Viktor Bout made his first major foray into the weapons business in 1995, on a pleasant summer day in Bulgaria. A Russian entrepreneur who was then twenty-eight years old, he had flown to Sofia from Sharjah, the third-largest city in the United Arab Emirates, where he had lived for the previous two years. Sharjah was a kind of postmodern caravansary—as Bout told me recently, it was a place with “practically no law.” Although he had arrived in the Emirates not knowing much about Arab culture, he had a cosmopolitan ability to adapt to new circumstances. He was intending to enter the field of aviation. Supple with languages, he could flip among Russian, English, Portuguese, and Esperanto; today, he says, he can “read fifteen or six-teen languages, go to the market with five or six.” He started spending time at the cargo hangars at Sharjah’s international airport, got to know the pilots and crews, and soon formed an air-freight company, Air Cess, with a small fleet of Russian planes.

In Sofia, Bout checked into the Park Hotel Moskva, a shabby, state-owned high-rise, and set out for the office of a Bulgarian arms dealer named Peter Mirchev. Bout was comfortable doing business almost anywhere, be it an Eastern European city or an African jungle airstrip. Air Cess was doing particularly well in Africa, where he sometimes worked with despotic regimes. Bout’s pilots flew television, air-conditioners, and expensive furniture from Sharjah to ragged African capitals, and delivered planeloads of West African francs from Senegal to surrounding countries. Air Cess had also begun shipping textiles and electronics from Sharjah to Afghanistan, a country that was then led by President Burhanuddin Rabbani. Bout had grown close to Rabbani’s defense minister, Ahmed Shah Massoud, whom Bout described to me as “a real revolutionary,” adding, “You could see the flame in his eyes.” Massoud was concerned about the advance of Taliban rebels, and one day his deputy asked Bout if he could also hustle guns.

Bout, who had the brash confidence of the autodidact, didn’t have a source of weapons, but he knew that he could find one. A friend had recently given him the phone number of Mirchev, and Bout called him and introduced himself. As Mirchev recalls it, Bout faxed him a list of the Afghans’ requests.

After Mirchev read it, he told Bout, “Come to Sofia.”

Mirchev was just a few years older than Bout, but he was already an experienced arms broker. At the end of the Cold War, he had realized that Bulgaria’s weapons manufacturers, which had scant access to the global market, needed someone to “help them make connections to the world.” As Mirchev, whom I met recently in Sofia, told me, “Nobody spoke English. I did.” He had quickly become an important conduit for weapons exports.

Bout arrived at Mirchev’s office, and they went out for dinner. Bout had a sly smile, and his blue eyes were offset by a brown mustache; he wore a sports jacket with an open-necked shirt. Mirchev, a small man with boxy cheeks, liked him, but was struck by his illiteracy in the arms trade. “He didn’t know anything,” Mirchev told me. “He mistaked the cali-bres, he mistaked the systems, he mistaked the weapons.”

After dinner, Mirchev and Bout went for drinks at an outdoor cafe, on a cobble-stoned street canopied with tram lines, and hashed out a business plan. Mirchev proposed that he would manage the supply side, while Bout would handle the transportation. Bout agreed. “Viktor is a fast learner and he is very easy with the contacts,” Mirchev told me. “He could reach the right people at any time.”

The Afghan weapons contracts were dauntingly large. “They were faced with war, they needed us badly,” Mirchev said. I asked him about the scale of the shipments. “How many tons?” he said. “I never calculated tons. I calculated money. It was huge.” And, for Bout, it was just the beginning: within five years, he would be known as the world’s preeminent arms trafficker.

From a young age, Bout, who grew up in the Soviet backwater of Dushanbe, Tajikistan, yearned to see the world. The son of an auto mechanic and a bookkeeper, he honed his English, in part, by listening to ABBA and Chicago records. As a teen-ager, he explored two common ways out: sports and the military. First, he travelled around the Soviet Union playing competitive volleyball. He eventually quit, he told me, to have more time for girls. At the age of eighteen, Bout was conscripted into the Soviet Army, and he spent two years with an infantry brigade in western Ukraine. When his term ended, he applied to the Military Institute of Foreign Languages, in Moscow. He was accepted, and studied Portuguese there.

Stephen Blank, an expert on the Soviet and Russian military at the Army War College, calls the institute a “breeding ground” for intelligence officers. Bout insists that he never was a spy, but Mirchev, a former C.I.A. officer, and a Ukrainian organized-crime figure all told me that Bout once worked for the Soviets’ foreign-military-intelligence directorate, or G.R.U. In 1988, Bout left the institute and went to Mozambique, a former Portuguese colony, with a group of Soviet military advisers. One evening in Maputo,
at a function at the Soviet Embassy, he began a conversation with a woman named Alla Protassova. She was in Mozambique with her husband, a translator for the local Soviet trade mission. “Viktor is a very active, energetic person,” Alla told me. “He drags you in.” She moved back to Russia with her husband. Soon after, she left him, and in 1991 married Bout, who had returned to Moscow.

The Soviet Union dissolved that year. Amid a collapsing economy and Boris Yeltsin’s haphazard Presidency, criminal gangs, which had previously been confined to prisons, flourished. There were now many ways to become rich in Russia, but Bout was driven more by wanderlust than by money. He and Alla moved from Moscow to Sharjah, and launched the air-freight company. They were soon living in a spacious seaside villa.

In August, 1995, a few months after Bout started his partnership with Peter Mirchev, Taliban MIGs forced down one of Bout’s airplanes, near Kandahar. The Taliban took hostage the plane’s Russian pilots and crew. During the next year, Bout and officials from Moscow tried to secure the men’s freedom; Bout even met with the Taliban leader Mullah Omar. The Russians finally made it out of the country. The details remain elusive. Bout says that the crew escaped, and denies accusations that he cut a deal to shift his business from Rabbani and Massoud to the Taliban.

In 1997, Bout moved to Johannesburg. He and Alla, now the parents of a young girl, took up residence in a walled mansion with two swimming pools. Bout began seeking a runway, for business purposes, and in the process he befriended a white South African named Andrew Smulian. Fifty-six years old, Smulian had a phlegmy voice and a white mustache that hooked around his mouth. He owned an air-freight business that occasionally shipped arms.

