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Infiltrator-turned-author from bay area warns we're lax on tracing drug money

Robert Trigaux, Times Columnist
In Print: Sunday, July 26, 2009



[Special to the Times]

Tampa Bay's Bob Mazur may be the most dedicated federal law enforcement officer you've never heard of.

Mazur played a big role in helping bring down BCCI, the Bank of Credit and Commerce International — the "world's sleaziest bank," a *Time* magazine cover once declared — even if many may no longer recognize the bank's name.

A U.S. Customs undercover agent masquerading as money launderer "Bob Musella," Mazur penetrated deeper than any federal agent into the murky, high-rolling world of laundering drug profit money into legitimate currency for Colombia's Medellin drug cartel.

Yes, he partied in \$1,000-per night hotel suites, lived in lavish (if borrowed) homes, drove Rolls Royce convertibles, flew on the Concorde and traveled in private jets.

But it proved a ruthless, global business whose details we'd just as soon forget. Do so at our own peril, Mazur suggests. Banking is the Achilles heel of the illegal drug world.

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A former New York banker and trained as an accountant, an undercover Mazur reached high into the executive suites of BCCI. He found a bank eager to launder billions in profits from drug cartels. Among many other criminal acts, BCCI personally handled the money laundering needs of former Panamanian dictator General Manuel Noriega.

If this all sounds dated, well, it is and it isn't.

Most of these events happened about 20 years ago. Mazur, a longtime Internal Revenue Service, Customs and Drug Enforcement Agency agent — and now the head of Tampa's Chase and Associates investigative firm — has written an inside-the-belly-of-the-beast, non-fiction account of his life pushing the envelope as an undercover agent.

The book concludes with a modern day warning that the United States and other countries have lost their will and expertise to counter the global drug threat and proliferation of criminal banking activities.

Consider these appalling numbers: The drug trade produces about \$500 billion a year. At most, the feds stop about \$1 billion of it.

That's one-fifth of 1 percent.

"For the past 20 years, no one has ever been prosecuted for laundering most of that \$10 trillion," Mazur says.

The book — *The Infiltrator: My Life Inside the Dirty Banks Behind Pablo Escobar's Medellin Cartel* (publisher: Little, Brown, \$25.99) — hits stores Monday.

The tale starts in Tampa, Clearwater and New Port Richey and stretches to Los Angeles, Panama and Europe. It climaxes at Palm Harbor's Innisbrook Resort in an elaborately concocted 1988 wedding ceremony adorned with \$20,000 in red Colombian roses. Invitees were a Who's Who of global banking and drug cartel scumbags who gladly arrived to celebrate the "marriage" of one of their own: Bob Musella (Mazur) and his "fiancee," played by a fellow undercover agent.


In fact, the event became known as a federal sting called Operation C-Chase. Federal agents nabbed dozens of astonished attendees as they arrived at a bachelor's party at MacBeth's atop the old Exchange Bank building in downtown Tampa. A vast majority would be found guilty and jailed, thanks to the work of Mazur (he would testify for three out of the six months of the trial) and his fellow agents.

Major newspapers and magazines splashed news of C-Chase on their covers. TV news anchors such as Tom Brokaw reported extensively on the sting and its repercussions.


Mazur's book is a good read. But it's disturbing for two reasons. First, Mazur's multiyear assignment was extremely hard on the agent, his school teacher wife and kids. Second, the undercover work by Mazur — penetrating an international operation involving trillions of dollars — goes way beyond the fed's conventional, low-level alias work. Much of Mazur's efforts he and fellow agents improvised as they went along.

In the later stages, Mazur struggled bitterly as much with budget-minded bosses and competing federal agencies as he did with the life-threatening suspicions of drug cartel members. In his book, he even cites the close ties of BCCI to the Bush family and CIA (at the time, the bank supported "Afghan freedom fighters" — which 20 years later we now call the Taliban) and wonders what influence they had on his case.

