



The Dark Art: Undercover in the Global War Against Narco-Terrorism

By Edward Follis, Douglas Century

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Edward Follis bought eightballs of coke in a red Corvette.

He negotiated multimillion-dollar deals onboard private King Airs.

He developed covert relationships with men who were not only international drug traffickers but—in some cases—operatives for Al Qaeda, Hezbollah, Hamas, the Shan United Army, or the Mexican Federation of cartels.

He was a master at the dark art of going undercover.

And this is his story...

Spanning five continents and filled with harrowing stories about the world's most ruthless drug lords and terrorist networks, *The Dark Art* is an incredible first hand account of Edward Follis's twenty-seven-year undercover career in the DEA—from doing street-level busts evocative of *Miami Vice* to using high-resolution-optics surveillance and classified cutting-edge technology to bring down narco-terror kingpins. It also closely examines how, from the early 1990s to today, the DEA underwent its own radical transformation, shifting its focus from local dealers of coke and weed to the billionaire financiers of worldwide terrorism.

Every word is true, and every story is documented. A globe-hopping nonfiction thriller, *The Dark Art* is a page-turning memoir that will electrify you from page one.



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Editorial Review

Review

“The cast of characters [Follis] met could populate a movie set.”—Malcolm Gladwell, *The New Yorker*

“A knockout.”—William Queen, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Under and Alone*

“[Follis] gives fresh meaning to the phrase ‘gung-ho’...Explosive.”—*Financial Times*

“*The Dark Art* has the fast pace and rough-and-ready style that one would expect of the non-fiction police action genre.”—*The Times of London*

About the Author

Since retiring from the DEA, **Edward Follis** spends much of the year traveling worldwide, offering his consulting expertise in the fields of global security, tactical intelligence, and risk assessment. He has been designated by the U.S. district courts as a certified expert in the subjects of narco-terrorism, international drug trafficking, and global terrorist networks.

Douglas Century is a contributing editor at *Tablet* magazine and writes regularly for leading national publications. He is the author and coauthor of bestselling books, including *Under and Alone*, *Brotherhood of Warriors*, *Barney Ross: The Loss of a Jewish Fighter*, and *Takedown: The Fall of the Last Mafia Empire*. Century is working on a new nonfiction book.

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

Edward Follis: DEA Special Agent; St. Louis–born; former United States Marine Corps military policeman; initially detailed with Group Four of the Los Angeles Division

General Mohammad Daud Daud: a former mujahideen who fought for years against the Soviet invasion; later established and headed Afghanistan’s first counter-narcotics police force (CNPA)

Rogelio Guevara: DEA Special Agent; supervisor of Group Four in the Los Angeles Division; gravely wounded while working undercover in Monterrey, Mexico

José Martinez: DEA Special Agent with Group Four of the Los Angeles Division; nearly fatally wounded in a shooting incident with drug traffickers in 1988

Paul Seema: DEA Special Agent; born in Thailand; murdered in a drug deal gone bad in Pasadena, California, in 1988

George Montoya: DEA Special Agent; also murdered in Pasadena, California, in 1988

William “Billy” Queen: Special Agent with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF); detailed the Heroin Enforcement Group in the Los Angeles Division of the DEA

Mike Holm: DEA Special Agent who, after serving many years in Beirut and Cairo, making cases against traffickers in the Middle East, became associate special agent in charge of the Los Angeles Division

John Zienter: assistant special agent in charge of the DEA’s Los Angeles Division

Jimmy Soiles: DEA Special Agent; detailed to French country office located in Paris, France; later Deputy Chief of Operations in Office of Global Enforcement for the Drug Enforcement Administration

Rudy Barang: DEA Special Agent; assigned to Bangkok

Mike Bansmer: DEA Special Agent and Resident Agent in Charge, Songkhla, Thailand; spent almost a decade making cases against the Shan United Army

Don Sturn: DEA’s assistant attaché in Bangkok

Don Ferrarone: longtime DEA Special Agent in the United States; later DEA’s country attaché to Thailand, based in Bangkok

Don Carstensen: head of the Organized Crime Unit in the prosecutor’s office in Honolulu, Hawaii

Charles Marsland: prosecutor of Honolulu, Hawaii, whose son Charles “Chuckles” Marsland was killed in a brutal murder in the 1980s