Bout treated Smulian as a mentor, calling him babu—Swahili for “grandfather.” With Smulian’s assistance, Bout found an office and an airstrip in Pietersburg, two hundred miles northeast of Johannesburg, and established companies in Swaziland and Zambia. (Bout eventually built a network of thirty companies around the world; some of them were fronts, investigators say.)

Later that year, Bout took Smulian to the International Defense Exhibition and Conference, or IDEX, which is held biennially in Abu Dhabi. At IDEX, the latest military hardware, from tanks to stun grenades, is on display; the show attracts government representatives, defense contractors, and arms brokers, who often form relationships there. At the exhibition, Bout introduced Smulian to Mikhail Kalashnikov, the creator of the AK-47, and Mirchev, who was scouting for potential clients. Mirchev told me that he found Smulian abrasive and “very satisfied with himself.”

As Bout’s roster of legitimate clients and contracts grew, he also pursued opportunities in the “gray market”—where legal goods are moved by illegal, or at least questionable, means. (Buying an iPad from Best Buy is legal, but buying one in the parking lot behind Best Buy, without paying tax, places you in the gray market.) Dealing arms is not inherently illegal: last year, the United States exported forty-six billion dollars’ worth of weaponry. Legitimate transactions require a document called an “end-user certificate,” which identifies the buyer. The weapons trade enters the gray market when weapons are transferred from a legitimate buyer to countries or militant groups that have been placed under sanctions. Often, this involves forging end-user certificates.

One country where Bout entered the gray market was Angola. Civil war had broken out there in 1975, between the government’s Marxist militias and rebel forces led by Jonas Savimbi. In 1994, the U.S. oversaw a peace treaty, and the U.N. was imposing sanctions prohibiting arms transfers to Savimbi’s faction, known as UNITA. Bout initially transported sardines, flour, potatoes, beer, whiskey, and cooking oil to UNITA territories. By 1998, the peace treaty had begun to unravel, and Savimbi wanted guns. Bout met with Savimbi. “He was so charismatic,” Bout recalls. Soon afterward, Mirchev told me, Bout began trafficking crates of rocket-propelled grenades, AK-47s, and mortars to UNITA, along with armored personnel carriers. Mirchev, who said that one contract with Savimbi was
worth a hundred million dollars, arranged the shipments from Burgas, on the Black Sea. The city’s airport had cheaper logistics costs than other Bulgarian airports, and had a runway capable of handling an Ilyushin-76, one of Bout’s largest planes. Mirchev said that although Bout remained above all a transporter and a “matchmaker,” he had also become “very knowledgeable about the matériel.”

Bout admitted to me that he delivered weapons to Togo and Zaire, whose governments were friendly to UNITA. But he insisted that he never delivered arms into UNITA-held territory inside Angola.

Witney Schneidman, at the time the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, says that intelligence reports from the C.I.A. and the National Security Administration began piling up on his desk, documenting the movement of Bout’s planes in and out of Angola. Schneidman, who once termed Bout “the personification of evil,” told me that Bout was “directly undermining our efforts to bring peace.” At the same time that Bout was delivering weapons to Savimbi’s forces, Schneidman said, he was also flying arms to the Angolan government. I asked Bout whether Savimbi knew about his mixed allegiance. Of course, Bout said. Didn’t Savimbi mind? “If I didn’t do it, someone else would,” Bout said.

Officials in Washington began to see Bout as the quintessential figure of transnational crime. He was distinguished not by cruelty or ruthlessness but by cunning amorality. “If he wasn’t doing arms and all the vile stuff, he would be a damn good businessman,” Andreas Morgner, a sanctions expert at the Treasury Department, said.

Bout’s trade gave him an outsized role in matters of war and peace. He neither shied from the pressure nor took sides. He flew Belgian peacekeepers into Somalia, and after the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, he says, he brought French troops into eastern Congo. Not long after, with the help of Mirchev and others, he was transporting arms from Russia, Bulgaria, and Iran into conflict zones.

In the fall of 1998, four years after the Rwandan genocide, Bout began transporting arms to Rwanda. Mirchev contracted with the Rwandan government to supply arms, and Bout ferried them from Burgas to Kigali. (Employees passing through Kigali stayed at the Intercontinental hotel, where Bout had rented all the rooms on the top two floors.) But not all the arms stayed in Rwanda. The country’s Tutsi-led government was backing Tutsi militias next door, in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo, against Congo’s President, Laurent Kabila. Some of the weapons were being diverted, aboard Bout’s airplanes, into the hands of rebels in Congo. At the time, Congo was not under sanctions; nevertheless, Bout and Mirchev contributed to a conflict that ultimately entangled eight African nations.

James Roberts, a pilot who worked for Bout, has said that he witnessed ammunition boxes, Russian rocket-propelled-grenade launchers, and Japanese pickup trucks with mounted machine guns being “driven up onto the ramp” of an Ilyushin-76, along with Rwandan soldiers marching “three abreast, double-time.” Bout, he said, sometimes stood on the tarmac as the cargo was loaded. The flights landed in either Goma or Kisangani, eastern Congolese cities where Rwandan-backed militias were strong. According to a 2008 International Rescue Committee report, Congo’s civil war caused several million deaths—more than any other conflict since the Second World War.

By the late nineties, Air Cess, Bout’s flagship, had become a leading airfreight company. His fleet included almost thirty aircraft, and he was a multimillionaire employing some three hundred people. At one point, Air Cess ranked second, after Lufthansa, in the volume of cargo shipped into and out of Sharjah. He had established a passenger airline in the Central African Republic, was leasing Russian passenger and cargo planes to Muammar Qaddafi’s government, in Libya, and was transporting weapons into war zones. And no one was doing anything to stop him.

In 1999, Peter Hain, the minister of state for Africa in Britain’s Foreign Office, began warning British officials about Viktor Bout. Hain saw British soldiers in Sierra Leone coming under increasingly sophisticated attacks and ambushes. The weapons used by rebels, many of them drunk or stoned boys, had evolved from machetes to AK-47s. In November of 2000, Hain, addressing lawmakers in the House of Commons, lambasted “sanctions-busters” who delivered weapons to Sierra Leone and Angola. Bout, he declared, was the worst of them, a “merchant of death.”

