

How To Catch An International Cocaine Baron: Hunting One Of Britain's Most Elusive Drug Lords



A scrap of paper with a Spanish mobile number was all the police needed to track down one of Britain's most devious drug barons

Adam Luck | Mail on Sunday | The Interview People

The elite Irish naval forces were armed to the teeth but still had good reason to fear for their lives as their two rigid inflatable boats, or RIBs, bounced around like corks in a Jacuzzi. Launched in the middle of the night by a patrol vessel some 130 miles

off the Cork coast, the boats were in danger of capsizing in gale-force winds and consigning Operation Seabight to a watery grave.

Their target was Dances with Waves, a 65ft yacht that had been tracked from the moment it set sail across the Atlantic from Trinidad after a tip from Britain's Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA).

Such was the damage being wreaked on the vessel, however, that the multinational operation overseen by Europe's maritime anti-drug agency in Lisbon, Portugal, was in danger of seeing its target and cargo sink without a trace.

It was a case of now or never for the men of Ireland's Joint Task Force on Drug Interdiction.

But when the SWAT-style unit boarded Dances, they met with no resistance from a three-man crew battered into submission after four weeks of relentless bad weather.

Also on board were 75 bales of cocaine weighing 1.5 tons. The final port of call for this lethal consignment was to be Britain's streets.

The cocaine, which had been injected with moisture to allow it to be better compacted, was astonishingly pure – up to 76 per cent (the average street purity is about 30 per cent) – and was later estimated to have a street value of £140 million.

Dances' skipper Philip Doo pointed the visitors to the ship's log in the aft locker, where he'd written down a bizarre explanation of why the drugs were on board, which the crew hoped would convince police. Alongside observations that it was 'a bit choppy' and that they'd 'just had a nice beef stew' was a story of chancing upon packets caught up in a fisherman's buoy.

'Discussed with crew what to do,' Doo wrote. 'Checked radar, no boats in range that

we could see. So best option to bring on board and change to head home to Liverpool and hand over to authorities there. 'There may be a reward ha! Anyway was a hazard to small boats and health!'

The naval unit continued to swarm over the listing boat gathering any further evidence they could uncover.

What they found seemed inconsequential at the time, back in November 2008 – a scrap of paper bearing a Spanish mobile phone number for 'int Bob'.

But through painstaking work, the mobile number would eventually help the authorities track down and capture one of Britain's biggest drug smugglers.

The three British men on board the boat, Doo, David Mufford and Christopher Wiggins, were taken back to Ireland.

Doo, a failed property developer from Brixham, and Wiggins, who lived on the Costa del Sol, were former brothers-in-law, and both knew supermarket worker Mufford.

If the Garda expected immediate confessions, they were to be disappointed. The crew claimed they were simply delivering the boat to a new owner, and clung to their pitiful story that they'd come across the bales of cocaine by chance.

Discussions about rewards and charitable donations, and whether they should simply throw them back overboard, were dutifully recorded in the logbook to provide a watery alibi.

But Irish investigators realised the Spanish mobile number, found stuffed underneath the skipper's chair, could be the key to unlocking the case.

When asked about the number, the crew claimed it belonged to someone called Bob

- or, in the logbook, Colin - who had apparently employed the hard-up trio on an earlier voyage to deliver another boat, Passion Storm. But there the trail appeared to go cold.

While the Irish police drugs team in Cork focused their efforts on securing the conviction of the British trio, SOCA took over the search for an individual higher up the chain.

Senior investigator Gary, who prefers not to reveal his full identity, helped lead a small team of SOCA investigators based in Bristol in what they called Operation Hemisphere.

'We were handed the pieces of a jigsaw,' he says. 'Now we had to pull the pieces together and build up a picture of the conspiracy, and with that reveal just who Colin or Bob was.'

The GPS system on the boat revealed that Dances had set off from Trinidad, then taken a diversion into Venezuelan waters, a traditional 'drop point' for cocaine consignments from Colombian cartels.

What the SOCA team also discovered was that both Dances and the earlier Passion Storm had been bought from the same boatyard in Chaguaramas, Trinidad: Dynamite Marine.

