

## South America

The situation was grim. An unknown number of individuals had embezzled dozens of millions of dollars from the plant. So systemic was the fraud that it was impossible to determine how far the rot had spread. What was known was that the plant manager had to be in on the scheme, along with accounting, because the entire set of duplicate books had to be invented. A hundred million a year at just this plant and over 30% had simply vanished, lost forever. Of the top 15 in management, the decision was made to try to determine who was possibly innocent as opposed to guilty. It was much easier that way for the numbers would be smaller to work with.

For the team from the Center, it was their 4<sup>th</sup> trip in as many months and every deployment had been brutal. Their assignment had been painfully straightforward. The executive vice president of the company was tasked with “cleaning up” the mess and the word on the street was that the second he stepped foot in this frontier style South American country he was a walking dead man. Thirty million goes a long way, especially in a country where the average wage at the time was 25 cents an hour. Death threats were issued and the government was totally incapable of rendering serious aid. Hence the call to CASS.

Seventeen bodyguards in two shifts, 5 vehicles and 2 private aircraft. The entire 9<sup>th</sup> floor of the Hilton had been secured by a combination of the Police, Hotel Security, and our team. The average work day was 18-20 hours and everybody was sick for a couple of days upon return to the United States. The stress, both physically and mentally, was that bad.

It was the classic nightmare of private security. Protect a high risk target in an unknown location with minimal assets, some of whom could very well be on the payroll of the enemy. Of the 17, most were locals with dubious training, poor pay, and limited intellect. At risk was an Exec VP of a huge Fortune 500 company.

On their first day the team had suffered an earthquake, and watched a small commuter aircraft fall from the skies and crash not 400 meters from the Hilton, killing everybody on board. Gunshots were heard later that night, while the heavily guarded client was ensconced in the Presidential suite.

But that was 4 long months ago and now it had come down to one day.

It was a very haggard team leader from CASS who addressed the men in the middle of the night. Exhausted was closer to the truth for he had been up till all hours drafting up the plan which was to be executed today. He had only just finished briefing the client, who had endorsed it wholeheartedly. Tom Savage had been asked for his input on a late night call to the US. Tom, who had trained the Special Air Service team responsible for the masterful strike at the Iranian Embassy in London, had nothing to add. He simply stated, "Who cares who dares, just win" as he hung up the phone, twisting the famous Regimental motto.

"Listen up", began the former Special Operations soldier, as he began to address the team in fluent Spanish.

He spoke for nearly an hour, using diagrams, maps, and enlarged photos. The team followed along through communications annexes, contingency plans, and code words, thumbing along in the 35 page order each had received.

It was classically unconventional, relying heavily on speed and surprise to compensate for lack of numbers and solid intelligence.

The general consensus was that the criminal element didn't really believe the client (name of Ted) had the intestinal fortitude to fire over 70% of his operational management. Ted did, and was planning, along with security, to axe the lot later that morning. What *was known*, beyond a shadow of a doubt, was that the second the tap was turned off on a scheme making millions of dollars for a dozen or so people, Ted's life was going to get both short and violent. What was also known was that there was a leak from somewhere within the security team. One of the locals was working both sides of the track but we hadn't been able to identify exactly who that was. The second that team had any private time one member was going to be on a cell phone and blow the whole plan to the opposition.

Shawn and Tom anticipated exactly that. Which was why the first operations order was at 0400 in the morning. It ended at 0530 and the men were permitted to return to their hotel rooms unsupervised. Many weeks later, after it was all over, the culprit was identified and admitted to calling the opposition, and divulging the contents of the briefing he had attended. The enemy had indeed been forewarned.

An hour later, the former Ranger padded into the Presidential suite. Ted was shaving when his bodyguard silently ghosted into view.

“So, are we compromised yet?” This from Ted.

“I should imagine so”, came the reply from his Chief of Detail. “Do me a favor”, he continued, “and wear this today”. With that he tossed over a large bullet proof vest. “You’ll have to excuse me now, time to get the wheels in motion.”