Enrique “Kiki” Camarena: DEA Special Agent who, while in Guadalajara investigating the increasingly powerful cocaine cartels, was brutally tortured and murdered in 1988, spawning a major diplomatic conflict between the governments of Mexico and the United States

Ambassador Ronald Neumann: veteran State Department official; appointed ambassador to Afghanistan, where he served in Kabul from 2005–07

Steve Whipple: DEA Special Agent detailed to the Juárez Cartel Task Force in El Paso, Texas, with Special Agent Follis; expert in wiretapping and other legal strategies to combat Mexican cocaine cartels

Haji Juma Khan: major opium trafficker and Taliban financier; power base was in the Baluchistan region near the Iranian border; estimated to have provided hundreds of millions in funds to Taliban insurgents

Khun Sa: nom de guerre of Chung Chi Fu, leader of the Shan United Army drug-funded insurgency based in Burma and northern Thailand; reputedly responsible for 70 percent of the heroin in the United States during the 1990s

“Dr. Dragan”: heroin and arms trafficker; worked in Los Angeles to acquire military weapons for Shan United Army insurgency

Kayed Berro: high-ranking financial officer within the Berro heroin trafficking organization of Lebanon; hiding in Southern California after being sentenced to death in absentia by an Egyptian court for drug trafficking

Mohammad Berro: patriarch of the Lebanon-based Berro heroin trafficking organization; based in Lebanon and the north of Israel

Ling Ching Pan: a major financial officer and lieutenant in the Shan United Army; based in Bangkok, Thailand

Sam Essell: boss of the Essell narcotics and organized crime group; responsible for major importation of narcotics to the United States; based in Lagos, Nigeria

Christian Uzomo: chief lieutenant in the Essell narcotics and organized crime group, based in California

William Brumley and Mike Lancaster: violent associates of the Essell narcotics importation and organized crime group; known for dealing in illegal weapons and producing silencers

Harvey Franklin: associate of the Essell organized crime group; a Crips gang affiliate known for dealing in heroin, stolen bearer bonds, and supernote counterfeit currency

Ronnie Ching: hit man for major Hawaiian drug traffickers and organized crime; ultimately confessed to committing nineteen murders

“Phong”: street nickname for a chief lieutenant in the Shan United Army; based in the north of Thailand

Amado Carrillo Fuentes: the so-called Lord of the Skies; boss of Juárez Cartel; the de facto CEO of a sprawling cocaine empire; estimated net worth of \$25 billion; ranked by the DEA as the most powerful cocaine trafficker in the world in the mid-1990s

Vicente Carrillo Fuentes: second-in-command in Juárez Cartel; some say the later successor to the position of boss of the cocaine-trafficking organization

Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán: originally a lieutenant in the Carrillo-Fuentes cartel; ultimately rose to the position of the most powerful drug lord of all time; ranked by *Forbes* magazine as the eighty-sixth richest man on earth

Mullah Omar: spiritual head of the Taliban; Afghanistan’s de facto head of state from 1996 to late 2001; intimately involved in the production, price-fixing, and sale of opium

Haji Bashir Noorzai: Afghan opium warlord and Taliban financier; responsible for much of the opium cultivation and heroin production in the Kandahar region

Haji Bagcho Sherzai: Afghan opium warlord and Taliban financier; a former mujihadeen; responsible for much of the opium cultivation and heroin production in the Kandahar region

Haji Khan Muhammad: major Afghan opium trafficker and Taliban insurgent; based in the Kandahar region

PART ONE

One must also note the growing convergence of terrorist organizations with criminal cartels like the drug trade to finance their activities. Such cooperative activities will only make terrorism and criminal cartels more dangerous and effective.

US JOINT FORCES COMMAND, "THE JOINT OPERATING ENVIRONMENT," NOVEMBER 2008

No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.

MATTHEW 6:24

PRELUDE

Kidnapped in Kabul

ASSIGNMENT: COUNTRY ATTACHÉ: GS-15

POSTING: KABUL, AFGHANISTAN

TARGET: THE HAJI JUMA KHAN NARCO-TERROR ORGANIZATION

DATE: **CLASSIFIED**

I was responsible for all blood. If anything happened to any of my agents or informants during an operation—even routine travel outside of the secure US Embassy compound—the weight was on me.