Yacht broker Frances Dow revealed that a man called David Harvey had bought Passion Storm in June 2006 for €115,000 in cash, using €500 notes, popular among cartels and criminals due to their high denomination.

In February 2007 Harvey reappeared to place a deposit on a boat called Picaro. He never completed the purchase.

It was a piece of evidence that would later prove key. In November 2007, Passion Storm, by now renamed Dragon, was stopped by Spanish authorities carrying 3.4 tons of hashish valued at around £2.8 million – but there was no trace of Harvey.

In July 2008, the elusive Harvey reappeared at Dynamite Marine and, after apologising for failing to complete the Picaro purchase, offered to buy another boat called Dances with Waves. Once the sale went through he disappeared again.

When the SOCA officers checked with the Trinidad authorities, they revealed that there was no Colin, but instead a David Harvey had been listed as being on board Passion Storm when it left the Caribbean island. SOCA realised that David Harvey was Colin.

The SOCA team also discovered that at around the time of the Picaro payment, a David Harvey put down a deposit on an RIB at the London Boat Show, but with one change to the spec: he wanted more powerful engines.

Powerful engines are a signature of drug traffickers, who have to move heavy consignments to and from the shore at sufficient speed to outrun any customs or naval vessels.

What scuppered Harvey's plans was that he was arrested at Heathrow for using a fraudulently obtained genuine passport (known as a FOG) and sentenced to 12 months. Because he was in prison he was unable to complete the purchases of Picaro and the RIB.

Although this wasn't crucial in terms of unveiling his true identity, what he did next was inexplicable, arrogant or both. He went back to the manufacturer of the RIB and asked for his money back.

As he could no longer use his fake identity, Harvey asked for the refund in another name: John Alan Brooks.

‘Since there was no criminality involved with the boats, he couldn’t see the problem using his real name,’ says SOCA investigator Gary. ‘It was one of his biggest mistakes.’

When SOCA began to scratch beneath the surface of his multiple false identities, a startling picture began to emerge of John Alan Brooks.

The son of a successful Blackpool coal merchant, Brooks enjoyed a childhood of comparative affluence and went on to develop a serious taste for the high life.

Although he left school with few qualifications, Brooks soon found his feet as a second-hand car salesman, building up a business in his home town.

Then in around 1984 he joined the first wave of Brits to move out to southern Spain, landing in the nascent gangster’s paradise of Puerto Banus, close to Marbella.

Tellingly, Brooks was arrested way back in 1985 attempting to leave the UK in a red Ferrari, having tried to use a false identity to obtain a passport.

It’s believed he went on to use five British passports as well as Irish ones, likely obtained for him by Irish crime groups, who are thought to have funded many of his operations.

In a rare moment of honesty, he told one British detective he’d had plastic surgery, which might explain why the photographs contained in his passports appear to vary.

‘Everybody was a dodgy geezer down there at the time,’ says Andrew Sutton, 41, who knew Brooks in the Eighties and was arrested with him in a 1987 drugs raid on the Costa del Sol.

'It was quite blatant and there were plenty of villains. There was one old London villain who used to swan around in a Bentley. Brooks had a black Ferrari Testarossa and a very pretty girlfriend who was pregnant at the time.

'He was a charmer all right, but whether he was a nice bloke I don't know. It was a real playboy era, with middle-aged men running around with supercars, yachts and expensive women.'

Known in Spain as Alan Brooks, he soon forged ahead in his criminal career, but in 1987 he was caught by a Spanish police dragnet on the Costa del Sol. Brooks was arrested at the wheel of a Range Rover close to a beach where a 500kg consignment of hashish was being unloaded.

Although he protested his innocence, he was found to have the keys to another Range Rover that was sitting right next to the landing point.

Having received a four-and-a-half-year sentence, he reappeared in Blackpool in the early Nineties, buying a large house and driving around in a Mercedes convertible with a personalised number plate. 'He wasn't keeping a low profile, as you might expect when someone comes back from Spain after serving time,' says a former customs investigator who has watched Brooks's career.

'You wouldn't think he'd have enough money to buy a house or car, but that's John Alan Brooks.' In 1996, however, Brooks suddenly disappeared from the UK and resurfaced in Spain.