The U.N. had already dispatched inspectors to Angola, to investigate how weapons were reaching UNITA rebels. In December, the U.N. published its report. Citing Bulgarian government sources, it claimed that “large quantities of different types of weapons” were being shipped from Bulgaria to Togo. The panel of investigators found that all the end-user certificates had been forged; each shipment had been brokered by Mirchev’s company; in all but one case, Air Cess had handled the transport.

Plausible deniability is a tenet of faith in the arms business. “My obligation is to put stuff inside the plane,” Mirchev told me. “From there, I don’t give a shit where the plane will go.” Similarly, Bout told me, “My job was to bring shipments from Bulgaria to Zaire, and then to Togo. . . . I did it. I understood my limits.” He added, “How, after that, someone else wants to squeeze it? That’s not my business.” In this view, he and Mirchev were not doing anything wrong; they were simply filling gaps in the global economy.

Ten months later, the U.N. issued a report on Liberia, which further implicated Bout’s companies in evading sanctions. (Bout denies working with Liberia’s leader at the time, Charles Taylor, who stands accused of many war crimes.) The report identified some of Bout’s top associates, including his older brother, Sergei; Pavel Popov, a talented pianist from Moldova, who handled Bout’s operations in the Central African Republic; and Sergei Denissenko, a graduate of the Military Institute of Foreign Languages, who spoke Chinese and acted as Bout’s deputy. An earlier report had named Richard Chichakli, a Syrian-born American citizen, as Bout’s “chief financial manager.” Bout had met Chichakli, a U.S. Army veteran, in Sharjah, where Chichakli had operated a tax-free enclave. Chichakli had since established an accounting practice in Richardson, Texas.

The U.N. reports carried no legal weight: the extent of their impact was to
“name and shame.” But Bout was doing discreet work for powerful people. After the U.S. government began putting pressure on Emirati authorities, Bout split his holdings with his brother Sergei, and returned home to Moscow, where he bought a large, unfinished house on a two-and-a-half-acre plot outside the city. “I wasn’t interested in building an empire,” Bout told me.

Bout wasn’t the only notorious businessman living in the area, presumably under some form of state protection. Russian authorities failed to hand over Semion Mogilevich, a Ukrainian wanted by the F.B.I. on money-laundering and fraud charges. Similarly, when Belgium issued a warrant, in 2002, through Interpol, for Bout’s arrest on money-laundering charges, the Russians didn’t comply. (The case eventually collapsed.)

Nevertheless, Bout felt the pressure from abroad. In 2003, he told a Times Magazine reporter, half jokingly, that he was “second only to Osama” on America’s most-wanted list. A year later, the Bush Administration filed an executive order targeting the finances of Liberia’s Charles Taylor, his top aides, and two European arms dealers: Bout and Leonid Minin. (Italian police had already arrested Minin, a Ukrainian, outside Milan, in a hotel room with four prostitutes, half a million dollars’ worth of diamonds, a pile of cocaine, and several fabricated end-user certificates.) On April 26, 2005, the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), in the Treasury Department, unveiled sanctions aimed at Bout, thirty companies associated with him, and Chichakli. Any assets in the U.S. would be frozen, and future transactions inside the country, or through American banks, would be blocked.

That morning, F.B.I. agents went to Chichakli’s home, in Texas, to search his office. They confiscated his computer, bank records, flight journals, a copy of Bout’s passport, and more than two hundred thousand dollars’ worth of diamonds. No criminal charges were filed, however, and a week later Chichakli flew to Russia, where he has been living ever since.

Soon after the raid, Department of Defense officials entered the names of the companies under sanctions into their databases. They made a surprising discovery: some of Bout’s companies were now delivering tents and frozen food to troops in Iraq. His planes had flown dozens of times in and out of Baghdad, according to flight records, and Bout was profiting from it. The Pentagon eventually voided the relevant contracts, but, by then, the war in Iraq had helped Viktor Bout get back on his feet.

Though Bout had avoided the press while he was abroad, he became a media sensation in Russia. After the Belgian warrant was issued, he appeared on Echo Moskvy, a popular radio station. “Why should I be afraid?” he said. “In my life, I did not do anything that I should be concerned about.” Bout began leaving a trail of inconsistent statements. He either refused to address difficult matters—“It’s not a question to discuss what we transported—or lied outright. During a 2005 televised interview, he insisted that he had never interacted with Taliban leaders, but the interviewer pressed him, and two minutes later he sighed and acknowledged having met Mullah Omar. During the same interview, he said that he had never trafficked weapons and no longer worked in the aviation sector. At the time, he was operating an avionics facility northwest of Moscow.

U.S. officials weren’t sure if Bout was still running guns. It was becoming increasingly difficult to separate his actions from his myth. (In 2005, Nicolas Cage starred in “Lord of War,” a film about an amoral arms dealer clearly modelled on Bout.) Some unsubstantiated reports about Bout’s activities made startling claims, suggesting that his planes had shuttled Al Qaeda’s gold reserves out of Afghanistan after the American invasion, that he had supplied armor-piercing rockets to Hezbollah, and that he had armed the Islamic Courts Union in Somalia.

Not long after Bout moved to Moscow, U.N. researchers were dispatched to eastern Congo to look for evidence of sanctions violations. One investigator, Christian Dietrich, recalls seeing many of Bout’s airplanes, but random inspections turned up only legitimate cargo. Peter Danssaert, of the International Peace Information Service—a think tank in Antwerp focussed on arms transfers—also spent years tracking Bout, but he, too, did not come across any proof of criminality.

Whether Bout had withdrawn from the weapons trade or simply gone underground, the U.S. sanctions had an impact: international markets were increasingly closed to him. “If you work in dollars, everything goes to the U.S.,” Bout later said. Even so, he found ways to game the system. He boasted of having “friends” at banks, who could alert him twenty-four hours before a block was placed on his accounts. And Chichakli told me in an e-mail that working around sanctions levied by the Office of Foreign Assets Control “is easier than buying a hamburger at McDonald’s.” In fact, he said, being targeted by OFAC automatically makes you “an accredited and trusted friend to any entity that despises the U.S. government and its political agenda and propaganda. You can make a very decent living solely because your name appears on the OFAC list. I can testify to that firsthand.”

