."

On a black leather couch beneath a portrait of the governor, Supnad recalled what his police contacts told him in 2009: that during interrogation, Burne revealed that he had very recently taken over for another captain, a British sailor named Bruce Jones. By the time the port officers had pulled alongside the *Ufuk,* Jones was long gone, as were the 16 crates full of weapons. The guns were bound for a Manila gun dealer called Red White and Blue Arms Incorporated.

The evening before the ship was intercepted, a small yacht called the *Mou Man Tai* had motored out from the nearby Subic Bay Yacht Club, taken the weapons and Jones onboard, and sped off into the night. The *Mou Man Tai* was found a few days later anchored off a remote fishing village. But neither Jones nor the guns were there, and Jones became the subject of a nationwide manhunt.

Five days after the seizure of the MV *Ufuk,* Supnad got a call from a family friend named Joe Frank Zuñiga. A prominent local lawyer, Zuñiga said that he was representing Bruce Jones, who was currently hiding in a forested area of the mountains above the coast. He wanted to meet with Supnad for an interview, to "tell to the world that he has nothing to do with the illegal shipment of guns."

The next day, Supnad drove into the mountains above the coastal city of Subic Bay. It was dark when he arrived at a small house, where he met Jones and Zuñiga. The three drove to a nearby restaurant. A photo from the meeting shows them sitting at a table with a red and white checked tablecloth, Jones in a light yellow T-shirt. The dirty-blond mane of hair he wore in the widely circulated photos of him had been cut short. Supnad recalled that Jones seemed distressed to the point of tears. "I am not a terrorist," he said.

Jones told Supnad his life story: He was 49 years old and had come to the Philippines in 1993 from Bristol, England. He was married to a 25-year-old local named Maricel and lived just outside Subic, the home of a former U.S. naval base. When Jones's predicament was reported back in Bristol, a hometown friend described him as a "lovable rogue," and his

former employer at the Bristol Ferry recalled that Jones had “an eye for adventure.” There was “clearly something about his character,” he added, “that meant he was prone to get caught up in a bit of trouble.”

Jones told Supnad that trouble arrived in August 2009, when a fellow Brit named Dave Smith approached him about sailing a ship from Turkey to Indonesia to the Philippines. A Manila-based company called La Plata Trading would pay for the journey and supply the crew. Smith arranged for Jones to fly to Turkey and purchase the MV *Ufuk,* a rusty but seaworthy 2,400-ton vessel. Along with a Georgian crew, Jones sailed down the coast of Africa, stopping in Ghana and Congo before rounding the Cape of Good Hope and heading for Indonesia.

At a dock in Jakarta, he picked up the cargo, a shipment of weapons from a company called PT Pindad, and set out for the Philippines. Jones told Supnad that he believed the shipment was legitimate: He had been supplied with an end-user certificate—a document in the arms trade establishing the legitimate destination for a weapons purchase— indicating that the guns were meant for a buyer in Mali. Around 50 Indonesian police and soldiers supervised the pickup. (Later, I found a classified cable from the U.S. embassy in Jakarta, released by WikiLeaks, revealing that the gun sale had been approved by the Indonesian Ministry of Defense.)

As Jones piloted the ship toward Bataan, however, he got a call from the owner of La Plata Trading, a man he’d never met, telling him to delay bringing the ship into port. The next day, he was told to steer the ship closer to Subic Bay and wait to dock. When the *Ufuk* had been in a holding pattern for several days, Jones began to worry. His wife was pregnant, due any day; Jones told the owner he wanted to get off.

That night, the *Mou Man Tai,* with Smith on board, brought a rubber speedboat alongside the *Ufuk.* Jones was replaced by Burne, the South African captain, and the 16 crates of guns were removed. The smaller boat took Jones back to Subic.

When the news broke that the ship had been seized, the press labeled Jones the brains behind the shipment instead of his employers, a large-scale organized-crime group that extended far beyond La Plata Trading. Terrified, Jones fled into the mountains.

“He told me that this syndicate was well financed,” Supnad said, its alleged owner “holding three kinds of passports.” Jones was willing to spill what he knew about the people who had hired him, he said, if the government would provide him with protection.

Supnad published the revelations on August 26, 2009, under the headline “British Captain of Arms Ship Seeks Protection.” Two weeks later, Jones surrendered to the Bureau of Customs, accompanied by Zuñiga. According to a report from the Philippine Office of the Special

Envoy on Transnational Crime, “Jones told investigators that he was hired by La Plata Trading Inc. through the help of Smith last August, to buy the vessel worth $800,000 in Turkey and the Indonesia-made assault rifles and pistols for $86,000.”