By early 2006, I was the country attaché, a senior member of the Drug Enforcement Administration at Level GS-15—in military terms, the pay-grade equivalent of a full-bird colonel. But I kept on doing what I'd always done: working the street. It was unheard of for a GS-15 to be tearing around a war zone in a Land Cruiser, toting an M4 carbine and a Glock 9mm, running undercover ops in the most hostile and lawless regions of Afghanistan. My superiors at DEA headquarters were often none too pleased when they read the stream of cables, emails, and sixes my team were filing from Kabul.*

Honestly, it was the only way I knew how to do my job. I was never a traditional desk boss. Whether in Los Angeles, El Paso, Bangkok, Tel Aviv, Cairo, or Kabul, I was always a street agent.

That's why the DEA boys in the Los Angeles Division started calling me Custer. Fuck the odds: I was always ready to get into the game. They gave me an old framed photograph of General Custer taken a few weeks before Little Bighorn: typical black humor between cops. The portrait was hanging over my desk.

Our embassy in Kabul is a huge complex—the perimeter entrusted to a contingent of Gurkhas from Nepal, experts at security and counterterrorist work. The compound itself, which cost the United States \$880 million, is surrounded by thick citadel-like walls. Unlike Baghdad, there's no Green Zone in Kabul. Outside those high concrete walls, things were *never* safe. Every day there were insurgency attacks. I lived in a small apartment directly under the ambassador's residence, and I'd wake up most mornings, ears assaulted by the sound of explosions. When Ramadan began in September 2006, we were hit by bombings for sixty days continuously.

Every time you drove out of the embassy you were a target for a suicide bomber with a VBIED—vehicle-borne improvised explosive device. I had a silver-metallic Land Cruiser with Level 3 body armor, but it could never withstand a direct hit. If you were at an intersection, you had to be ever-vigilant for VBIEDs. Even cruder: In the mob crowding the streets, asking for handouts, some kid rolls a hand grenade under the chassis and—no last-second prayers—that's the end of it.

• • •

It was a bright June morning, and the mountain bowl of Kabul was already heavy with the promise of a hot, fetid afternoon ahead. I was at my desk, right under the imperious gaze of Custer, when I got a call from Group Supervisor Mike Marsac, who was managing one of our daily undercover operations.

I'd approved an op in which my investigative assistant Tariq, along with an Afghan informant code-named 007, was sent in undercover to purchase three kilograms of heroin for fifteen grand. The dealers we were targeting were a smaller tributary crew, but I had a hunch that infiltrating them could lead us deeper into the orbit of the biggest opium and heroin organization on the planet and the man reputed to be their leader: the mysterious Haji Juma Khan.

It should have been a routine buy: I'd done hundreds of them in my career. But now I heard Marsac out of breath—scared shitless: "Ed, they're fuckin' gone!"

"Who?"

"Tariq and Double-Oh-Seven. They were just grabbed and bagged."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I don't know how—they were snatched off the street."

"Mike, where are our people now?"

"We don't know."

"Shit." The reality stung like some whipped-up mountain sandstorm: There'd been a security breach. We'd had surveillance units, our DEA agents, and a team from the CNPA—the Counter Narcotics Police of Afghanistan—parked in undercover vehicles at both ends of the street. But somehow during the operation we'd been betrayed.

With geometric precision two compact cars—an older red Toyota Corolla and a gray Honda Civic—came screeching in. The Corolla parked diagonally in front of our undercover vehicle; then the Civic rammed in tight behind. No possible way out. As Mike Marsac described it, four guys—all Afghans—snatched Tariq and 007, pulled them into their vehicle, and made a clean getaway. All in a period of less than ninety seconds. So fast that our surveillance people couldn't race to the scene. Tariq and 007 were gone. The speed of the boxing maneuver told me one thing: Whoever snatched our people were trained intelligence operatives.

"Who're we looking at here?" Marsac asked.

"It's too textbook perfect," I said. "These guys were raised by the fuckin' KGB."

I made a flurry of calls to the Langley boys and to the National Directorate of Security (NDS), the domestic intelligence service of Afghanistan. In effect, I was talking to two heads of the same hydra: Although the NDS was an autonomous branch of the Afghan government, our spooks were the puppet masters of the Afghan intelligence apparatus.

"Listen to me—I just lost *two* people!" I shouted into my Motorola.

Blanket denials. One spook with a midwestern accent kept telling me: "No, we have operations today, but

nothing involving counter-narcotics.”