At the very least, Bout’s original fleet of planes was no longer fully active. According to Bout’s lawyer, two planes were “gathering dust” in Congo. Three sat, abandoned, in the Emirates. One of them, a bulking Ilyushin-76, had been turned into a billboard for the Palma Beach Hotel in Umm al-Qwain, thirty miles northeast of Dubai. “Sometimes we have to face the reality of the present world,” Bout wrote in 2006 to his old friend Andrew Smulian. Bout wanted to establish a low-cost airline in Russia, comparable to JetBlue, but was unable to raise sufficient capital in cash. With narrower horizons, Bout bought five acres in Maykop, a Russian town near the Black Sea, where he planned to develop an organic farm producing arugula and goat cheese. “It’s hard to find good rucola in Russia,” he told me.

One day in the summer of 2007, Juan Zarate left the White House and headed to the Drug Enforcement Administration’s headquarters, in Crystal City, Virginia. Previously, Zarate had worked at the Treasury Department, where he had obsessively monitored
Bout's finances. Now, as a counterterrorism adviser to President George W. Bush, he wondered what else could be done to stop Bout. “The D.E.A. had begun to prove that it could go after ver-
titable untouchables and bring them to justice in pretty dramatic and important
ways,” Zarate told me. Weeks earlier, agents from the D.E.A.’s Special Opera-
tions Division had arrested Monzer al-
Kassar, a Syrian arms trafficker living in
Spain, through an elaborate overseas sting. Zarate sat down with Mike Braun,
the D.E.A.’s chief of operations, along
with several agents. Zarate recalls being “pretty explicit” about the difficulties of
catching Bout, who rarely left Russia. Za-
rate offered Braun a steak dinner if his
guys could pull it off.

The D.E.A. agents concocted a
scheme, borrowing heavily from the sce-
nario that had netted Kassar. Undercover
operatives, posing as members of Colom-
bia’s main rebel group, the FARC, would
entice Bout, through intermediaries, with
the prospect of a multimillion-dollar arms deal. The State Department design-
ates the FARC as a foreign terrorist orga-
nization; because much of the FARC’s
funds derive from the drug trade, the
D.E.A. takes the lead on most cases re-
lated to the group. The undercover agents
would insist on meeting Bout somewhere
outside Russia, and catch him on tape
discussing a shipment of surface-to-air
missiles to the FARC, for the purpose of
killing American troops in Colombia.
(For decades, Washington has backed
the Colombian government, sending
American commandos, agents, and intel-
ligence officers to assist police and mili-
tary officials there.)

If Bout went along with the deal, it
would prove that he remained in the
weapons trade, and place him in poten-
tial violation of four federal statutes: con-
spiring to kill U.S. nationals; conspiring
to kill U.S. federal officers; conspiring to
acquire anti-aircraft missiles; and con-
spiring to provide material support to
a foreign terrorist organization. The U.S.
allows federal agents to entice foreigners
overseas into breaking American laws,
and then capture them. It is one of only a
few countries to do so.

Braun told me that, in planning such
a plot, “you’re looking to identify weak
links in the group.” The agents singled
out Andrew Smulian, the South African,
as their best bet. Smulian was sixty-
seven, and, by his own admission, “bro-
er than broke.” He had sold his com-
pany and was working in the front office
of a hypodermic-needle factory in Tan-
zania. He and Bout had not seen each
other in nearly a decade, though they had
stayed in touch through e-mails and
phone calls. Lately, Smulian had begun
corresponding with Bout about prospec-
tive investments in Tanzania, including
building a casino, importing cashews,
and supplying the Tanzanian military
with helicopters, tanks, and ships. Bout
had contacted Russia’s defense export
agency to see whether it would fulfill
such a legal arms transfer; he was await-
ing word.

In November, 2007, the D.E.A.
laundered its sting. Mike Snow, a Congo-
based businessman who was friendly with
both Smulian and Bout through the avi-
ation industry, had become a D.E.A. in-
formant. Snow wrote an e-mail to Smu-
lian. Referring to Bout as “Boris,” as they
did when using insecure communica-
tions, Snow said, “May have a deal for
Boris, could your guy get you and me to
go see him?” Smulian forwarded Snow’s
request to Bout.

“Seems they are looking for some ‘ag-
icultural stuff,’” Smulian wrote.
Bout replied four hours later. “About
‘agricultural stuff’ all possible. What is
needed?? You can proceed.”

Smulian flew to Curaçao, and on Jan-
uary 10, 2008, he went to the tiki bar
at the Hilton, where he met with Snow and
two undercover operatives posing as
FARC representatives. One operative, a
convicted Colombian cocaine smuggler
who called himself Ricardo, spoke only
Spanish; the other, called Carlos, spoke
English, and did most of the talking. He
knew how to build a case, having worked
with the U.S. government on some hun-
dred and fifty undercover assignments.
He also knew the world of drugs and
guns. Born in Guatemala, Carlos had
joined the Army there in the early nine-
ties, then moved into military intelli-
gence. He soon began trafficking drugs,
moving, by his estimate, more than six
thousand pounds of cocaine. He eventu-
ally turned himself in and presented his
services to the D.E.A., which has since
paid him more than one and a half mil-
lion dollars. For his work on the Kassar
case, in which he posed as a FARC
logistics man, the State Department gave
Carlos seven million dollars.

At the tiki bar, Carlos and Ricardo
told Smulian that they were eager to ac-
quire Igla—Russian-made shoulder-
fired missiles—to target helicopters flown
by American pilots. Carlos declared that
“I wish you’d do something about the moat.”

... they had plenty of cash and could cover all of Smulian’s expenses. Smulian said that acquiring Iglas was beyond his means, but added that he knew someone in Moscow—a Russian, whom he described as a “top dog.” Smulian told Carlos, who was wearing a surveillance device, that the Russian “doesn’t like gringos.”

Carlos insisted on meeting the Russian. “We want to talk face-to-face, to see that this is for real,” he said. Smulian balked: the Russian was “protected at the very top” and “really close” with President Vladimir Putin. But, from what Smulian understood, that protection applied only inside Russia. Smulian needed to talk it over with the Russian. He left Curacao the next day and headed to Moscow.