In February 2010, the Philippine government charged 37 people—Burne and the entire Georgian crew, plus Jones—with illegally bringing the guns into the Philippines. But the indictment also covered the owners of La Plata Trading and Red White and Blue Arms, including “David Smith a.k.a. Dave Smith,” “Michael T. Archangel,” and one “Johan a.k.a. John Paul Leraux.”

Zuñiga requested that the Philippine Department of Justice place Jones under witness protection and made another public plea for his safety. “Mr. Jones is afraid for his life,” Zuñiga told a reporter. “He is a victim and not a suspect.”

In his brief dealings with Le Roux’s empire, Jones had glimpsed enough to be afraid. During the period between 2007 and 2011, Le Roux’s businesses had begun to metastasize, expanding simultaneously into logging, precious metals mining, gold smuggling, land deals, cocaine shipping, and arms dealing. These activities were spread across dozens of shell companies registered all over the world.

As I mapped Le Roux’s sprawling network, different parts began to intersect. Israelis associated with the call centers in Tel Aviv were deployed to run international logging operations. They recruited their friends, who were dispatched to Hong Kong to guard houses full of gold or to Brazil to set up front companies. Names that I’d seen on documents of organizations related to Le Roux’s pharmacy operation showed up in businesses connected to arms trafficking or money laundering.

The person who tied many of these threads together for me was Lulu, the relative of Le Roux’s who contacted me in early March. In a series of online chats, Lulu told me that by the early 2000s, he and Le Roux had fallen out of touch. Then, in 2007, Le Roux approached him about a job. Over the course of a single year, Lulu came in contact with several of Le Roux’s operations and became familiar with many of the players—Joseph Hunter among them—whose names would later surface in American court documents.

In March of this year, a former employee of Le Roux’s also forwarded me80 pages of online chat logs with Le Roux, who called himself Johan. In them, Le Roux discusses operations as varied as moving gold out of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, purchasing a plane, and seeking suppliers of rocket-propelled grenades:

> **[6/21/2008 6:09:03 PM] johan says:** RPG-7 two units needed with 20 rounds, 10 grenades, plastic explosives, 4 MP5’s with 2 15 clips ammo each, it is just a sample order to check if i can supply, i need it delivered in mozambique, i will take it from there to asia myself

None of my sources knew how Le Roux got involved in the weapons market, but his organizations were staffed by ex-soldiers and mercenaries. Among his top echelon, Le Roux was closest to a man named Dave Smith. A British native, Smith had done security work in Iraq and then for a risk-management company in the Philippines. He allegedly carried an American passport, leaving some associates confused as to his national origins. Le Roux had hired Smith sometime before 2008 and elevated him to a kind of all-purpose deputy and consigliere, trusted to coordinate gold shipments around Africa or arrange for the dispatch of an inconvenient person. It was Smith who, in 2009, stood over Moran Oz, floating in the waters off Subic Bay, and threatened to kill him.

One of Le Roux's former employees whom I met in Manila—to ensure his safety, I refer to him as Gil—recalled that Le Roux had once told Smith, "I live vicariously through you." Le Roux mostly sat behind a computer; Smith was a man of action.

People like Smith gave Le Roux access to the network of international security contractors that spanned the globe after the contractor-aided wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. "I was forwarded an email from a friend that was working in Iraq," a South African who joined one of Le Roux's companies told me. "They were looking for snipers and close-protection personnel. I sent my CV and was flown to Manila a week later."

Such recruits could be involved in anything from protecting smuggled shipments to arranging the transportation of prostitutes used for bribing government officials in Papua New Guinea:

> **[6/8/2008 5:17:59 PM] johan says:** major business in PNG need to come up with a white chick
>
> **[6/8/2008 5:18:07 PM] johan says:** promised it to a government minister there
>
> **[6/8/2008 5:18:11 PM] johan says:** vital to my business

In the chat logs, there were countless such discussions, a documented trail of acts that the perpetrators were simultaneously trying to ensure could never be documented. Le Roux was paranoid about security, but not quite paranoid enough. "It is ok to talk normally as Skype is encrypted," he says at one point, then changes his mind and asks his correspondent to download an encrypted messenger program or use an email service that Le Roux himself had built.