I hung up on her midsentence. There was only one *possible* explanation: a rogue group of Afghan intelligence officers. Agents from the NDS who’d been trained by the Soviets at universities in Moscow and military bases had now gone into side business for themselves. Sure, the *business* of ripping off actual dealers. They must have had me and my people under surveillance and assumed that our guys—Tariq and 007—were real heroin dealers. It was a validation of our undercover disguises and techniques that we were so utterly believable as an authentic Afghan drug-trafficking organization.

The rogue unit had planned an audacious rip: kidnap Tariq and 007, steal the dope, steal the buy money, then sell the three kilograms of heroin at pure profit. A couple of dead heroin dealers in the Afghan desert: Who was going to ask any questions?

No cooperation from the spooks. We’d have to get them ourselves. I grabbed Special Agent Brad Tierney, my right-hand man in Kabul. Brad had been a US marshal in Tulsa before landing at DEA. Fifty-three years old, tall, with thick brown hair, Tierney was a cop’s cop. A guy you could trust with your life.

In fact, in the recent past, I’d done just that. Tierney had been stationed in Bangkok with me for my three-and-a-half-year stint, during which I worked to infiltrate the Shan United Army, the world’s largest drug insurgency. It was funny that so many agents stationed in Afghanistan had served with me either in Thailand or when I was in El Paso working the Mexican cartels.* As if all the scattered knights and bishops and rooks had been reassembled for one final chess match . . .

From the doorway of my office, I gave Brad a heads-up.

“Grab your shit.”

Tierney nodded. Each of us had a holstered regulation Glock 17, and we checked the cartridges of our M4 carbines—the reduced version of the standard US military M16 assault rifle, preferable for operating in tight urban spaces. And, of course, I had my Cold Steel bowie knife sheathed on my back. We slung our M4s over our shoulders and raced outside to my Land Cruiser.

Before we hit the street, I’d rung up General Mohammad Daud Daud, the deputy interior minister for counter-narcotics. In the past six months, Mohammad had become my dear friend. We’d gotten down on our knees and prayed together—devout Muslim and Christian—in a Kabul mosque during some of the worst Ramadan terror attacks. Mohammad was Tajik, a venerated mujahideen who’d fought heroically against the Soviet invaders. Indeed, he’d been chief of staff to General Ahmad Shah Massoud, the legendary Lion of Panjshir—the father of Afghan democracy—murdered by Al Qaeda on the eve of September 11, 2001.

Daud was now a three-star general and had a powerful reputation, one of the few high-ranking men in Afghanistan whose integrity was unquestioned.

“General,” I said, “two of my guys are gone—kidnapped.”

“Who are they, Ed?” he asked.

I told him. “But nobody’s talking. NDS all swear it wasn’t them.”

Working two sets of cell phones, General Daud and I organized a dragnet. If my people had been kidnapped by legit traffickers, they’d be taken out of Kabul, held as hostages, and bartered for ransom. The dragnet consisted of my DEA guys, General Daud’s CNPA officers, members of the National Interdiction Unit, and

uniformed Afghan police—more than three hundred sets of eyeballs working all investigative leads and exit routes from Kabul.

It's the peril of doing drug enforcement in a war zone: There are *no* blue-on-blue safeguards. Among the DEA, CIA, and various Afghan police and intel agencies, there are no counterchecks to avoid an undercover stepping—unsuspectingly—onto the set of another undercover op and getting popped.

• • •

Mohammad played his trump card: He called the office of the National Directorate of Security and spoke to General Ahmad Nawabi, the second-in-command of the NDS in Kabul. Brad and I raced over to the NDS headquarters. It was a dreamlike vision: We were no longer in Afghanistan. The gates parted to reveal lush foliage, a small garden, a well-groomed soccer field. A verdant oasis amid the outlaw frenzy of downtown Kabul.

The building itself was poured concrete, early-'80s construction; it had been used for interrogations by the KGB. I ran up three flights of stairs and saw grisly reminders of the building's more recent use under the Taliban. On one flight a few of the floor tiles were tinged pink, stained by the blood of "transgressors" who Mullah Omar's henchmen had flogged for blasphemy, adultery, or other violations of Sharia law.

Afghan guards led us at gunpoint straight to General Nawabi. He was waiting for me in his leather desk chair, casually smoking, eyebrows furrowed. He wore a charcoal suit, a striped gray-and-blue tie, his gray beard perfectly trimmed. We wasted no time on handshakes or pleasantries.