Ted looked up from the sink, still covered in lather. “I hope this works. “

The response was faint as the former Ranger was already heading for the suite. “I hope it does too, as it’s your life I’m betting on it.”

The team was called together in the conference suite. Only this time there was a marked change in attitude. The section leaders held out bags into which cell phones were deposited. Further communications with the outside world were prohibited.

A second briefing occurred, with a radically different plan. This time it was the real order and smiles could be seen around the room as comprehension set in. There were very few questions upon completion.

Only this time the men were not permitted to be alone, and only those who were patently loyal were permitted cellular phones. This time, the plan wasn’t going to leak. Not that there was time anyway, for part of the process hinged on speed and surprise, and to achieve that required swift movement from this time forward. The drivers departed for the parking garage of the Hilton in order to arrange the sequence of vehicles in the convoy.

The conference at the plant was called for 0900. Word had been put out by Ted that it was strictly to have a “candid discussion” with all elements in order to address the missing funds. There was to be no hint of firings or reprisals at the meeting and all were to attend. Only 2 short hours ago, this was confirmed by the bogus Operations Order put out in the hotel suite. The first Operations Order had confirmed that the management was to be handled with kid gloves, and that there was to be no overt action until word was received from corporate headquarters. The leak promptly forwarded this to the embezzlers who entered the meeting with confidence high and threat perception low. The infiltrator had no chance to warn of a change in tactics because he neither had a cell phone nor an opportunity to use it.

This “business as usual” façade was also maintained at the Hilton. Logic would have dictated that if today were the big show, then bags would be checked, rooms cleared, and bills paid. There is little sense in hanging around once the axe had fallen. It was an open secret that staff at the Hilton were on the embezzler’s payroll. Given the average wage at the time, one could hardly fault the employees, all of whom had mouths to feed at home.

Yet the suitcases were unpacked, clothes still hung in the closet, and laundry still was checked in to the cleaners. It was never possible to determine who the leak was at the Hilton, but the message sent forward after Ted had left for the plant was patently clear. Nobody was leaving the Hilton anytime soon. So another plank in the platform of deception was safely constructed.

The third and final deception lay at the airport, where the company Lear jet lay guarded inside a hangar. Money works wonders and the manager of the hangar was only too pleased to report that none of the preliminary paperwork or aircraft pre flight inspections had been completed.

When taken collectively, the management who had embezzled some 30 million seemed to have no reason to fear the staff meeting as there was no evidence of any pending threat to their ongoing pilferage. It seemed that Ted was all talk and no action. In the privacy of the conference room, all breathed a silent sigh of relief.

It wouldn’t last long, for even at that moment the 7 vehicle convoy was entering the compound through a back gate, so as to ensure they could not be seen from the conference room. It was critical to maintain the element of surprise until the final moment, which was rapidly approaching. Silently, the men rearranged vehicles and broke down into several smaller teams. Already, Ted, his Team Leader from CASS and a dozen members of the team were striding at speed, covering the last hundred meters through the corridors of the administrative building towards the conference room.

There is a time for surprise, and a time for speed. Each are designed to get you as close to the enemy as possible. Both had exceeded the expectations of those who drafted the plan. The last piece of the triad was violence of action and in this discipline the team was well prepared and thoroughly rehearsed.

The door to the conference room opened and a flood of suits poured into the room. Ted was the 5<sup>th</sup> in line and promptly ordered all to remain seated while another half dozen of the security silently surged into the conference room.

Of course there is always one idiot, more a pompous ass than intelligent, who rose to his feet and began to bluster about the meaning of this outrage.

He never completed the first sentence. As he rose to his feet his chair was slammed into the back of his legs, rapidly returning his overweight form to the sitting position. A hand found a chubby ear and pulled down hard and an instant later the overweight fool found his face mashed into the table as the Protection Officer politely informed him to be quiet. And should he continue to pose a threat, he could expect to be shackled and neutralized. Both were within his judicial rights as the Security Officer was also a member of the National Police force, co-opted to the Protection Detail for a couple of weeks.