The messages also capture Le Roux's encyclopedic knowledge of various industries. At times I was numbed by the sheer banality of his sprawling criminal network as I paged through thousands of words about customs issues in the Congo, copper prices on the London Metal Exchange, and arrangements to buy certain brands of logging winches.

At other moments, however,they reveal Le Roux's chilling attitude toward violence and how increasingly capricious he could be in meting it out. In one conversation, Le Roux casually inquires whether a man who owes him money has any children.

Lulu told me that while he was working for Le Roux, he developed a growing suspicion that he too was at risk. Two Le Roux hires in Africa lost a considerable sum of money in a scam, Lulu said, and Le Roux blamed him. At one point, Le Roux ordered him to Manila and then failed to show up at a dinner meeting. That night, Lulu heard that another associate had been arrested on what he believed to be a bogus drug charge. Lulu immediately went to the airport and caught the next flight to Hong Kong.

He picked a hotel and checked in, assuming he was safe. Then the landline rang. "It was Paul, asking me why I've run away," he told me. "I put the phone down, checked out, and rushed to the airport." The first flight was to Bangkok. "Same story," he told me. This time it was a Le Roux associate on the line.

With no idea how he was being tracked, Lulu hid at a friend's apartment in another country while he tried to figure out Le Roux's intentions. In one online chat, Lulu told Le Roux, "I thought you were hunting me." Le Roux responded with a smiley face. "Buddy if I was hunting you," he said, "you would be dead."

Lulu told me that he never saw Le Roux again and "spent the next five years in absolute fear."

Mar Supnad's account of his meeting with Jones was a coup, cited in the national and international press. But soon Supnad began receiving threats. The first one was "friendly," he told me: A journalist colleague invited him to meet at a Starbucks in Subic Bay. He offered him 500,000 pesos (around $10,000) to stop writing about the *Ufuk*. "The emissary," Supnad would later write in an article recounting the bribe attempt, "told this writer that top PNP [Philippine National Police] and DoJ [Philippine Department of Justice] officials will handle the gun smuggling case provided there will be no more exposé on the newspapers."

Not long after came a second offer: Someone from the "syndicate" behind the gun shipment approached Supnad's editor andsuggested that Supnad take a three-month trip to Hong Kong or Macau, fully paid for, rather than write any more stories about the *Ufuk.* Again Supnad said no, and his editor agreed. "Just continue writing what you know about the smuggling," he said the editor told him.

Supnad started varying his route to work and avoiding the Subic area entirely. He changed the plates on his car regularly and entered and exited his residence cautiously. Sometimes he wore a wig. He heard rumors that the syndicate had paid off a police official, to the tune of 30 million pesos, to make the *Ufuk* case—and the charges against one "Johan," the man behind it—go away.

Bruce Jones, by contrast, gradually let his vigilance lapse, confident, according to Supnad, "that the syndicate was no longer running after him." By September 2010, it had been a year since Jones had told investigators what he knew, and he decided to venture out. On the morning of September 21, Jones drove his wife and son to the Marquee Mall, in Angeles City, another former home to a U.S. military base outside Manila.

They were meeting a friend, an American named John Nash, for lunch, along with Nash's wife. Jones and Nash knew each other from the expat circles in Subic Bay, where Nash ran a security company that, among other things, supplied bouncers for local bars and security for a Sea World–type water park called Ocean Adventure. The area is favored by former soldiers, drifters, and expat men pursuing cheap tropical lodging and an active sex trade. A local reporter told me that if people "had some problems with some other expats, they go to him," referring to Nash. He spoke five Filipino dialects fluently, and rumors swirled—possibly created by Nash's own dubious bragging, the reporter said—that he'd been in the CIA. Few people believed him, the reporter said, but at the very least "he was well connected."

According to the police report of the events of September 21, at 2 p.m. the group departed from lunch, Jones and his wife in their gray Mitsubishi Lancer and Nash following a few minutes behind. They planned to meet up at the nearby Mountain Clark Firing Range.

As the car turned down Don Jose street, 100 feet from the entrance to the gun range, a red Honda XRM motorcycle pulled up behind it, with two men in helmets riding in tandem. As the vehicles approached a speed bump, the motorcycle zoomed in front, blocking the car's path. The man on the back leaped off, approached the car, and fired into the driver-side window. The gunman climbed back on the motorcycle, and the men sped off in the direction from which they'd come.

Jones was hit multiple times, and one bullet passed through his body and struck Maricel in the back. He fell over on top of her, vomiting blood. Maricel froze, terrified, and then opened the door and climbed out.