Bout met him at Moscow’s Sheremetyevo Airport. It was a cold and overcast morning, and Bout was wearing a striped sweater and a long brown coat. Both men had aged since their last meeting. Bout was more than forty pounds overweight, had a grey beard, and was wearing a black Mercedes. On the way, they stopped to shop: Bout bought Smulian an overcoat, along with pants, shoes, neckties, and shirts. They had lunch near Red Square and posed for photographs in front of Lenin’s Tomb. Later, Bout dropped Smulian off at his hotel.

The next day, Bout brought Smulian to his dacha in Golitsyno, a town west of Moscow. The house, which had four bedrooms, was surprisingly modest: it was clad in beige vinyl siding. As Smulian later recalled, they sat down in Bout’s study. As snow fell outside, Alla brought tea, then left the men alone. Smulian summarized the meeting in Curacao and described the prospective deal with the FARC.

Bout said that he didn’t work with drug dealers. Smulian stressed that, although the FARC sold cocaine, Carlos and Ricardo had portrayed the group’s fight as political, not criminal. Bout thought it over. There was a glut in the arms market, he said, and profit margins were down, to the point that more money could be made selling cashews. Yet the Colombians seemed desperate, and Bout hoped that he might even persuade them to buy some of his old planes. He told Smulian to press on, but urged him to proceed cautiously, discarding mobile phones, SIM cards, restaurant receipts, and the like.

Finally, they discussed the weapons. Where could they obtain Iglas? Smulian inquired about Mirchev, and Bout called him. They began speaking in Russian. The word igla is Russian for “needle.” Talking in code, Bout asked Mirchev whether any “sewing devices” were available. Mirchev said that he knew of a hundred or so “sewing devices” in Ukraine. Bout turned to Smulian and said, in English, “A hundred pieces available immediately.”

I asked Mirchev what else he remembered about the call. Before hanging up, he said, Bout told him, “We shall work together again soon.”

After two days in Moscow, Smulian met Carlos in Copenhagen. Smulian was looking forward to a substantial payday. The arrangement called for Smulian and Snow to share a fifteen-per-cent commission for a deal worth less than a million dollars, ten per cent for a deal between one and two million, and five per cent for a deal exceeding two million. “If you are who you say you are, who you told me you are, the assistance will be a lot,” Smulian told Carlos. Bout had calculated that the FARC’s “uptake” of arms could reach a hundred tons. He was asking for between fifteen and twenty million dollars for the deal.

Carlos offered to introduce Smulian to the FARC leadership—if you want to go to the middle of the jungle.”

“No,” Smulian said, amiably. During the meeting in Russia, he noted, Bout had determined that an air drop was the best method for delivery. “They can put forty tons into a football field, on the dot,” Smulian boasted. They would do so at night, “so the gringos can’t see peanuts.” Carlos seemed convinced, and wanted to know when he could see Bout. They agreed to meet in Romania, a few days later.

The D.E.A. agents had chosen Romania because they knew that local authorities would let them tap phones. Bout, meanwhile, worked on getting a visa, but being tracked by the U.S. had dulled his adventurism. He told Smulian that Romania was “not a very easy place for me,” and suggested meeting in Montenegro, Moldova, or Armenia. Wary of anyplace where Bout felt comfortable, the agents insisted on Bucharest. “Fucking shit, you know?” Bout told Smulian. “It’s
not safe for me.” Finally, after ten days, the D.E.A. agent supervising the sting, Louis Milione, packed up, reasoning that if they lingered indefinitely they wouldn’t seem real.

Two weeks later, Carlos called Bout. “Buenos tardes,” he said. “We’re going to Thailand. I don’t know if it’s possible for you to go there.” The agents had built a productive relationship with Thai law-enforcement officials, and knew that Russian citizens could visit the country without a visa. (Bout had previously travelled there for an air-transportation convention.)

Bout booked a ticket to Bangkok and reserved a room at the Sofitel. Like all successful entrepreneurs, he knew that a man is only as good as his latest success. South American politics were new to him. He logged on to his computer and researched his clients. He spent the next two weeks studying up on the FARC, reading its manifesto and learning about its leaders. On the night of March 5th, Bout and a bodyguard boarded Aeroflot Flight 553—an overnight trip to Thailand.

Shortly after 10 A.M. the next day, Bout stepped out of the terminal at Bangkok’s Suvarnabhumi Airport, with a Lonely Planet guide to Colombia in his suitcase. The air was humid and sticky; he wore an orange polo shirt, khakis, and sneakers. He hailed a cab and headed toward the Sofitel.

D.E.A. agents and their Thai partners arrived at the hotel throughout the morning; they came by ones and twos, to deflect suspicion. They converted a room on the twentieth floor into a command center. Presuming that Bout had indeed worked for the G.R.U., the agents thought that he would detect traditional surveillance techniques, so they didn’t follow his taxi. Instead, an informant observed near a toll booth, and another crouched beside a disabled car on the highway. Bout didn’t seem concerned about being spotted; he submitted legitimate documents to airport immigration officials. Was he being reckless? Or did he have deep connections in Thailand?

At the Sofitel, Bout found Smulian, Carlos, and Snow at the mezzanine bar. “Muy gosto,” Bout said to Carlos, who was wearing a wire. Bout ordered a hot tea with lemon. “I’m very sorry to what happened a few days ago,” he said to Carlos—a reference to a Colombian military attack that had killed Raul Reyes, a top FARC commander. Losing friends, Bout said, is “very serious.”

He, Smulian, and Carlos took the elevator to the twenty-seventh floor, where they were joined by Ricardo. The four men entered a conference room with a floor-to-ceiling window, and sat around a long table with an arrangement of lilies at the center. Bout reached for a pen and pad. “Let’s make a list of your needs,” he said.

Ricardo, who had been introduced as a comandante—a field commander for the FARC—said, “I need anti-aircraft missiles that I can operate against Apaches.”

“How many?” Bout said. He jotted down weapons and quantities, in a mixture of Russian, English, and Spanish: a hundred Iglas; five thousand AK-47s; ten million rounds of ammunition; two hundred and fifty Dragunov sniper rifles; twenty thousand fragmentation grenades; seven hundred and forty mortars; two kinds of rocket-propelled grenades.

Carlos inquired about C-4 plastic explosives.

“How many tons do you need?” Bout replied.

Carlos and Ricardo said that a ton would be enough.

“We have five,” Bout said.