And with that, the thought of any form of collective resistance perished in mid thought. Every manager found a highly competent bodyguard placed directly to his rear and room was instantly hushed.

Ted wasted no time, informing each was fired effective immediately. There would be no recourse, no redress of grievances to the company. This was the end, here, today.

In less than an hour each manager had been taken under escort to his desk, allowed to police up personal items and was promptly deposited outside the gate. The armed security guards, no connection to the bodyguard team, were told that the management were now considered persona non grata and force was authorized in denying them access to the facility.

Only one had the courage to contest the issue, but a few minutes discussion in regards to the ramifications of his dubious choice of sides was able to resolve the issue without further debate.

In 75 minutes the decks had been swept clean. The new plant manager was due to arrive the next day and the other vacancies had already been filled by highly competent, and trustworthy, candidates from other plants.

And now the shoe was on the other foot. For now the thieves and criminals had the upper hand. For them, the choice was easy. The new broom sweeping through meant a cessation of illegal profits. Intimidation and violence propagated against Ted represented the only viable course of action resulting in a potential return to the status quo. Or at least the chance to make one last grab for all the cash available. And for that country in that time period, a professional killer could be hired for about \$1000 US. All one needed was contacts and the embezzlers had those contacts. A thousand is piggy bank change when confronted with millions in money to be made or lost. Phone calls would already be placed

as the opposition began to focus on the known choke points for Ted. Sooner or later, Ted would have to move from the Hilton to the Airport and that is where he would be most vulnerable. Within hours, gunmen would be waiting, if they were not already.

They never got the opportunity, for Ted was involved in the last phase of the plan which was also the most ingenious. The planners from CASS had struck again.

The most sought after man in the whole country was at that moment sitting down in the most popular ice cream café in the entire metropolis, half way through an enormous banana split. The truth was, the events of the morning had progressed more rapidly than expected, and this stop represented one of three contingencies based upon exactly that. The team had three quarters of an hour to kill so why not have ice cream? Granted, it was a bit strange with a dozen stern men facing outwards while the boss tore up a banana split, but it was the last place the world would ever expect to find Ted. Sometimes hiding in plain sight is the best option of all.

Three miles away a private executive jet was being prepared in a closed hangar, not 400 meters from the corporate one used by Ted's company. It had been quietly leased for a one time trip to Florida and back. The passenger manifest was not provided but the money was paid in cash, in full, up front.

Fifteen minutes later the convoy pulled in. The engines were already turning over as Ted scrambled up the gangway. He had not even sat down before the plane was taxiing towards the primary runway as the pilot requested departure clearance from the tower. Two minutes later it was all over as the sleek executive jet punched through the low overcast into the brilliant sunshine above. Ted peeled off his bullet proof vest and ordered a rum and cola to celebrate.

Even as the client drifted off to a well deserved sleep, the final pieces of the puzzle were falling into place. The team had surreptitiously returned to the Hilton and had swept the Presidential suite of clothes and belongings, along with the other handful of rooms leased by the company. And with that, they settled down to wait. It was a long night for the entire security detail, for they all silently lay in ambush inside the darkened rooms for an attack that never materialized. It was, in retrospect, probably a good thing, for the gunmen who tried to shoot Ted in his sleep would have been severely surprised at the firepower of the quiet men biding their time in lethal ambush for his calling.

The company corporate jet departed the next morning, empty. The manager duly reported the fueling and paperwork being processed but there was nothing to attack for nobody every showed up. The plane returned, unhindered, to the United States.

The only other note of interest occurred later in the morning at the International Airport. A quiet gentleman, checked through First Class to Miami, had an inordinate quantity of checked luggage. He had arrived in the departure lounge with excess cargo at the last possible minute, which created headaches for the baggage handlers. Unperturbed, he paid the \$500.00 overcharge in crisp new \$100 dollar bills. He kept to himself and always managed to sit with his back to the wall until the American Airlines jet was safely off the ground, winging towards the Florida coastline.

The team leader, a graduate of CASS, looked forward to nothing more than a long sleep and a good swim. Mission accomplished.