"Are you listening to me?" I said. "Don't tell me this was some *random* rip-off. It was done with geometric precision. I *know* these are your people."

Nawabi grimaced and then, without warning, he left us alone in his office. I couldn't hear what he was saying next door, but he was obviously on his private cell. When he returned, he gave me a straight fucking answer for the first time.

"It seems we have found your people."

"Yeah? Where the hell are they?"

Nawabi cleared the phlegm in his throat. He spat out an address: My guys were being held at a building on the eastern outskirts of Kabul. Brad Tierney and I bolted outside. By now the sun was brutally hot. The streets of Kabul would be surging with mobs of pedestrians, street vendors, Muslims on their way to mosques. I decided we'd have better odds undercover. This wasn't by the book, but then very little in Afghanistan ever was. I grabbed the duffel bag I kept discreetly hidden in the Land Cruiser.

"Haji up," I said. We threw on our UC garb: the white cotton tops of the *shalwar kameez*, black scarves around our faces, and two Massoud caps—tan-colored beret-like hats that were the favored headgear of the Lion of Panjshir himself. I was gunning the gas, on the *edge*, swerving the heavy armored Toyota as if I'd taken a straight shot of adrenaline. The streets of Kabul swarmed around us like a medieval bazaar. I had tunnel vision, oblivious to the thumping as the side mirrors of the Land Cruiser clipped pedestrians, knocking more than a few to the pavement. Tierney had tunnel vision, too. Behind us, we heard angry shouting.

I glanced at Brad. "Look, man," I said. "Whatever we gotta do—I mean *whatever* we've gotta do—we're gonna get them the fuck out today."

“You bet the fuck we are.”

As I raced through the Kabul side streets, we made a solemn vow to each other—as *men*, not cops. We weren’t anticipating a shoot-out, though anything was possible in Kabul. I drove out on the winding highway that leads to the eastern outskirts. I looked up at those towering humpbacked mountains and saw scores of Afghan women and boys trundling down thousands of feet just to get their daily water.

We pulled up to the curb, double-checking the address. It was an old white-and-gray concrete office building, also from the Soviet era: nondescript and boxlike, pockmarked by decades-old civil war shelling. There wasn’t an external threat at the building’s entrance or perimeter, so we left our M4s behind. Brad and I stepped outside, drawing the Glocks from our leather holsters.

• • •

We ran up a rank-smelling stairwell, and by the time we’d reached the fifth floor, I could hear thudding and shouting and moaning and I could feel my heartbeat up into my throat. We burst through an unlocked door and saw that Tariq and 007 had been savagely beaten. They were slumped over on a blood-smeared fabric sofa, drifting between half conscious and half dead.

We immediately faced off with the four kidnappers. They were dressed like Westerners, not Hajis: light-colored polo shirts and khakis and dress shoes.

At first glance, they must have thought we were Taliban, but we ripped off the black-and-tan scarves and identified ourselves as DEA agents.

The commander of the unit, a diminutive Pashtun, spoke an educated—albeit heavily accented—English. His enforcer was wearing a blood-spattered pale linen shirt. He had a damaged eye; a crude gauze patch covered the wound. He also looked Pashtun, about six-two and 230 pounds. Hours later, we learned that he’d been a prizefighter, some Russian-trained heavyweight, and he’d certainly put his boxing skills to creative use. He’d beaten Tariq and 007 professionally, methodically: cracked ribs, smashed eyes, busted noses, knocked-out teeth.

The kidnappers were staring us down. But they weren’t showing any weapons, so Brad and I holstered our Glocks. A crazed cacophony of cursing and shouting ensued.

“Who the fuck are you guys?”

“We’re conducting a drug investigation,” the commander said finally, calmly.

I looked down at the sofa. Tariq had regained consciousness but could scarcely sit upright. It looked like our informant, 007, might already be dead.

“Where’s the heroin? Where’s the three kilos?” Brad shouted.

“It has been turned in for evidence.”

“Evidence—what the fuck are you talking about?”

“And where’s the money?” I said.

The hulking one-eyed boxer simply shrugged at me.

“There was fifteen Gs for three fuckin’ kilograms!”

The room was tight. Things were getting so heated, so explosive—somebody was going to get popped any second. I looked down at Tariq and 007: They were both bleeding heavily, eyes rolling back, drifting away . . .