Gunrunners are full of bluster—what Bout’s lawyer later called “puffing.” Bout offered to supply the FARC with drones and with ultralight aircraft outfitted with grenade launchers, which were “very good to bring down helicopters.” When I described this to Mirchev, he laughed, calling the notion of an armored ultralight “bullshit from a technical point of view.” A drone was more plausible. But where would Bout have got one? “From me,” Mirchev said.

At one point, Bout pulled a map from his briefcase and spread it out on the table. Bout told Carlos and Ricardo that they needed to find an official—perhaps someone from Nicaragua—who could sign an end-user certificate, make a payment, then “take out your things.” Bout said, “It’s a job that’s a bit political, a bit commercial, and a bit intelligent, you know?” If they didn’t proceed carefully, they were going to “create a scandal.”

Supposing that a Nicaraguan official could produce a certificate, and that the aircraft would fly there first, Bout leaned over the map and drew his finger southeast from Nicaragua, across Colombia, stopping in Manaus, a city in northern Brazil. After dropping the weapons into the FARC-controlled jungle, Bout explained, the plane would land in Manaus, and, as a cover, load up sacks of flour and crates of fruit.

Ricardo reacted with delight. “Those gringo sons of bitches!” he said. “They’re not going to kill us in our sleep anymore.”

“Gringos are enemies,” Bout agreed. “For me, it’s not business—it’s my fight.”

He told them that he had been fighting the U.S. for “ten to fifteen years,” calling it “one person’s resistance.” The room erupted in laughter.

Moments after Bout and Carlos
stood up to shake hands and close the deal, Thai policemen and D.E.A. agents burst through the conference-room door, weapons drawn. “Hands up!” the Thais commanded. “You’re under arrest!” Bout raised his arms and was shoved against a wall, his legs spread.

A few minutes later, Tom Pasquarello, the D.E.A.’s regional director in Bangkok, walked into the room and found Bout sitting calmly at the table. Pasquarello introduced himself and asked him if he knew what was going on. “The game is over,” Bout said. Pasquarello paused, unsure whether Bout was talking about his own career, the undercover charade, or something else. “I’ve seen people in these situations many times before,” Pasquarello told me. “Sometimes they are angry. Sometimes they are emotional. Sometimes they are angry. Sometimes they are emotional. Viktor was relaxed. It’s a memory that still plays out in my head. Everything that has just happened—the D.E.A. agents, his life going up in flames—and he doesn’t break a sweat. It was like he was just sitting down to read the newspaper.”

Smulian was considerably less composed. Led to his hotel room, he watched Thai investigators inspect his belongings while Robert Zachariasiewicz, another D.E.A. agent, interviewed him and explained the charges he faced. The conspiracy to acquire antiaircraft missiles alone carried a minimum mandatory sentence of twenty-five years. (There is no parole in the U.S. federal system.) Smulian, who faced the five years. (There is no parole in the U.S. federal system.)

“W

If everything is recorded, then you have everything,” Bout said. “You have all the cards on the table.”

While prosecutors from the U.S. Attorney’s office in Manhattan debriefed Smulian, Bout spent his days in an overcrowded Bangkok jail cell. He made a point of not learning Thai; he feared that doing so would undermine his status as a foreigner in a Bangkok courtroom. Instead, he used the time to study Sanskrit, Hindi, and Persian. Meanwhile, he fought his extradition to the U.S.

He had powerful supporters. The Russian government denounced the charges against Bout, and protested to the Thai Ambassador in Moscow. American officials became aware of more nefarious efforts to secure Bout’s freedom. In a cable released by WikiLeaks, Eric John, the American Ambassador to Thailand, wrote that there were “disturbing indications” that Bout’s “Russian supporters have been using money and influence in an attempt to block extradition.” In December, 2008, a Thai naval captain testified in a Bangkok courtroom that Bout had come to the city to assess the functionality of a submarine port. The captain, it was later revealed, had been put up to the scheme by a purported G.R.U. asset—the son of a retired Thai admiral. Facing pressure from the U.S. Embassy, the Thai Navy said that Bout had not come to the country on official business.

On December 22, 2008, nine months after Bout was arrested, he testified in court. Street hawkers squatted nearby, selling pirated DVDs of “Lord of War,” featuring a photograph of Bout, in prison garb, superimposed next to Nicolas Cage. Under oath, Bout told a Thai judge that Smulian had reserved the Sofitel conference room so that he could meet four foreigners interested in buying two of his used airplanes. About fifteen minutes later, Bout recalled, he was placed under arrest. (Bout, Smulian, Carlos, and Ricardo spoke for more than ninety minutes.) “No one clearly said that they were members of the FARC,” Bout told the judge. “There was no discussion of selling weapons.”

After more than two years of legal wrangling, the Thai court approved Bout’s extradition. On November 15, 2010, a team of D.E.A. agents arrived in Bangkok. Security was tight. Pasquarello, the D.E.A. agent, said, “The Russians knew we had Viktor’s laptop and knew all about his weapons-trafficking activities. And they had already spent considerable clout and resources trying to get him out of prison. Were they going to try and break him free on the way to the airport? Or try to assassinate him?”

So the D.E.A. employed a decoy. On the morning of November 16th, a motorcade of police vehicles left Bang Kwang prison, where Bout was being held, and headed to Suvarnabhumi Airport. Reporters followed. Minutes later, a second convoy, without lights or sirens, drove to Dong Muang, a military airport. Bout sat, shackled, in the back seat of an S.U.V. with tinted windows, wearing a ballistic helmet. Once he arrived inside the terminal, American officials removed his helmet. Bout’s hair had grown moppish, and his mustache was caterpillar-thick.

As the agents ushered Bout toward the plane, he suddenly whirled around. “Where is Derek?” he asked, referring to Derek Odney, a Bangkok-based D.E.A. agent he had got to know. For the first time since the sting, Bout looked vulnerable.

He spotted Odney and asked, “Are you going with me?”

“I’m going with you—don’t worry,” Odney said.

On the trip to New York, Bout borrowed a flight attendant’s iPod and listened to classical music: Tchaikovsky, Beethoven, Bach. The plane landed at Westchester County Airport at night. When Bout stepped off the plane, escorted by two D.E.A. agents, it was the first time that he had ever been on American soil. Cameras flashed. He squeezed into an armored car and made the trip to Manhattan. “They brought me into New York like I was an atom bomb,” he said.