She frantically called Nash, who raced down Don Jose to where the Lancer was parked, pulled Maricel and her son into his car, and drove to the hospital. The baby was unhurt, and doctors quickly stabilized Maricel. Jones died slumped across the passenger's seat, his wife's shoes still on the floor next to him.

Five years later, I stood on that spot with Roberto Manuel, the officer who conducted the initial investigation into the crime. We could hear the popping sound of guns from the firing range just down the street—ideal cover for a midday assassination. According to the police report, investigators found four .45-caliber shell casings and a deformed bullet near the car.

Manuel showed me some crime-scene photos he'd taken that day and demonstrated with hand motions exactly how far from Jones's window the gunman must have fired: close enough to ensure accuracy, he said, but not so close as to shatter the window.

There was little other evidence, however. Tandem motorcycle riders are a common style of assassination in the Philippines, not least because helmeted killers can speed off without being identified. That same day police questioned Nash, who gave his full name as John William Nash, Jr., a 49-year-old American working as a "consultant" in the Subic Bay area. Nash said that Jones had told him he'd received repeated death threats and had noticed strangers near his home, whom Jones believed were connected to his "employers" on the *Ufuk.*

Nash told police that he and his wife had lingered for a minute after lunch, putting some packages in the trunk of their car. He recalled receiving the call from Maricel and arriving to find "Bruce already bloodied and lying at the front seat of his car."

By the time of Bruce Jones's murder, Le Roux needed personnel who could handle global operations both legitimate and illegal. To do so, he ported over Israelis from his call centers, relatives like Lulu, and a collection of South African and Zimbabwean associates.

Such was the case with a mild-mannered 28-year-old Zimbabwean engineer named Robert McGowan. In 2007, McGowan heard about a rich South African who paid well and needed help importing equipment for a major logging project in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

But before the project could get under way, Le Roux told McGowan, they needed to form several corporate entities, in Hong Kong and in the U.S., which they would use to acquire the heavy machinery for clearing roads and transporting trees. "I had a list of questions: What are the companies going to be used for and things like that," McGowan told me when I reached him by phone earlier this year. "Everything I did I tried to keep straight and aboveboard."

McGowan flew to Hong Kong and opened a company called Diko Limited. Then he scoured the world for logging machinery at the best price. When he found earth-moving equipment in Texas, Le Roux paid him to travel to the U.S. and create a pair of companies to handle the export: Armada Commerce and Quality Fountain. "PLR had somehow already organized everything before I got there, and all I had to do was open up the bank accounts," McGowan would later write in an email to a lawyer, recounting his dealings with Le Roux.

For many people affiliated with Le Roux, it was difficult to grasp the scope of what he was engaged in. He kept his various businesses separated from one another; someone like McGowan could have no idea about the weapons aboard the *Ufuk.*

"It was really compartmentalized," Gil, my source in Manila, said. Among other projects, Gil

was hired to help with the transport of gold from Hong Kong to the Philippines. “I didn’t really pay attention” to whether the work was fully legal, he said, although he declined an assignment from Le Roux involving methamphetamine trafficking. For the most part, “when he told me to do something, I did it,” Gil said. But “morally I knew it was wrong. I lost the plot.”

At other times, Le Roux seemed to mix his businesses out of operational convenience. In 2009, he paid McGowan—nominally someone involved only in the timber business—to fly to Israel and register a call center called Customer Service Worldwide, or CSWW, where he met Alon Berkman and Moran Oz. Seven years later, I found his British passport in the company’s registration documents.

Many of Le Roux’s operations seemed utterly quixotic. “I remember he phoned me at one point in a panic, wanting a list of all the farmland in Zimbabwe available,” Lulu told me. That request, it turned out, was part of a scheme to lease land from the Zimbabwean government and then bring back white farmers who had lost the land when it shed colonialism and minority white rule in the early 1980s. To make the deal happen, Le Roux had asked an Israeli named Levi Kugel to find an international lobbyist and former Israeli-intelligence agent named Ari Ben-Menashe, who had close ties to Zimbabwe’s leader, Robert Mugabe. Le Roux subsequently paid Ben-Menashe $12 million to lobby Mugabe. “We want recognition that injustice was done in the past and that the land-reform program corrects that,” Le Roux told the Washington newspaper *The Hill,* in what appears to be the only media statement he’s ever given.

“Then the whole thing died and he never spoke about it again,” Lulu said.

