

# Traffickers in the Supply Chain

## Even State-of-the-Art Logistics and Supply Chain Systems Are Magnets for Traffickers

In the mid-1980s during the War on Drugs, a coalition of international forces targeted the cartels' supply chains and temporarily closed the Caribbean route they used to traffic cocaine to North America and Europe. In response, the cartels targeted and infested the supply chains of major manufacturers and commercial retailers in a concerted new campaign that continues to the present day. This was an unintended consequence of the War on Drugs.

Trafficking is a constantly evolving challenge, but the lessons of history are powerful, and our struggle in the Caribbean provided many valuable lessons that remain valid today. Let's take a brief look at what transpired then and what we can learn from this experience that still has utility in today's high-tech world.

In 1982, I was a captain in an infantry battalion. I was ordered to hand-pick a team of ten soldiers and train them as a special operations narcotics unit. We were to provide armed support for US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) agents working in Jamaica as they went after the trafficking operations of the Columbian Medellin and Cali cartels. This was during a peak in a low-intensity conflict that had claimed tens of thousands of lives.

Jamaica was a key transshipment route for cocaine, as well as a major source of marijuana, and we would be working in tandem with DEA operatives in Columbia and elsewhere in Latin America and the USA. At the same time, extensive slash-and-burn operations were being mounted in Jamaica against the farms growing marijuana in the hinterland.

At the outset, our work primarily entailed jumping out of helicopters several miles away from illegal jungle airstrips used by the traffickers. We always operated under DEA direction, and our mission was to intercept the traffickers' light aircraft as they attempted to take off from these remote dirt runways hacked out of the bush. Jumping into the unknown, knowing that alert and utterly ruthless criminals with automatic weapons were out there somewhere, was always something that focused the mind and heightened the senses. The downdraft from the chopper's rotors would beat the tall grasses flat in the small clearings we used as landing zones. The silence after the aircraft had gone fell like a blanket, and the heat always hit us like an oven opening.

We sweated ceaselessly under our steel helmets, humping our gear through heavy undergrowth and mangrove swamps, across muddy rivers and racing streams. We

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wondered what lay hidden in the trees on every side. We knew that large crocodiles lived in some of the waterways. Technically, they were caimans, dangerous crocodilian alligatoroids. Even people who live in these parts occasionally manage to get themselves eaten.

Other raids involved fast boat intercepts with the Coast Guard, as well as covert beach landings that allowed us to trek undetected to airstrips near the coast. Once, as we waded ashore, chest deep in the sea, the fin of a large shark sliced the water between us and the beach. No squad of soldiers in full combat gear ever moved as urgently through deep water as we did.

The traffickers' aircraft could come by day or night; the pilots often used night vision goggles, which were a novelty to us and highly prized when arrests were made. I don't think we ever handed any of these goggles in as evidence, keeping them for our own use.

The planes would land, taxi, and U-turn expertly at the end of the runway in readiness for a quick departure, while we watched from the treeline. Pickup trucks full of packages of narcotics, covered by tarpaulins and with dozens of armed men perched on top, raced down the dirt roads and onto the landing strips in chaotic clouds of dust. That was always our cue, and we would advance silently, often being spotted only at the last moment, when it was too late for the traffickers to do anything other than drop their weapons.

The operational tempo was very high for several years, and things sometimes went wrong. There were casualties, most of them fatal. Aircraft went down. One was deliberately rammed on the runway by a traffickers' aircraft, killing the military pilot and co-pilot. I had served with both men for some years and knew them well. During this time, I lost several other close friends and colleagues. I still think about them regularly some thirty-five years later.

Nevertheless, the impact of our efforts was substantial, and for a period at least, Columbian cocaine stopped passing through Jamaica in volume as the cartels changed their tactics. We had targeted their supply chain, but now they would pause, rethink, reconnoitre, and then launch supply chain attacks of their own.

## Here Be Smugglers

We had suffered costly losses, but the cartels had lost their shipments and many of their pilots. These pilots were expensive and were usually US citizens, many of them Vietnam veterans. The pilot who had deliberately



I am sitting in the open door of this Huey on Caribbean drug enforcement operations, circa 1983.



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rammed one of our aircraft was one such. He was a US Marine Corps veteran of Vietnam who passed away in Florida in 2015 at age sixty-two, having discovered Jesus during his later years.