• • •

I didn’t give a shit about the missing cash or heroin. First and only priority—I needed to get our guys back to our embassy compound, where they could receive medical attention. Brad and I lifted them onto our shoulders, like a couple of firefighters, pushed past the kidnappers, and lugged them down the five flights.

I kicked open the front door, and we burst back into the blinding daylight. A gawking mob had surrounded my Land Cruiser, angry Afghan men, young and middle-aged, pressing in close, undulating like some great human jellyfish. With our black scarves off, they could see our sunburned American faces now; they’d pegged us for imposters—interlopers—infidels.

We pressed forward, through louder shouting, cursing. I felt hot breath on my neck.

The mob parted. We pushed forcibly into the Land Cruiser. Tariq and 007 both slumped over unconscious in the backseat.

“Twenty minutes,” Brad said, once I was speeding on the highway into Kabul.

“No doubt,” I said, “*if* that . . .”

Tierney was right: If we’d showed up twenty minutes later, our guys would’ve been *gone*. The boxer would have beaten them to death.

CHAPTER 1

GROUP FOUR

My first day on the job I was terrified.

Wasn’t too worried about the work.

I was scared out of my mind that I might be *late*. It seems ludicrous to me now—Los Angeles would soon enough become my adopted hometown—but as a newly minted DEA agent entering strange and frightening territory, I was driving those Los Angeles freeways for the first time. My aunt’s place was about thirty miles from the DEA office, and I had no idea how bad the traffic might be.

I hardly slept, got up at four a.m., was showered and dressed in my dark-blue suit, waiting for first light. Drove into downtown LA and was in the office at six a.m. sharp. DEA headquarters was then in the heart of the financial district, right in the Los Angeles World Trade Center, a low-rise office complex on 350 South Figueroa Street, with a staff of about one hundred.

I pulled down South Figueroa, parked, and went upstairs. The only other soul in the place was Lekita Hill, a DEA secretary who was to become one of my closest friends and my emotional rock as I took on increasingly difficult, logically complex, and politically sensitive investigations.

In the Los Angeles Division, I was assigned to Enforcement Group Four—the Heroin Task Force, where I was to learn the nitty-gritty of undercover narcotics operations firsthand. The task force was filled with these older, irreplaceable lawmen, veterans who'd been rewriting the playbook on how to be an undercover.

As I arrived on the scene, Group Four had just suffered an intense trauma, one that had played out in the national headlines and was still being written about almost daily when I came on the job. Three sterling men had all been caught in a deadly shoot-out in an undercover operation down in Pasadena. The only one left to talk about it was DEA Special Agent José Martinez; the other two undercover agents, Paul Seema and George Montoya, had been shot to death by a thug wielding a .45 semiautomatic.

José, the driver during the undercover operation, badly wounded in the shoot-out, would receive the Medal of Valor personally from President Reagan.

Shortly before I started in Group Four, the *Los Angeles Times* ran a front-page story that spotlighted the high-risk world I was about to enter. I remember reading the story at my aunt's kitchen table.

A SHADOW WORLD OF LIFE AND DEATH:

WORKING MOSTLY UNDERCOVER, DEA AGENTS LIVE WITH DANGER AND OFTEN DIE UNHERALDED

The article described, in great detail, the brutal killings of agents Seema and Montoya, explaining that no matter the level of street smarts, instinct, and training of the undercover agents, drug dealers almost always have the upper hand, armed with “absolute greed” and a callous willingness to instantly kill both other dealers and “federal officers who play too convincingly their roles” while undercover:

“Television glorifies us as fun and games and cops and robbers,” said Rogelio Guevara, a Los Angeles agent for the Drug Enforcement Administration, a friend of both men. “But [DEA work] is also very real, a very dangerous job, and it is for keeps.

“We have the highest assault rate of any federal law enforcement agency, and if anything, we’re seeing an increase. That’s nothing to brag about, just a sad truth . . .”

It was daunting to enter into that tight-knit Group Four family. I sensed it immediately: This was a family of trauma, a family of hurt. I didn’t know George Montoya or Paul Seema personally—though ironically enough, years later, when I was living in Thailand, I would hear repeatedly from people who’d known Paul as a young man; he’d been with the CIA before he transitioned over to the DEA. People in Thailand regarded the murdered agent with respect bordering on reverence.