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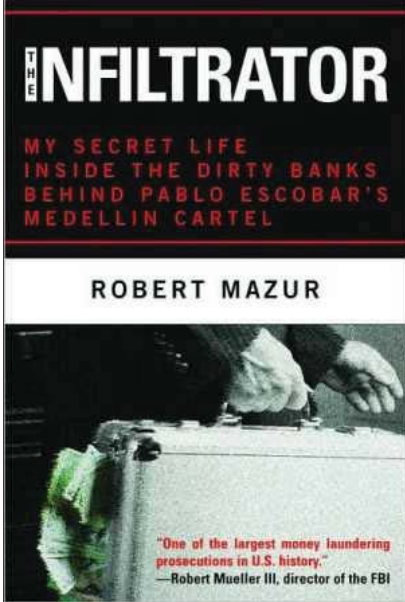
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MY SECRET LIFE
INSIDE THE DIRTY BANKS
BEHIND PABLO ESCOBAR'S
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"One of the largest money laundering prosecutions in U.S. history."
—Robert Mueller III, director of the FBI

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Why dredge all this up now, so long after the events?

First, Mazur says, it's a true tale that is entertaining. Mazur was a technical consultant on the 2006 movie *Miami Vice*, starring Colin Farrell and Jamie Foxx as undercover cops Crockett and Tubbs. Movie director Michael Mann, Mazur says, told him his tale was unique and important.

Other BCCI books published long ago were told by outsiders dependent on "slanted testimony of bitter witnesses," Mazur says. This is the first book told by someone living the experience.

But here's what really motivates Mazur. "This book offers insight into how governments have turned their back on the upper echelons of crime and why the war on drugs is in dire need of help," he states.

• • •

Earlier this month, I sat in on an evening graduate school class on forensic accounting. It's about how to use accounting techniques to detect fraud. Bob Mazur was invited by class professor Daphne Ullman to talk to her class about his undercover experiences and explain methods of money laundering.

Mazur was bearded and typically adorned in \$1,000 suits when undercover. Now, at 57, he's clean-shaven and casual. He obviously loves sharing his stories and, he hopes, some of his expertise about money laundering. It's becoming a lost art, he laments, as law enforcement agencies now focus more on quick scores of low-level street dealers and mostly ignore the money men.

Mazur describes his experience in ways young students can relate to. "It was kind of like the Super Bowl when the Bucs were in it," he says. "I was just an okay quarterback surrounded by some superstars."

It's a recurring theme with Mazur. He is quick to praise his fellow agents, especially partner Emir Abreu, whose undercover credibility "carried me on many occasions. I owe him my life," Mazur says.

He is equally quick to condemn banks, especially the private bankers that cater to the world's wealthy. He's penned a fresh editorial, now being shopped by Little Brown publicists, aimed at morally corrupt bankers at UBS. The Swiss banking firm is under federal investigation for alleged money laundering and aiding wealthy U.S. clients in hiding their money overseas.

"Not everybody is guilty," Mazur tells a rapt University of Tampa classroom. "But a good percentage of private bankers use the same techniques as BCCI."

Late in *The Infiltrator*, a stressed Mazur admits he could not bring himself to call it quits in spite of all the second guessing from Tampa and Washington higher ups. It is a notable confession.

"It was disgusting," he writes. "I would have walked away from it all, but I, too, had my agenda. My unique placement in the underworld — a position I thought no one else would ever see again — obsessed me. It could have cost me my career, my family, or my life — it didn't matter. My own blind ambition was pushing me."

Throughout my conversations with Mazur, he is anxious that any coverage minimize personal information about him and his family. I asked him how he reconciles writing such a candid book about powerful drug cartels and slimy bankers without drawing attention.

"I think this story is so important that I'm willing to take calculated risks to put it out," he explains. "I'm just the vehicle through which the public can learn about the phenomenon of the corrupting power of the underworld's fortunes."

He got me there. *The Infiltrator* portrays a side of the global money machine that's shockingly unregulated and way out of control.

"I felt the time had finally come when I had to either make this happen or walk away from it for the rest of my life," Mazur says. "I've never walked away from controversy before, and I ultimately decided that, on balance, I had to do this."

We're glad he did.

Robert Trigaux can be reached at trigaux@sptimes.com

Book signing

Robert Mazur, author of *The Infiltrator: My Life Inside the Dirty Banks Behind Pablo Escobar's Medellin Cartel*, will discuss and sign his book starting at 6 p.m. Aug. 7 at the Four Green Fields pub, 205 W Platt St., Tampa, in conjunction with Inkwood Books book store.

[Last modified: Jul 25, 2009 04:31 AM]