Sometime in late 2008 or 2009, Le Roux similarly abandoned the logging operation and cut off communications with McGowan. McGowan told me that he traveled to Manila to get some answers. Other people who knew Le Roux, he said, told him, “Don’t go, it’s dangerous. I said, ‘Why should I not go? I’ve got nothing to hide.’” When he arrived in the Philippines, McGowan told me, “it was like a wild goose chase: Go here, go there. I don’t know if he had someone following me.”

McGowan eventually confronted Le Roux, who told him that he wanted to keep working together. “That was the last time I saw him,” McGowan told me.

I’d first come across McGowan’s name in the filings of the companies that he admitted to registering: CSWW in Israel, and Armada and Quality Fountain in the U.S. But there were other companies with his name on them that he said he didn’t know existed. “I’ve just Googled that right now,” he told me when I informed him that an online company called ABSystems was registered in his name. “I’ve never heard of it until you sent me an email this

evening." Another company McGowan says he knew nothing about was called Southern Ace, and it would end up playing a bizarre role in, of all places, Somalia, perpetually on the short list of the world's most failed states.

In 2010, the United Nations Security Council sent an investigative team into Somalia to assess the country's instability and its epidemic of sea piracy. The team, which was led by a Frenchman named Aurélien Llorca, reported several dire findings, among them a troubling rise in military involvement by private security companies, including a previously unknown outfit called Southern Ace.

In the report issued by the group, they noted that Southern Ace had begun operating in the state of Galmudug, in central Somalia, in 2009, "presenting itself as 'traders and importers of fisheries products in Hong-Kong.'" In actuality, Southern Ace began recruiting a local militia and arming it with AK-47's, grenade launchers, and truck-mounted heavy machine guns. They also imported uniforms, flak jackets, and radios from the Philippines. Based on an interview with a Somali military source, Llorca determined that the company was actually owned by one "Paul Calder Le Roux also known as Bernard John Bowlins."

Llorca reported that Le Roux had obtained permission to land an Antonov plane at the local airport in Galmudug and that he "planned to import by air a large quantity of heavy weapons, including 75 kilograms of C4 explosives, 200 land mines, one million rounds of 7.62 mm ammunition, and five AT-3 'Sagger' anti-tank missiles."

The idea of a foreign outfit launching its own militia in this part of the country "was completely surreal," Llorca told me last fall. "It was a completely underreported area with few UN operations, because the country was very dangerous." Southern Ace, he said, "just came without informing anyone and formed a business out of the blue."

It got weirder. The militia Le Roux had backed was entangled in an ongoing war between local pastoral nomads and another clan. In November 2010, a battle involving Le Roux's troops raged for several days, "causing allegedly heavy casualties from both sides." Why would Le Roux, sitting in Manila, have a vested interest in a power struggle between two clans in Somalia? It seemed absurd.

I asked several sources about Le Roux's precise goals in Somalia, but they seemed opaque even to people who were employed by Southern Ace. Gil told me that he'd heard that Le Roux was planning to an island nation in the Indian Ocean. "He wanted to put an army together and bring back in the former president," Gil said. "Or something like that. So he would have a place to operate from."

Like so many Le Roux stories, it seemed at first too cinematic to be true, and I dismissed it as the kind of tale that gets circulated among mercenary types over too many drinks. As I pored through the transcripts of the wiretaps of Le Roux's enforcer, Joseph Hunter, I came

across this: “We have guys in Somalia buying weapons that are making an army,” Hunter told an associate. “They was making an army in Somalia because we were gonna invade an island, just… you can’t make it up. Not even in a movie. This is real stuff.”

Llorca was nonetheless skeptical of the island-invasion plan. “It’s a bit far,” he said of the Maldives, which lie almost 2,000 miles to the east of Somalia. “What we know is that he tried to import a lot of weapons. But from my understanding at that time it was clearly for his Somali operations, not for something else.” This was at the height of Somali sea piracy, and Llorca’s team suspected that Le Roux intended to set up “a kind of private security company on the shore of Somalia, in one of the most pirate-infested areas, to establish a base and then get money from shipping companies to disrupt the attacks from pirates.”

According to Llorca, when that project failed, Le Roux’s local contact in Somalia then set up a company called GalSom Limited, which operated on the Southern Ace compound in Galmudug and began experimenting with “the cultivation of hallucinogenic plants, including opium, coca, and cannabis.” GalSom imported greenhouses, herbicides, and farming equipment from around the world. A former Southern Ace employee, who didn’t work directly in Somalia but conducted similar projects elsewhere, told me that Le Roux had said he wanted to start a cocaine plantation in Somalia.

