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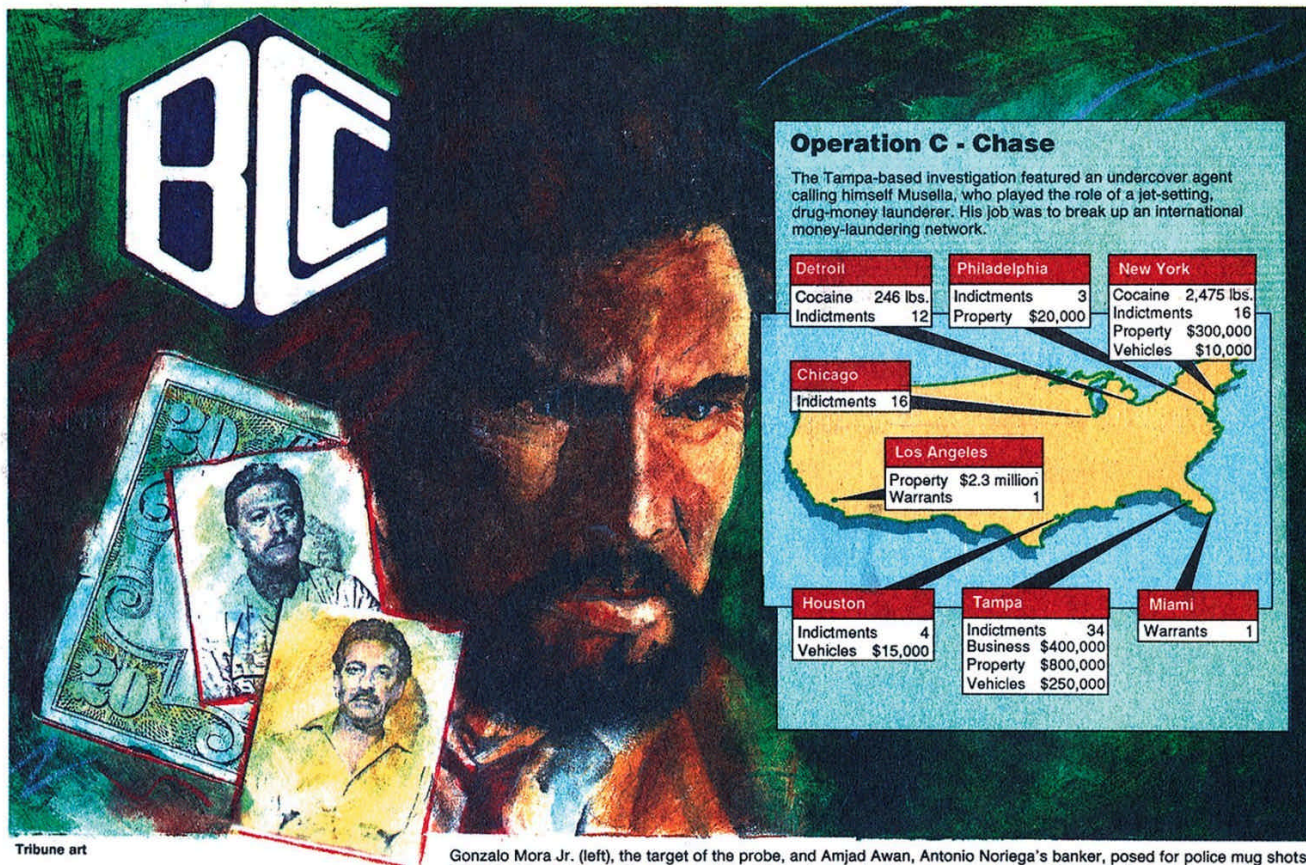
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A MAN CALLED MUSELLA



Gonzalo Mora Jr. (left), the target of the probe, and Amjad Awan, Antonio Noriega's banker, posed for police mug shots instead of a wedding photographer, thanks to the bearded undercover agent who called himself Musella.

Role-playing agent hung money launderers out to dry

By Bentley Orrick

Trim, dark, dapper and obviously successful, the man who called himself Robert Louis Musella had every reason to grin as his wedding guests checked in to the pool party at the Innisbrook Resort & Golf Club on a clear and seasonably mild Saturday evening last October. His job was almost done. Soon, drinks in hand, the males among the guests would be packed off in limousines for the drive from Tarpon Springs to Tampa where, they had been told, the ribald delights of a bachelor's party awaited them. Then the man who called himself Musella would be off to one of the half-dozen homes he had keys to — this one in New Port Richey — to rendezvous with a pair of Colombians who had arrived to collect a \$175,000 cash down payment of a \$400,000 cocaine debt.

