

## Undercover: Spies hired to infiltrate anti-coal campaign

Tom Allard : 7-9 minutes : 6/1/2014

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Former soldiers and intelligence operatives have been sent to infiltrate a network of anti-coal protesters aiming to thwart a multibillion dollar expansion of coal production in northern NSW.

Using false identities, the spies-for-hire have attempted to penetrate the inner sanctum of a group of environmentalists and local landowners who have vigorously attempted to stop the coalmines at Maules Creek and Boggabri.



Tangled web: Suspected spy Marnie Tisot.

In what represents a significant escalation of a heated battle between Whitehaven Coal and Idemitsu Australia Resources and anti-coal activists, a Fairfax Media investigation has uncovered a clandestine campaign of significant scale but ham-fisted execution.

Several undercover agents were discovered by the activists, including one alleged spy Marnie Tisot, who was confronted on camera. The operation raises questions of its legality given the outright deception to disrupt protest movements.



Verifact owner Dan Crowley.

Fairfax has interviewed individuals directly involved in the espionage and multiple sources with detailed inside knowledge of the surveillance have independently alleged it was orchestrated by a company run by a former Australian military intelligence officer, Tony Groves, and his partner, Maria Topia.

While their firm, the Centre for Intelligence and Risk Management, had direct operational responsibility for the espionage, it is only one link in a chain of companies believed to be involved.

Who the ultimate client was remains a mystery. Spies in the field were not told, although it was clear the Centre for Intelligence and Risk Management was acting for another party or parties.

Several leading corporations and prominent Australians are also involved in the coal expansion in northern NSW and the security

operations that protect them.



Centre for Intelligence and Risk Management's Maria Topia. *Credit: Facebook*

Whitehaven Coal is chaired by former deputy prime minister Mark Vaile and was owned by Nathan Tinkler until he sold his shares last June.

In a statement, Whitehaven denied it was involved in or aware of the private spying.

But, asked if the security firm that protects the Maules Creek site, Verifact, had any knowledge of the operation, it said only: "Verifact are contracted to monitor access onto site to ensure compliance with our workplace health and safety obligations."

Verifact is owned by former World Cup winning Wallaby rugby union star and undercover Queensland policeman Dan Crowley, whose biography was entitled *Undercover Prop*.

Mr Crowley and Verifact did not respond to emailed questions.

Idemitsu Australia Resources owns and operates the Boggabri mine. The company spends \$40,000 a week securing the facility, chief operating officer Rod Bridges told the Northern Daily Leader in January.

In a statement released to Fairfax, Mr Bridges did not directly answer questions over whether it or a related entity was involved or aware of the spying activity, or whether it or related entities had engaged CIRM.

Rather than confirm or deny any involvement, he provided an explanation about why high level security was required.

"Boggabri Coal has been forced to contract site security because of repeated incidences of unlawful entry by activists over a period of three years," he said. "The company [is] responsible for the safety of all people entering the site. This responsibility extends to activists who illegally enter the site and put themselves in dangerous situations." The surveillance operation, say insiders, has been in place for at least five months.

"The IOs [intelligence operatives] task was to get information on [protest] actions, report on actions, gather information on the leadership," said one source.

"Some were tasked to infiltrate. Others just do observation."

Fairfax Media was unable to contact CIRM or Ms Topia and Mr Groves. Emails, phone calls and text messages went unanswered. Ms Topia is from New Zealand, is believed to have an intelligence background and is the owner of CIRM. Mr Groves is a former member of the Australian Defence Force who has worked as a private security guard in Afghanistan and Iraq. The two are believed to be in a relationship.

Ms Topia and Mr Groves turned up at Maules Creek under assumed identities, said protest leader Ben Solity. Mr Groves said he was a former member of a bikie club who had previous weapons charges on the books and made several visits.

"Tony brought a partner named Maria to the camp once with a couple of other friends. That Maria is the same person that is pictured in Maria Topia's facebook profile," said Mr Solity.

The protesters were already deeply worried about infiltration when they confronted Marnie Tisot in May. Ms Tisot had visited the camp on four occasions under the alias Loulou Mayfield, even acting as a spokeswoman at one point.

Her suspicious behaviour, and the inadvertent revealing of her real name in an email she sent, led to the discovery that she worked for Professional Service Solutions (PSS), a Brisbane intelligence and security firm that has worked for the United Nations.

Confronted on camera, she denied she was working undercover, breaking down in tears and saying she had assumed her false identity to escape the attention of a violent ex-husband. She also said she had stopped working for PSS.

However, Ms Tisot continued to use her real name once she left Maules Creek and returned quickly back to work at PSS after being

detected.

Her emotional story about fleeing a violent man was also undermined by the prominent profile and photograph on the PSS website and the fact there were business cards in her name with her mobile number at the office of PSS last week. In a brief interview with Fairfax Media, Ms Tisot declined to outline what she was doing at Maules Creek but referred Fairfax to her explanation on video.

However, multiple sources familiar with the operation have confirmed to Fairfax that Ms Tisot was working as an intelligence operative for CIRM.

The chief executive of PSS, Craig Coleman, said PSS had never been involved in the operation and Ms Tisot’s activities were done “in a personal capacity”.

“This has nothing to do with PSS,” he said. “I have confidentiality agreements with my staff and I’m sure whatever ops they had down at Maules Creek also had confidentiality agreements as well.”

Barbara McDonald, a law professor at Sydney University and privacy expert, said any spying arranged by a private company that involved false identities and deception was legally questionable.

It could fall foul of provisions in the corporations, consumer and privacy laws, particularly if “someone had acted on the deception to the material detriment” of those being spied on, she said.

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However, anti-coal protesters have also been found to have broken the law, with mass arrests and the guilty plea for disseminating false information last week by Jonathan Moylan, who sent out a fake ANZ Bank press release claiming the bank was withdrawing a \$1.2 billion loan facility for the Maules Creek mine.

Mr Solity said the campaign at Maules Creek was to “raise awareness about the destruction of the Leard State Forest for a mine which will inevitably contribute to a large amount of carbon emissions that will exacerbate climate change”.

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