Llorca said that Le Roux abandoned the project as quickly as he’d started it, however, once he discovered that he’d been duped into paying his militiamen $300 per month, twice the market rate. After spending several million dollars in Galmudug, in mid-2010 he abandoned whatever plans he had in the region. Locals overran the compound and took possession of the weapons, and one of Southern Ace’s employees was shot and killed in the ensuing chaos. “He blew up with his main guy over 150 bucks per person,” Lulu told me. “That is so Paul.”

When Llorca’s team’s findings were released by the UN in July 2011, the international press responded with a flurry of articles recounting the astonishing facts and pondering the whereabouts and global reach of this “shadowy South African businessman,” as one article referred to him. When Robert McGowan read the news, he panicked. With “that Southern Ace thing,” McGowan told me, “all of a sudden under my name I owned this large private army.”

When I found the UN report online last fall, I combed through it looking for anything that might draw connections between areas of research that had so far eluded me. Eventually, I came upon this: “Local start up costs for the period March to June 2009 amounted to at least US$500,000,” Llorca reported, “wired from Paul Calder Le Roux’s company in Philippines, La Plata Trading.” La Plata, the same company that funded weapons purchases in Somalia, had also sent Dave Smith to hire Bruce Jones as captain of the MV *Ufuk.*

I decided to look up Bruce Jones's lawyer, Joe Frank Zuñiga, and ask him if there was anything else Jones might have said about his dealings with Le Roux. The first Google result stunned me enough that I wrote a note in my files that says, simply: "Holy shit."

It was a headline from a Philippine news site dated July 5, 2012: "Where is lawyer Joe Frank Zuñiga?" According to the article, "On June 20, prominent Bataan lawyer Joe Frank Zuñiga left his home in Balanga City to meet with a client in nearby Subic, but never returned and has been missing since."

Two months later, I was in the Manila office of Peter Lugay, chief of the NBI's special task force. The Zuñiga case had landed on Lugay's desk in 2012, after Zuñiga's wife requested that the bureau take on the search for her missing husband. The details were relatively sparse: At 11:45 on the morning of June 20, Zuñiga was last seen in the Subic Bay area after a meeting with two men. One of them was Timothy Desmond, the CEO of the Ocean Adventure water park. (Desmond, an American animal behaviorist, once trained the killer whale in the movie *Free Willy.*) The other attendee was the head of security for Ocean Adventure, John Nash.

Nash and Zuñiga were "quite close," Lugay told me. "They called each other 'compadre.'" Nash was also the last person to see both Bruce Jones and Joe Frank Zuñiga alive. Around the time of the meeting, a witness reported seeing a man near Zuñiga's car being dragged into a white van.

Lugay's colleague, agent Arnold Diaz, told me that since taking on the Zuñiga case they had been trying to "identify all the other events leading to Nash. You have looked at Bruce Jones, right?"

I said that I had.

"And Mike Lontoc?" It didn't ring a bell. "Mike Lontoc was the owner of Red White and Blue," he said. That name I did know: Red White and Blue Arms was the alleged destination for the weapons on the MV *Ufuk* in August 2009.

Back at my hotel I looked up Lontoc. I found that he was the general manager of Red White and Blue and also a member of the Philippine national target-shooting team. RWB's website had been registered to a company owned by Paul Le Roux.

According to news reports, one afternoon in September 2011, a year after the murder of Bruce Jones, Lontoc was driving from a shooting competition in a Manila suburb. Typically, he employed a driver, but on this day his driver had failed to show up. As Lontoc slowed down at a busy intersection, he received a call on his cell phone. Simultaneously, four men surrounded Lontoc's pickup truck, firing into it with an Uzi and several handguns. He drove another 100 feet before slamming into a concrete wall and died on the scene.

Lontoc's widow told a local newspaper that her husband had gotten mixed up with a gun-running syndicate and had tried to get out. A year later, a man named Jimmy Pianiar confessed to killing Lontoc, saying that he and three others had attempted to murder him on at least five separate occasions. The hit had been paid for by a man who police would identify only as "the mastermind."

"Have you encountered the name Herbert Tan Tiu?" Agent Diaz asked me. "I think some of the arms shipments were recovered from his apartment." Indeed, I later found out that in early October 2010, the Philippine National Police raided Tan Tiu's house and discovered a cache of Indonesian-made assault rifles that they reportedly suspected had come from the MV *Ufuk.*

"What happened to Tan Tiu?" I asked, dreading the answer.