On October 12, 2011, the first day of Bout’s trial, the line to enter the Daniel Patrick Moynihan United States Courthouse extended around the side of the building. “I’ve never seen it like this,” a visitor mumbled to a marshal near the door. “Trial of the century, they say,” the marshal replied.

The courtroom, on the fifteenth floor, was overcrowded, with journalists sitting on folding chairs in the aisles. Bout wore a gray pin-striped suit and a navy tie. Deep wrinkles creased the sides of his mouth; since being arrested, he had shed
almost fifty pounds. Alla Bout, who was renting an apartment in Manhattan for the trial, told me, “He looks terrible.” Bout scanned those in attendance, mouthing something to Alla and nodding to several Russian reporters.

Bout sat next to his attorneys, Albert Dayan and Ken Kaplan. Dayan, the lead lawyer, was a young, streetwise Bukharan Jew from Queens; he tended to wear the kind of plaid suits more appropriate for “SportsCenter,” and his rhetorical style sometimes evoked “My Cousin Vinny.” When Bout had first declared his interest in hiring a lawyer, Manhattan’s leading attorneys had filed through. Bout consulted Gerald Shargel, whom prosecutors once described as the “house counsel” to the Gambino crime family, and Ivan Fisher, who had represented major Mafia figures. Then Bout met with Dayan and Kaplan, a more seasoned attorney. Dayan, who speaks Russian, told Bout that he believed in his innocence. And Kaplan, as the secondary attorney, offered a cut rate, which accommodated Bout’s ostensibly dire economic situation. Bout hired them, and his brother Sergei helped arrange for legal payments.

Dayan was pleased that Bout had drawn Judge Shira Scheindlin, who has a reputation for making prosecutors’ lives difficult. Indeed, while ruling on a pretrial motion, she was critical of the D.E.A., implying that the agents who arrested Bout had lied under oath, and agreeing with Bout’s assertion that he had been threatened with “disease, hunger, heat, and rape” if he did not cooperate. (A day later, in a reworded ruling, she softened her attack on the D.E.A.) Before the trial began, Scheindlin ruled that references to “Lord of War” would be struck, as well as mentions of Libya and Rwanda, which she termed “buzzwords.” A month before the trial started, Dayan and I spoke on the phone. He predicted, “It’s going to be a brawl.”

As Dayan stepped onto the podium that first morning, he appeared solemn and tired. “The very profound truth is that Viktor Bout never wanted, never intended, and was never going to sell arms to anyone in this case,” he said. “Everything will be laid out before you.” In Dayan’s telling, Bout wasn’t negotiating an arms deal with the FARC; rather, he was “baiting them along with promises of arms,” hoping to sell two cargo jets “gathering dust” in Congo. In other words, Bout and the D.E.A. had been trying to trick each other—it was a “two-way, real-life con game.” Dayan said that Carlos and Ricardo were disingenuous, and described them as acting “desperate” and “stupid.” He didn’t call a single witness.

There was one potentially winnable argument: questioning the notion that Bout was a terrorist bent on killing Americans. Bout may have clung to a certain Cold War provincialism and cynicism about American foreign policy, but his behavior was too pragmatic to be ideologically tagged. Sanjivan Ruprah, a former associate of Bout’s, told American authorities in 2001 that Bout was prepared to facilitate the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan by providing arms to the Northern Alliance. (It’s unclear if the offer was accepted.) Dayan contended that Bout, in his statements against America, was merely telling Carlos and Ricardo what he thought they wanted to hear: “If you’re selling a five-million-dollar object to people who are wearing Yankee hats, you are not going to tell them, ‘I’m glad they lost in the first round of the playoffs.’”

Dayan spent the rest of the proceedings seeming lost and overwhelmed. He questioned the possibility of a fair trial (“Who has got a chance in this machine?”); suggested that Bout was a victim (“They hooked him”); got discombobulated (“Let me see if I can get this the right way in a sentence”); and struggled to show confidence before the press corps (“I know where I am going with this”). After one ineffectual cross-examination, he told me, “This is not like ‘Matlock’ or ‘L.A. Law,’ where the witness is going to break down and say, ‘Yes, I lied about
Andrew Smulian took the stand on the eighth day. In a tale of multiple deceptions, his betrayal was the starkest. He wore a dark blazer over his navy prison jumpsuit, with large, thick glasses that, from a distance, clouded his face. As he answered questions, he hardly lifted his gaze from his transcript binder, and never looked directly at Bout. During a break, I asked Alla Bout whether her husband might have turned state’s witness had he been in Smulian’s predicament. “It all depends on what a person considers their principles,” she said. “Your soul? Or money and physical world? I know Viktor has moral principles.” When Smulian stepped down, after three days of testimony, Bout’s eyes followed him to the door. Smulian stared at his feet. He will be sentenced following a break, I asked Alla Bout whether her husband might have turned state’s witness had he been in Smulian’s predicament. “It all depends on what a person considers their principles,” she said. “Your soul? Or money and physical world? I know Viktor has moral principles.” When Smulian stepped down, after three days of testimony, Bout’s eyes followed him to the door. Smulian stared at his feet. He will be sentenced this spring. In all likelihood, he will receive “time served” and enter a witness-protection program.

Closing arguments began on Halloween. Bout’s wife and daughter, now a teen-ager, sat in the second row. Dayan began the defense’s statement by saying, “First of all, I would like to thank God for everything,” as if he were giving an Oscar acceptance speech. He then thanked the jury, the judge, Kaplan, and Bout for “trusting me with the most important decision of his life.” Dayan cleared his throat. “Although I believe that the truth is really with me, I am a little bit nervous.” When he tried to pour himself a cup of water, he knocked over the pitcher, sending ice cubes skittering across the defense table.

Anjan Sahni, the Assistant U.S. Attorney prosecuting the case, told the jurors that “the central premise of the defense theory is illogical.” He focussed on the falseness of Bout’s testimony in Thailand: his claims that the meeting had lasted only fifteen minutes, that the men had never identified themselves as FARC members, that weapons were never discussed.