When I came on the job, the details of that trauma were still murky to me: I knew that two agents had been murdered in a heroin transaction while working undercover. The one who’d survived, albeit badly wounded, came back to working undercover just a few months after the shooting and was now sitting six feet away from me.

José Martinez was to become my partner, indispensable friend, and invaluable mentor.

José was known as a premier undercover, probably the best UC we had working in Group Four at the time. He stood only about five-five but was strong as a bull, never backed away from anyone. José had been a top collegiate wrestler. He’s Mexican-American but has a very pale complexion and jet-black hair—I guess the conquistadors’ DNA still runs heavy in his genes, not the more Aztec features so many Mexicans share. José speaks flawless English, but also Castilian Spanish, a variety of Mexican dialects, and Spanglish. His skills on the street were intuitive—stuff you could never learn in a classroom or some practical exercise at the

federal academy.

José took me under his wing; I became his junior partner. That first Christmas in LA, I spent with José and his family. We put in a lot of long nights working surveillance, out on undercover jobs, talking about the Pasadena shooting.

The bullet scars on his legs were still pink and cherry red; the trauma was equally fresh in his mind. He needed to talk to somebody about it, needed some clarity, needed to make sense of what had happened to his two dear friends. You never really get *closure* when you've lost two of your partners and nearly died yourself.

José, more than anybody in Group Four, pushed me hard to get into the undercover roles. He read me immediately; he knew that UC work was best suited to my personality. He had an uncanny—almost innate—knack for it, and he immediately recognized the same traits in me.

Rogelio Guevara, the Group Four supervisor, was my immediate boss. He'd been really tight with special agents Seema and Montoya.

Born in Mexico, Rogelio had led a full life before joining the DEA: He'd been a butcher, and then earned his college degree in criminal justice, ultimately becoming a legend among Mexican heroin agents. In another near-fatal undercover operation, while working down in Monterrey, Mexico, Rogelio had very nearly been murdered. He lost the use of one eye for the rest of his life.

Bandits ambushed him, put a bullet in his cranium, but he'd miraculously survived that head shot. He and his partner had come over a ridge and been confronted by a gang of more than thirty banditos, some of whom were riding horses. It was supposed to be a major undercover marijuana buy, but it turned out to be a rip. The traffickers killed Rogelio's partner. A bandit on horseback shot Rogelio in the face. One round went in right over his eye and exited at his temple. Even today, he still has a huge dark scar down the side of his face.

Like José Martinez, Rogelio was fearless. Strongly built, Aztec features, about six-foot-one. The long scar and his damaged eye gave him a particularly intense appearance. When I came to Group Four, he was still hopping back and forth between his supervisory role in LA and undercover work inside Mexico.

Rogelio was a marvelous guy; more than once, he went undercover as a boss with me—which wasn't by the DEA rulebook, especially given that he was virtually blind in one eye. It was something I watched and internalized and would carry over into my own days as a boss, as supervisor, and even higher up the chain of command in the DEA. For Rogelio, rank meant nothing. He knew it was on the street that the real police work gets done.

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After completing the federal academy in Quantico, Virginia, I had several career options. My application to the US Secret Service was rejected, but I was offered positions with NCIS, the FBI, and the DEA. While still a military policeman in Hawaii, I'd also been recruited by the CIA—even gone through the battery of psychological tests down at Langley. I mulled things over for a day. I didn't ask anyone's opinion. I wanted the decision to be mine. I withdrew from both FBI and NCIS, then called the CIA as well.

“Thanks,” I told them, “but my heart is with the DEA.”

Honestly, I'd wanted to be a narc—working for the DEA—ever since I was nineteen years old and heard the song “Smuggler's Blues” by Glenn Frey. A few lines in the lyrics, about the '80s cocaine epidemic, just leapt

out of the tinny car speakers:

It's propping up the governments in Colombia and Peru,

You ask any DEA man,

He'll say, "There's nothin' we can do . . ."

Driving in my old Chevrolet, something struck a chord—I guess it must have pissed me off—and I couldn't get the song out of my head. Obsessed about it for weeks. Talked about it constantly with my buddies. One of those crystallizing moments: I said to myself, *Fuck it, I'm gonna become that DEA man. Let 'em try to tell me there's nothing we can do . . .*

Around that same time, I stumbled on the book *Serpico* by Peter Maas, and it blew me away. Today, after years in law enforcement, I realize that I have some of the same personal flaws as Frank Serpico. But back then, as a very young man, I saw in his crusading, lone-wolf policing style a role model for my life. After reading *Serpico*, I was dead set on becoming an undercover narc. Then the movie, starring Al Pacino, came out: I saw it about six times.