"He is also missing," Lugay said.

In the two years since the *Ufuk* had been taken into possession by Philippine authorities, two people with information about the arms shipment had been gunned down in broad daylight and two others had disappeared. Of Zuñiga, Lugay said, "Unfortunately, I think we can safely assume that he is dead."

As I talked to police and other sources, it seemed obvious to me that thedisappearances of four witnesses connected to the *Ufuk* had to have been ordered by Le Roux. But no one could offer definitive proof. Then one afternoon, with the help of a local resident, I snuck into Dasmariñas, the closely guarded gated community where Le Roux had lived in Manila. We went by Le Roux's old house, a relatively modest stucco home with a solid brown gate. Security cameras still hung from the roof, but the high walls looked water stained, and paint was chipping around the barred windows. A neighborhood security guard told me that he didn't remember much about Le Roux beyond a strange incident involving a man who'd been arrested on the Dasmariñas grounds while trying to take a motorcycle.

I later found an account of the story in the *Philippine Star* that clarified some details. A Filipino named had been caught trying to steal a motorcycle from the security guards' compound. Baricuatro was arrested, and when police searched his backpack they found, according to the article, "questionable documents," along with a wig, a camera, and various false ID cards.Baricuatro also reportedly matched the sketch of a man seen conducting surveillance on Michael Lontoc's pickup truck hours before he was ambushed.

Mar Supnad, the newspaper reporter who'd been investigating the story of the *Ufuk*, told me that a police source had contacted him after Baricuatro's arrest. They'd found a printout of a hit list in Baricuatro's pocket, the source said. "And number one in his hit list is Mar Supnad." He paused to make sure I understood. "That is me."

Upon hearing this news, Supnad paid a visit to Baricuatro in jail. He claimed that he was a

high-ranking police official who could help Baricuatro out of his predicament. According to Supnad, Baricuatro told him he was hired not to kill Supnad, but to conduct surveillance on him so that someone else could murder him. The man who'd hired him, Baricuatro said, was Dave Smith.

Meanwhile, the investigation and trials of those involved with the *Ufuk* largely fizzled. The Georgian crew members were deported back to their home country. By 2014, a court filing from the Philippine government revealed that the remaining cases, including one against "Johan" a.k.a. "Paul Lereaux" and his top deputies had been "archived." Only one participant, Lawrence John Burne, the South African ship captain, was tried and convicted in absentia, after jumping bail. He has never been found.

The one thing everyone I spoke to seemed to agree on was that Le Roux operated with a staggering level of impunity. He had so many PNP and government officials in his pocket, and he had intimidated so many others, that he could make any case go away. "I don't know how deep this goes," Lugay told me. "We tried to talk to the prosecutor, to set up a meeting about the case, and you know what the prosecutor said? 'Tell your boss I'm not talking to him, because people disappear in this case.'"

Gil, my source in Manila, told me something similar, but with a twist. "There was a lot of money spread around by Mr. Le Roux," he said. To avoid any repercussions for illegally shipping that many arms into the Philippines, plus the subsequent murders and disappearances of any possible witnesses, Gil said, "he would have the PNP *and* the NBI involved."

It was suddenly very hard to know who to trust.

Robert McGowan was trying to get his life together after his first run-in with Paul Le Roux—he was left holding the bag with suppliers of logging equipment around the world from the canceled venture in the Congo—when he discovered that Le Roux's operations in Somalia were listed under his name.

"I've never met him, but he's the name on a lot of companies," Gil told me when I asked about McGowan. "It is a real person, he lives in Africa somewhere. At one point he asked to be taken off of everything." McGowan was frantic after learning that a UN report had named Southern Ace, registered in the UK in his name, in connection with illegal arms trafficking and drug manufacturing. He called Alon Berkman, who ran Le Roux's operations in Israel. According to one source I spoke with, Berkman relayed to Le Roux that McGowan was trying to reach him, and Le Roux said to ignore him.

McGowan then tried another tack, contacting an attorney in the U.S. who was married to an old friend of his wife. McGowan asked if he could take legal action against Le Roux, to somehow get his name removed from any companies he'd registered on Le Roux's behalf and any for which his identity had been used without his knowledge.

"I need to try and close up everything I have linking me with this guy, including the companies in the USA, Israel & Hong Kong," he wrote to the attorney. McGowan had evidence that Le Roux had broken into his email account using his mother's maiden name—which Le Roux had once asked him for. "I do not have the resources available to go to each of these countries to shut everything down or to hire lawyers," McGowan wrote.