Dayan brushed this off with the pronouncement “Words are like wind,” and repeated the argument that Bout had simply wanted to trick Carlos and Ricardo into buying airplanes. “The Chinese have an interesting tale about this,” he said. “The tale says to dress and sound like a swine to catch a tiger. It’s an old hunting technique where the hunter would dress like a swine and make sounds like a swine, and then when the tiger would come for the kill, as Viktor Bout did, to dump his planes, it was the hunters who would have the last laugh. And that’s exactly what happened.”

It was time for the jury to deliberate. Bout turned and, facing Alla, put his fists in front of his chest—telling her to be strong.

The next day, Bout was found guilty on all counts. He and Dayan hugged, then marshals escorted Bout from the courtroom. Outside, Alla told reporters that, as far as she was concerned, her husband had not been convicted: “They just found Nicolas Cage guilty.”

For the past fifteen months, Bout has been living in solitary confinement, in the “special-housing unit” of the Metropolitan Correctional Center in lower Manhattan. His cell consists of a concrete bed and a window of frosted Plexiglas. The room contains a desk, a shower, and a toilet; standing in the center of it, Bout says, he can reach out and touch both walls. He is seldom let out to exercise. Most of the voices he hears come from a shortwave radio that picks up Voice of Russia and National Public Radio. He can read paperbacks that his family and his lawyers have ordered from the publisher, but hardcovers are considered potential weapons.

The impact of Bout’s arrest remains under dispute. Louise Shelley, a professor at George Mason University and an expert on corruption and organized crime in the former Soviet Union, told me, “We act like getting rid of Bout gets rid of the problem. Sure, he was bigger and better. But he was not unique.” A Lebanese arms dealer recently told Reuters that, owing to the rebellion in Syria, he was busier than ever. I asked Peter Mirchev—who was not implicated in the sting—if the weapons business had changed in recent years. He shrugged. Profit margins, he said, were about the same. The community of dealers was “a little bit bigger.” He conceded that pressure from the United States had affected arms supplies; an American initiative in 2005 had effectively wiped out Bulgaria’s stash of Iglas. When I asked Mirchev whether he was still in touch with Bout’s former associates, he smiled and said that he had recently spoken to Sergei Bout and Sergei Denissenko.

One morning in late December, I went to the prison to meet Bout. In a conference area, a few prisoners, wearing brown jumpsuits without handcuffs, sat in plastic chairs, holding legal documents. When word reached the guards that Bout was headed downstairs, they cleared out the other prisoners and covered the room’s sole window.

The sound of chains and jangling keys heralded his arrival. Surrounded by two guards, Bout inched forward, shackled at his ankles, wrists, and waist. The guards unfastened his cuffs, then left Bout and me alone. He wore an orange jumpsuit,\n
“I love you, I’ll follow you to the ends of the earth, but I’m through getting slippers for someone who hasn’t published anything since 1997.”
nearly slippers, and orange socks. Gesturing toward the guards, he said that watching over him had “become almost a religion for them.” We sat at a circular table. His voice was soft, his sentences punctuated by wan smiles. “The special-housing unit?” he said. “Solitary confinement? Even the U.N. says that solitary confinement is torture.” (He was referring to a recent report by the U.N. special rapporteur on torture, which had called for a ban on solitary confinement.) “I am being tortured twenty-four hours a day.”

Gerald Posner, a journalist and a lawyer who had advised Bout for a time, pro bono, recalls that when they first met Bout hadn’t wanted to discuss his case; rather, he wanted to “talk about black holes and how Stephen Hawking was overrated.” I have a faltering grip on two of the languages Bout speaks—Persian and Urdu—and, after exchanging pleasantries in them, Bout dilated on the legacy of Persian poetry, which he called “the language of love,” and the importance of reading Ferdowsi’s epic poem “Shahnameh” for understanding the Iranian, Afghan, and Tajik psyche. Recently, he said, he had read several books about harsh detention and survival. He praised Laura Hillenbrand’s “Unbroken” and encouraged me to read Henri Charrière’s “Papillon.”

We met four times, between late December and mid-February. Two weeks after my first visit, having started “Papillon,” I pointed out that toward the beginning of the book Charrière lays out his plan to seek revenge on the people responsible for his incarceration. I asked Bout if he felt similar rage. “Why should I feel aggressive toward these people?” he said. “They are sleepwalking men.” He went on, “The D.E.A. has become worse than drug dealers. At least drug dealers have ethics.”

The longer we sat in the small, musty room, the more the tempered side of Bout’s personality receded. I asked whether he felt any remorse. “I did nothing in my mind that qualifies as a crime,” he replied. “Sure, I was doing transportation of arms,” he said. “But it was occasionally. Three hundred and sixty days were normal shipments. For five days, I shipped arms and made a couple of hundred thousand dollars.” (Mirchev, by contrast, recalls a period of “almost daily flights” for UNITA.)

As for his fateful lapse of caution, he said, “If it was a trap and I fell into it, O.K. But what did I do? Did I declare myself to go to fucking Colombia? Did I grab a gun and go to kill an American? I just want a big country like China or Russia to do this to an American. Will you also call it justice?” He was practically spitting out the words. “This is not justice. It’s a minefield. What you people don’t understand is that it’s coming for you next. You’re living in a police state. Everything your Founding Fathers got, you’re giving back. It’s like Stalin’s time. You can be arrested for just saying—no, thinking—something. ‘Oh, he’s an arms dealer,’ they say. Why do they say this? Because I’m Russian!”

Bout had stood up and was leaning across the table, his face inches from mine. “Do you people have the moral standing to ask this question? Who are you to judge me? You have authority over me, but you don’t have power over me!”

On February 3rd, Dayan requested that Bout be moved out of solitary confinement. In a hearing five days later, Judge Scheindlin agreed, saying that Bout’s immediate circumstances; it also seemed like a signal that Scheindlin would not recommend that Bout be assigned to the kind of “super-max” facility that keeps all inmates in solitary confinement—a prospect that Dayan recently compared to being “buried alive.”

A long prison term still awaits, however. On March 12th, Bout, who turned forty-five not long ago, will receive a sentence of between twenty-five years and life. “They will try to lock me up for life,” Bout told me. “But I’ll get back to Russia. I don’t know when. But I’m still young. Your empire will collapse and I’ll get out of here.”

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Nicholas Schmidle talks about Viktor Bout.