The traffickers now made a strategic move to smuggling, hiding their contraband on large cargo vessels and within the shipping containers they carry. Rather than renting their own boxes, they preferred to contaminate legitimate shipments. This usually involved subverting employees at the point of manufacture, in trucking and warehousing operations, or in the port itself. Ships' crews and officers were also targets.

Some trafficking rings developed significant technical sophistication, employing experts from the private sector to provide the necessary skills. Port systems were subverted, in order to allow the traffickers to move their containers around within the port. Divers would weld underwater metal tubes to the hulls of ships. These were stuffed with cocaine in waterproof wrappings. The tubes would then be removed by other divers when the ships arrived in US or European ports. But it was the reconfiguration of shipping containers and the creation of cargo made from narcotics that most impressed me.

Much like the hackers of today, the narcotics traffickers of the '80s and '90s began to display incredible levels of imagination and creativity. Statuettes were made from a mixture of cocaine and other substances, to be shipped as commercial goods and then broken down on delivery. Empty shipping containers were magically converted so that they could be used to carry substantial quantities of drugs in false compartments. False walls created large cavities, as did false floors. The hollow cross beams on the containers' doors were cut open, filled with packages of drugs, and

then welded shut. The inner tyres of roll-on, roll-off boxes were filled with drugs or cash instead of air. It seemed that nothing was beyond the wit of man.

## Once More unto the Breach

By 1990, the Port of Kingston was the third-largest container transshipment port in the world. Shipping containers from everywhere were dropped off here, then reassigned and consolidated on vessels heading to the required destinations. Added to these huge piles of forty-foot metal boxes, others held local cargos, primarily clothing assembled in the factories of the Jamaica Free Zone, under a US programme that allowed them to be imported duty-free.

Now out of uniform and with a couple of years in military intelligence added to my CV, I was given a new task. I was to set up and manage a team of container-cargo search specialists. We would operate within a secure government facility, performing detailed inspections of specific containers and ships that intelligence analysts and customs officers identified as suspect. The enemy was the same: totally committed and completely ruthless traffickers who were capable of anything. It wasn't long before my vessel search diver and one of the Police officers attached to my team had been assassinated as they drove to work.

Much of the intelligence analysis involved studies of vessel and container movements. A rigged container would often be reused several times by traffickers. While they used insiders to ensure that the same container was always sent back to them, we used data analysis to spot containers that did not follow the more random usage patterns one might expect. When such an outlier was spotted, the box would be intercepted and brought to our site to be fully stripped down, sniffed by dogs, drilled, measured, and eyeballed minutely.

This intelligence-led approach to cargo examinations was essential. With thousands of containers passing through the port daily, it was impossible to inspect more than a tiny percentage. Random spot checks were doomed to fail.

Another critical factor was whistleblowing. To be suspected of informing on narcotics trafficking was usually a death sentence, but local populations in developing nations often have very high, old-school moral standards. They detest the wrongdoers amongst them. If they were supported and kept safe from harm, very reliable reports from informants were regularly received.

As a result, we began to find a lot more than drugs during our searches. All manner of things turned up, including people (sometimes alive but more often suffocated), stolen vehicles, automatic weapons, cash, and stolen goods, including the first generation of cloned mobile handsets.

We applied high-grade numbered seals to the container doors to help us to spot tampering, but the traffickers learned how to exploit the hinges and lift the entire door off with a forklift, keeping the seal intact. We spot-welded the hinges and randomised the drivers pulling containers to the port, in order to increase the chances that someone would blow the whistle, but the traffickers subverted the computer systems used to manage this process. We trained



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specialist Police and customs teams, but the traffickers got to some of them and paid them off.

One customs officer on our team started showing up to work in two different high-end cars of the same model—one red, one green. You never saw a man saunter into an office with fewer cares in the world. We struggled to prove anything, and a very militant trade union prevented us from firing him, so we assigned him to a meaningless desk job until he finally resigned. Eventually, we acquired the first generation of GPS trackers. These helped, but some were interfered with by traffickers who were able to turn them on and off at will.

## The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same

Look to your robotic systems, your artificial-intelligence tools, and your modern IT platforms with an open mind. Who will attack these and how? The threat has not diminished, and it probably never will. Attacks on the supply chain by traffickers are akin to an arms race. It's a case of two steps forward and one step back, and if you take your eye off the ball, that one step back can quickly become ten.

Everything counts. Trafficking is a full-spectrum crime; the relationship between physical security, logical security, processes, and people is nowhere more evident. Supply chain security requires skill, imagination, and thinking, not outside the box but as if there is no box at all. ■