"These people are very dangerous," he continued. "If we take this up with law enforcement in the USA, what sort of protection can we get? They do need to be stopped and justice done, but I do not want to put my family at risk."

The lawyer replied that "in the simplest terms you have been the victim of identity theft." The wrinkle, he said, "is that the person who stole your identity is an international gunrunner and drug smuggler." The lawyer offered to put him in touch with American law enforcement, but even they would be unable to guarantee his safety in Africa.

On a late Friday afternoon in 2014, John Nash, the Ocean Adventure security guard and friend of two dead men, was headed down a narrow beachside road in Barretto, a town just north of Subic. Suddenly, an SUV appeared in front of him, blocking his path. Before he could reverse, another closed him in from behind. A half-dozen agents from the National Bureau of Investigation leaped out, weapons in hand, and ordered Nash out of his vehicle. Within moments, they'd hustled him into one of the unmarked SUVs and were on the highway for the two-hour drive back to Manila.

Peter Lugay and his colleagues told me the arrest was a shock maneuver. Suspecting that Nash had sources in the local police, they had kept the operation secret—so successfully, in fact, that the next morning the Barretto police spokesperson announced that Nash had been kidnapped by armed men. The police were combing through surveillance footage, he said, "for the possible identification of suspects."

The reason for Nash's arrest was perhaps even stranger than the circumstances of it. When the NBI had begun pursuing Nash as a person of interest in the Zuñiga case, they ran his American passport with the U.S. embassy in Manila. The reply was startling: John Nash, Lugay told me, "was using an expired passport that belonged to a deceased person." The Embassy canceled Nash's passport, and the NBI made the arrest.

By the time I sat down with Lugay, Nash had been in NBI limbo for over 18 months. There was not enough information to charge him with anything other than immigration violations, but since Nash refused to give another name, there was nowhere for him to be deported to.

They had no idea who he was or where he was from. The NBI's efforts to get any nation to claim him had failed**.** Besides the U.S., Lugay said, "we tried the British, Australians, South Africans. We were in a quandary." Nor did anyone seem to have known Nash by any other name. What's more, Timothy Desmond, the *Free Willy* trainer who had hired Nash to run security, was now an international fugitive. After being accused of defrauding an investor behind Ocean Adventure, Desmond had disappeared.

In photos that Lugay showed me, the man known as John Nash is in his fifties, with a shaved white head and considerable bulk. The NBI agents said he'd lost some weight while in custody. Lugay declined my request to speak with him but asked whether I might be able to help them figure out who he really is. Specifically, he wondered if I might have any clues as to the meaning of his tattoo, a cartoon bulldog smoking a cigar.

For now, Nash remains in NBI custody, a man without a name or country. No one has ever been arrested in the murder of Bruce Jones, or the disappearance of Joe Frank Zuñiga.

A few days after meeting with Lugay and Diaz, I sat with Gil outside a Starbucks in Manila. He told me that he had asked Le Roux about Jones's assassination. "I said, 'I don't understand why you had that captain killed.'"

"He was going to testify," Le Roux said.

"His wife and child were in the car," Gil said.

"I didn't have *them* killed."

In truth, no one seemed safe from Le Roux's malice, including those who were close to him, like Dave Smith. In the years after the *Ufuk* incident, there was talk that Smith had started skimming off the drugs and gold that he was transporting for Le Roux. "I think [Smith] started taking drugs, and that's probably why he started being loose and spending the stuff," Gil told me. "He was pissed off because he wasn't really making much money, and he was doing so much, traveling here and there, as the second in command." There was a rumor that he'd bought a Lamborghini.

At some point, Le Roux got wind of it. "My understanding is Smith was picked up outside a bar, drunk, and thrown into a van," Gil said. if what he said next is true, but perhaps the truth of what Gil heard is immaterial. "My understanding was that he was placed in a shallow grave and given a telephone." Paul Le Roux was on the other end. "'You see what happens?' he says. And then they shot him and buried him."

Not long after, Gil said, Le Roux met him at the Hard Rock Café in Manila. "I guess you know what's going on," he said Le Roux told him. "I didn't need Dave. You're lucky I need you."

In the transcripts of the DEA's wiretap recordings of Joseph Hunter, I found the story of Smith's demise, told in brief. "Dave got killed for stealing money," Hunter told an associate. "And then I took his job."

"The Mastermind" is taking a two-week hiatus. Episode 5 will arrive on April 14. Remember that you can read each episode two days early in the Texture app.