

United States v. Joseph Hunter, et al.

**Prepared Remarks of U.S. Attorney Preet Bharara
September 27, 2013**

Good afternoon. My name is Preet Bharara, and I am the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York.

Today we announce the arrest of Joseph Hunter, a man who served in the United States Army for nearly 20 years: a former sniper instructor; a former drill sergeant; and a man who, since leaving the military, has allegedly worked as a contract killer – arranging, successfully, for the murder of numerous people.

Today, we also announce the arrests of four other men, also former soldiers: a former U.S. Army soldier, Timothy Vamvakias; and three former European soldiers – each one a trained sniper.

The bone-chilling allegations in today's indictment read like they were ripped from the pages of a Tom Clancy novel. The charges tell a tale of an international band of mercenary marksmen who enlisted their elite military training to serve as hired guns for evil ends.

As alleged in the indictment unsealed today, the former soldiers were hand-picked by Joseph Hunter to assist a purported Colombian drug-trafficking organization.

All five defendants allegedly worked to help import hundreds of kilograms of cocaine into the United States.

And, as alleged in the Indictment, three of the former soldiers went one terrible step further. Three of the defendants were ready, willing and eager to take cold hard cash to commit the cold-blooded murders of a DEA agent and an informant.

As alleged, the three agreed to murder an agent of the Drug Enforcement Administration, and to murder a person who they were told was acting as an informant for the DEA agent.

All at the behest of the purported drug-trafficking organization. And all in exchange for a large pay day — collectively about eight hundred thousand dollars.

As alleged, all five defendants put their military skills and training at the disposal of men they believed to be ruthless drug traffickers.

Today's arrests are the culmination of a bold and brave global investigation conducted by some of the most extraordinary law-enforcement agents in the world – the men and women of the DEA's Special Operations Division.

As I noted at the outset, and as today's indictment alleges, Joseph Hunter has successfully arranged for a number of murders for hire in the years since 2004, when he left the United States Army.

As the investigation revealed, these were consummated, completed contract killings. And because it was clear that Hunter was a threat to public safety around the world, our partners in the Special Operations Division set out to stop him.

Here's what happened.

The two planned contract murders – Joseph Hunter called them “assassinations” – were to be carried out in Liberia, and to be quarterbacked by Hunter from Thailand.

Hunter, who also went by the alias “Rambo,” was a sergeant first class in the U.S. Army, and a sniper instructor. Another American, Timothy Vamvakias, was also in the U.S. Army, and served as a sergeant, infantryman and a military police officer.

Dennis Gogel, from the German armed forces, was also a trained sniper. Those three men are charged in the murder-for-hire scheme.

In addition, two others made up the alleged security team for the purported narcotics trafficking organization from Colombia. Michael Filter, from the German armed forces, and Slawomir Soborksi, from the Polish armed forces. Both of them were also snipers.

Hunter allegedly masterminded and quarter backed the entire operation from Thailand. The assassinations of the DEA agent and the informant were supposed to take place in Liberia.

Some more details and background about the case: During 2012, Joseph Hunter began collecting resumes, by e-mail, for prospective members of a so-called “security team.”

The idea was for this “security team” of highly-trained former soldiers – today’s defendants – to be on call to do the difficult dirty work of international drug dealers.

The DEA introduced two confidential sources to Hunter. These confidential sources, wearing recording devices, claimed to be Colombian cocaine traffickers.

Hunter and his “security team” leapt at the chance to serve the purported drug dealers.

For example, the security team traveled to the Caribbean, and conducted surveillance of a plane — to make certain that no law-enforcement agent was watching. The plane was said to be loading up with over 500 pounds of cocaine — bound for New York.

But right from the outset, Joseph Hunter and his men were looking for more lucrative work.

The recordings paint a chilling picture: “Bonus work” was Hunter’s term for contract killings. Short range, close-in murders for hire. Here’s how Hunter put it in private, speaking just to his men:

“Most of the bonus work is up close . . . because in the cities . . . you don’t get long-range shots.”

The confidential sources went to Joseph Hunter, offering just such “bonus work.” They told him that their cocaine trafficking organization had been infiltrated; that a witness was supplying information to the DEA; and that that problem needed to be taken care of.

As alleged, Joseph Hunter didn’t flinch at the chance. He said that his men could “handle both jobs.” They would murder the DEA agent. And they would murder the witness too.

From there it was off to the races.

The assassinations were to be done in Liberia by one of the former U.S. soldiers, Vamvakias; and by Dennis Gogel, a former German soldier, while Hunter was to run the operation from his base in Thailand.

Hunter’s men supplied two state-of-the-art masks to be used during the killings – latex masks that cover the face and the neck and that can even allow a person to look like he is of a different race.

They were to be armed to the teeth -- with rifles. Pistols equipped with silencers. Submachine guns. Why a submachine gun?

As one of the former U.S. soldiers explained it: “That will guarantee that whatever gets in that kill zone is going down.”

The motive here was money. Greed, plain and simple.

As alleged, Joseph Hunter had killed before for money. And he, and his men, wanted more of it. These are the motives of professional killers. The motives of professional hit men.

But there was another motive, too. One of the former German soldiers said that doing the killings would be “fun.” He said: “I love this work.”

The DEA had been very closely monitoring all of this.

And when the two former soldiers actually flew from Asia to Liberia to do the murders, for which they expected to be paid, at that point, the DEA had seen more than enough.

The two men were arrested upon their arrival in Liberia and are now in custody here. Joseph Hunter was arrested back in Thailand, from where he was running the operation. He is en route to the United States to face justice in the Southern District of New York.

The two remaining defendants, former Polish and German soldiers, are in custody in Estonia. We will seek their extradition, also to face justice in the Southern District.

I would like to commend the Department of Justice's Office of International Affairs. Under the leadership of Molly Warlow, they have done extraordinary work in support of this complicated global investigation.

In addition, I want to recognize the career prosecutors in my office who have each worked so very hard and so well on this investigation. Michael Lockard, Aimee Hector, and Anna Skotko, led by their supervisors in the Terrorism and International Narcotics Unit, chiefs Michael Farbiarz and Jocelyn Strauber. These prosecutors will now work to ensure that justice is done in our courts.

Let me also take a moment to thank and recognize our partners on this case, and on so many other important cases, the Special Operations Division of the DEA. Their work here was as absolutely incredible as it was effective. In an operation that spanned four continents, the Special Operations Division acted to end the career of a professional hit man who was planning to kill a federal law enforcement officer and a federal witness.

And in the days and weeks to come, I know that we will be hearing more about the extraordinary work that SOD has been doing around the world. This case is a tribute to their leadership and their innovation.

Now let me call Derek Maltz, Special Agent-in-Charge of the Special Operations Division of the DEA, to the podium.