DRUG SMUGGLING

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PART 1

HOW TO
PLAY THE
GAME
There is a big difference between drug smugglers and drug dealers. Few smugglers would ever consider being involved in the final stages of getting the contraband to the ultimate user, while just about all dealers would love to enter the high-profit world of the smuggler. Both groups take risks, but the smuggler operates on a much more technical plane, dealing with transport vehicles and high-tech equipment rather than street corners and customers.

Drug-smuggling operations can be compared to small multinational companies. Just because one person is successful importing beer from Mexico doesn’t mean that it is going to work exactly the same way if another person decides he wants to start a company to import the same beer.

It all comes down to people—finding the right people for the right jobs and doing it in a careful, back-channel way to minimize the chance of law enforcement being contacted about the budding conspiracy taking place. From source-country sellers and workers to pilots and boat captains to ground crews in the United States to vehicle drivers, safe-house baby-sitters, chiefs of sales, money transporters, and legal advisors, you can’t do multinational drug smuggling without a lot of people being involved.

However, drug smuggling is an amazingly profitable business, and where there is big money available there will always be risk takers who want to roll the dice. Some people are born lucky and can win at the Las Vegas gambling tables even if they’ve had fifteen drinks and are playing footsie with the girl sitting next to them. The question is, would that person do even better if he or
she wasn’t drunk and partially distracted? Who knows, but I believe that successful drug-smuggling endeavors are not a matter of luck, but rather a result of information gathering, planning, and then execution.

Even though the “forbidden” nature of drug-smuggling information transfer makes it difficult, the person who makes the effort to find the answers to the questions he has about every little detail of the mission will be the one who gives himself the best odds of succeeding.

Money is the sparkling lure that puts the thought of becoming a drug smuggler in most people’s minds. Many people think that money can solve all their problems and change their lives for the better. Nowhere does the opportunity exist to amass huge sums of money more quickly than in the drug-smuggling business. However, if money is a person’s only motivation for getting involved in illegal smuggling missions, then he would be much better off heading to New York and getting involved in all those Wall Street tricks.

To take the risks of breaking laws, challenging American defenses, and possibly going to jail for years requires more incentives than making quick cash to buy a car, boat, or new wardrobe. This is where attitude is so important — outlaw attitude — and if you don’t think that the adventure, excitement, and challenge of drug smuggling rank right up there with the potential money, then you are in the wrong line of work.

Adventure, excitement, challenge, and danger combined with the possibility of a huge payday is a job description that only criminal activity can provide. The F-15 fighter pilots shooting down Iraqi MiGs during Operation Desert Storm got close to fulfilling the job description, but they didn’t get paid upwards of $50,000 for each successful mission they flew.

If criminal activity is the heading under which one might find the combination of excitement, danger, and money, then when expertise, skill, and handshake trust are thrown in, drug smuggling can be seen as the niche where the outlaw personality can find true happiness.

Contrary to media hype, few drug smugglers carry weapons. The penetration of the United State’s borders is done with as much
slyness, stealth, and invisibility as possible. If the smuggler makes it he gets rich, and if he doesn’t he goes to jail. But ahead of this get-rich-or-go-to-jail mentality, there has to be an attitude that the playing of the game, the fighting of the battle, is the backbone of the whole endeavor.

When my former air force pilot training classmate Mick told me in 1975 that he was a marijuana smuggler and asked if I was interested in joining his crew, the first thing I asked him was what it would involve. He said it would involve flying planes from Florida to Colombia, landing on a dirt road in the middle of nowhere, and then flying back to the United States, with the last two hours of the flight being done at night, fifty feet above the water. I never even asked Mick what he would pay me. It just clicked that this was something that offered everything I had dreamed about in a job.

If, after years of knowing and observing someone, I start the preliminary probe into whether an interest in getting involved in drug smuggling exists, the first area I approach is how that person feels about extreme, possibly life-threatening adventure. If the answer is the usual cavalier attitude of “no sweat, danger is my middle name,” I then break out my copy of the movie *Never Cry Wolf* and pop it in the VCR.

There is a scene in that movie that I think best captures the attitude a person has to have to be a participant in any smuggling group I’m involved with. Within the first five minutes of the movie, Brian Dennehy’s character is flying a beat-up radial-engine De Havilland Otter aircraft to the remotest part of Alaska to drop off a guy who is going to spend the winter in the wilderness doing research on wolves. Dennehy’s character is picking his way through the clouds and mountains and talking about how boring it must be in the lower forty-eight states where everyone just sits around watching TV.

Just as he finishes his sentence, the aircraft engine starts coughing and then dies. Dennehy pounds on the dash then tells his passenger to take the aircraft controls and hold the airplane level. When the passenger has his hands on the controls, Dennehy grabs his tool box and pulls out a wrench. He opens the pilot-side door and begins to climb out on the strut to try and
undo a frozen fuel valve. However, before he is positioned on the strut, he sticks his head back inside the cockpit and holds up his wrench like a tomahawk. “Adventure,” he says, “that’s how you beat boredom—adventure.”

If the Brian Dennehy character from *Never Cry Wolf* doesn’t stir something in your personality makeup that allows you to identify with what he is doing out on that strut, then don’t get involved in the action end of drug smuggling.

There is one other aspect that people have to do some thinking about before signing on for a smuggling mission, and that’s the concept of going to prison. The fact is that if you are active as a drug smuggler, the odds are that you will be doing some jail time before you retire from the business. Going to jail is part of a drug smuggler’s job description. It’s not much different from a person who is deathly afraid of flying—if you are afraid to fly in an airplane, don’t plan to use your week of vacation time for a trip to Australia.

As long as the smuggling profession offers fantastic paydays to those who succeed, there will always be a steady stream of people willing to roll the dice. Those who thrive will be keen on staying abreast of changes, able to accept the setbacks and jail time that might come their way, and, above all, be thrilled that an opportunity exists for an individual to find adventure, danger, and excitement in a line of work that rewards innovativeness and boldness with impressive financial rewards.