In hindsight, I can see I was an idealist—perhaps naïve—but I really thought I could make a difference. I consolidated my academic goals, focused everything in my life from that day forward toward becoming a narc. Every move and decision I made was with the goal of becoming a DEA special agent working undercover to take down drug traffickers.

To me there was no better platform for a career in law enforcement than the Drug Enforcement Administration. DEA's roots go back to laws enacted in 1914. Originally under the US Department of the Treasury's Bureau of Prohibition, the agency was created on June 14, 1930. Most people don't realize this, but for years the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (FBN) was the only law enforcement agency tackling the Mafia; J. Edgar Hoover famously denied that there was a national syndicate of organized crime families—until the public embarrassment of the Apalachin conclave in 1957 forced Hoover to admit that there was indeed a nationwide organized-crime conspiracy; Hoover stubbornly refused to use the word "Mafia," preferring to call the gangsters members of La Cosa Nostra (LCN).

Despite the widespread belief that the Mafia bosses wouldn't sanction drug dealing on supposedly moral grounds—a myth perpetuated in films like *The Godfather*—Mob bosses going back to Arnold "The Brain" Rothstein and Charles "Lucky" Luciano trafficked in heroin in the 1920s and 1930s. Luciano once famously described heroin as "a million dollars in a suitcase."

It's a long-standing truism: Wherever there are drugs, there's organized crime. The Bureau of Narcotics almost by default was in the vanguard of interdiction, seizures, and arrests. Back in the 1960s and 1970s the big money was in smack. Horse. H. Cases involving the notorious French Connection—the Corsican importers, the Sicilian manufacturers—were all handled by the precursor of the DEA, task forces comprised of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics alongside local cops from the New York State Police and New York Police Department detectives.

The Drug Enforcement Administration, established by President Nixon in 1973, melded the Treasury's Bureau of Narcotics and the Justice Department's Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs. Before I came on the job, the DEA headquarters was located at 1405 I Street NW in Washington. With the growth of the agency due to the explosion of illicit narcotics flowing into the country, by 1989 the headquarters had expanded and relocated to Pentagon City in Arlington, Virginia. The DEA was established to spearhead the original "War on Drugs." As I was to see during my years on the street, there could hardly be a greater

misnomer than a “War on Drugs.” The only “war”—if we insist on that military term—consists of battles targeting individual drug traffickers. For me, the idea of a War on Drugs was irrational; no matter how good a federal agent you are, no matter how big your cases, you could never simply *seize* enough narcotics to make any appreciable difference.

Even early on, fresh out of the academy, I realized that the only difference you could ever make was by pursuing a tactic of *decapitation*: Taking out the actual kingpins. Decimating the organizations themselves not by working your way up the ladder but by going straight at the leadership. If you wanted to win, you had to take out the bosses directly.

• • •

It was in those early days in Group Four—barely two weeks on the job—that I learned the nitty-gritty of undercover narcotics operations firsthand. The task force included DEA agents like José and Rogelio, but also a group of special agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF).

One was a hard-charging North Carolinian who everyone called Billy-Boy: Special Agent William Queen of the ATF. At the time, Billy was becoming an expert undercover, working one-percenter biker gangs throughout the Southwest; a decade later, he'd chronicle his undercover journey inside the Mongols outlaw motorcycle club in his *New York Times* bestseller, *Under and Alone*.*

I was a *baby* the first time I went undercover on a heroin deal. We were going out to buy a pound of smack at this hotel. The traffickers were independent Mexican wholesalers—midlevel distributors connected to one of the cartels south of the border, known as the Riveras organization.

They dealt in a form of black-tar heroin called *chiva*. Supposedly, they had some of the best quality *chiva* in California. I'd learned to talk the talk by now: We had to refer to weights such as “eightballs” and “Mexican ounces.” (Mexicans, like much of the rest of the world, use the metric system. A kilogram is 2.2 pounds; there are 35.2 ounces in a kilo. A standard ounce on the decimal scale is 28.35 grams. Rounding down for convenience, a Mexican ounce is actually 25 grams.)

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