His move came in the wake of the seizure of a boat by customs officials on the River Ribble, close to Preston, Lancashire. On board was 2.5 tons of cannabis.

Police raided Brooks's house, but he was never arrested or charged, even though investigators strongly believed he was involved.

Also in 1996, he was convicted in absentia in France for conspiring to import 4.2 tons of cannabis and sentenced to 13 years. His luck appeared to run out, however, when he was arrested that same year in Tangier, Morocco, after yet another drugs seizure.

In 1997 he was given a ten-year sentence. Incredibly, though, not even that held him back. Brooks pulled off his most remarkable escape yet when in 2000 he feigned back pain in order to receive treatment at a Tangier hospital.

As the visits became regular, the security began to slacken.

On one visit a getaway car was waiting for him, and he was driven to the nearby port, where a Jet Ski was waiting with extra fuel tanks to take him to safety across the Strait of Gibraltar.

Brooks settled back into life in his luxurious villa outside Marbella with stunning views of the mountains. But this house would, in a way, come to betray him.

When the SOCA team went down to the Costa del Sol, there was one significant piece of the jigsaw – the mobile number found on board Dances – that still needed slotting into place. Whose was it? ‘We knew the cell mast where the calls from the Spanish mobile number were received and sent from,’ says SOCA investigator Gary.

‘We stood outside Brooks’s house and we could see that the calls were bouncing off that mast. The ship’s log referenced Colin, but really Colin is Brooks.’

Although the net was tightening, SOCA still had to land their catch. They began by applying for a European Arrest Warrant, but crucially they also watched to see if Brooks made any credit-card transactions.

This seemed a forlorn hope given his preference for using cash, yet their vigilance

paid off after he sneaked into the UK in October 2011 using yet another false passport. Brooks may have paid for his stay at the luxurious Marriott Grand Residences in London's Mayfair with £5,200 in cash, but he made a fatal mistake: he had his credit card swiped on arrival.

Although the police and SOCA missed him while he was in London, they subsequently raided his brother Fred's house in Blackpool and found Brooks with his girlfriend and child in tow.

'I've had very little contact with my brother over the years,' says Fred Brooks.

'Considering what he's been convicted of, if you meet him he doesn't come across as a gangster, but as a gentleman. Yes, he loves his fast cars – Ferraris, Bentleys, Lamborghinis and E-type Jags. 'You could also say that my brother has a complex love life,' he adds, 'with two or three families or more. He went to Marbella about 30 years ago and started getting into trouble. I don't understand it all to be honest.'

'I Was This Close To Brooks,' Says SOCA Investigator Gary, Indicating A Distance Of 2ft, 'And When The Words "28 Years" Emerged You Could See All The Blood Drain From His Face.'

Brooks was finally convicted of plotting to smuggle cocaine into the UK at Birmingham Crown Court in September. His cohorts Doo, Mufford and Wiggins had already been jailed in Ireland for ten years back in 2009.

'I was this close to Brooks,' says SOCA investigator Gary, indicating a distance of 2ft, 'and when the words "28 years" emerged you could see all the blood drain from his face.'

Brooks was a facilitator. He obtained Irish passports through criminal groups, travelled to South America and bought yachts in the Caribbean. I believe that he was working for someone in Spain.' SOCA may not have caught others further up the chain, but Brooks's tentacles certainly spread wide.

During his trial it emerged that a countersignature on one of Brooks's passports had been provided by a London publican called Paul Collins, who'd also signed the passport applications of two traffickers jailed following a £320 million Irish drug bust in 2007. Irish detectives believe Brooks was also behind this conspiracy.

'He's been at it for years. It's obvious,' says Detective Sergeant Feargal Foley of the Irish police. SOCA investigators are now looking to strip Brooks of his ill-gotten gains.

They're likely to face a long fight, as much of his property is believed to be well concealed and offshore.

Should the 61-year-old survive his sentence, he may once again head for the Continent, but probably not at the wheel of a Ferrari. Instead, it's expected that the ageing drugs baron will be extradited to France to serve out the sentence for trafficking he dodged in 1996. This time he's unlikely to be able to escape on a Jet Ski.