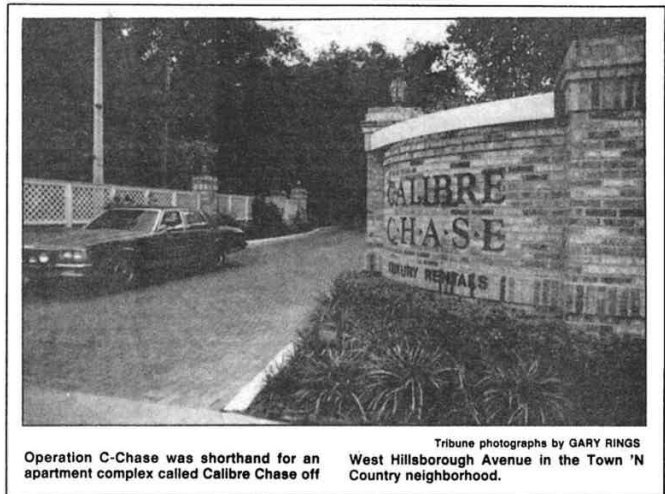
It had been a long day but now it was nearly over, this last scene in a long-running production that had taken him on the road to Miami, New York, Los Angeles, Paris, London, Nassau, Costa Rica. He had every reason to grin, this man who called himself Musella. After two full years of grinding tension acting the part of a Mafia-connected money-launderer, he could drop the mask. After months of almost daily contacts with associates of some of the most murderous cocaine barons in the world, he could put down the handcrafted leather briefcase with the built-in tape recorder. After conning the bank employees of some the richest men in the world, he could start signing his real name again. He could drop his defenses as the

secret leader of one of the largest drug money investigations in history, one in which he personally had a hand in the financial alchemy of mutating more than \$34 million in cocaine cash into traceable, paper-trailed bank transactions. For this case, at least, the role playing was over. He could once again be Robert Mazur, Senior Special Agent, U.S. Customs Service.

The arrests, the indictments, the mock wedding – all were ballyhooed by federal officials only too happy to be able to claim a rare victory in the unceasing war on drugs. But they clamped a tight lid on the details. One of the most closely guarded secrets was the name of the agent who took the name Musella. Who was he? How did he pull it off? Volumes of court documents filed since the arrests and the first public testimony about the case last month have begun to strip away the secrecy.

Mazur volunteered to become Musella two years before that October evening when his wedding guests gathered at the pool at Innisbrook. Within the hour, combined investigative agencies of the United States, France and Great Britain would strike in the “takedown” of the globe-girdling operation code-named “C-Chase.”

Originally “C-Chase” it was shorthand for an apartment complex called Calibre Chase northwest of Tampa where the investigation was launched – was just another attempt to infiltrate a ring which laundered cash drug profits for the cocaine barons of Colombia. But then it targeted the Bank of Credit and Commerce International (BCCI), a consortium of Middle Eastern and Pakistani financiers with \$4 billion in assets circulating among its branches in more than 70 countries around the world. Diplomatic pressure and new treaties gradually had cracked the fabled bank secrecy of such offshore money havens as Switzerland and the Cayman Islands – at least when it came to hidden drug money. Banks in Panama gradually were being cracked open as well. But no federal agent had ever before penetrated the private offices of a private worldwide bank like BCCI, which operated in all those countries and so many more. Until the man who called himself Musella came along.



Life among the jet set

On the surface, the living had been easy for the man who called himself Musella. There was a town house on Key Biscayne across the bay from Miami. A hideaway in Calibre Chase. A house in New Port Richey, near the office of his Financial Consulting Inc. A condominium on the Pinellas shore. There was a choice between \$500-a-day suites at the Helmsley Palace and the Vista International to ease his business travels in New York City, and a variety of five-star hotels abroad. There was a \$1.2 million Cessna Citation 2 available at Sunbird Airlines charter service. A yacht in Clearwater to entertain business guests. And an American Express card that never seemed to run dry. There were connections with local financial corporations and the New York Stock Exchange, and sole ownership of offshore corporations in the likes of Panama, Lichtenstein and Gibraltar. There were bank accounts galore. Oh, and the Mercedes 500 SEL, of course. And, on his wedding's eve, a group of tanned, lean, loyal employees, helping the party arrangements go smoothly, mingling with the guests just in from Paris, Miami and Medellin, Colombia.

As far as the guests knew, Musella was getting married in the morning to the woman who called herself Kathleen Erickson, the woman who had accompanied him on lavish business trips to such destinations as Paris, London and the Bahamas. Wasn't there a bachelor party arranged at the MacBeth's Restaurant at the top of the high-rise across from the Federal Courthouse in downtown Tampa? And wouldn't those nine guests be surprised when they emerged from the limousines, drinks in hand, and found out the wedding was a sham to gather them like sheep for the shearing and that they had been invited to a jail cell instead of a stag party?

Secrets Revealed

The man who called himself Musella disappeared from public view the night of Oct. 8, when agents in three nations rolled up Operation C-Chase. His real identity remained a closely held secret for months. Then surfaced here 10 months later in a Manhattan federal courtroom as U.S. Customs Senior Special Agent Mazur.

Mazur was testifying last month at the trial of a Colombian accountant who had been living on Long Island and was almost incidentally snagged by Operation C-Chase when he delivered \$171,000 in cash to an undercover agent playing the

role of a runner for the Tampa-based Musella money laundering operation. Sitting in the witness chair, talking publicly for the first time about his undercover role, Mazur wasn't far from his Italian-American roots on Staten Island across the Hudson River. Or from his high school, or Wagner College where he had majored in business administration. His trim figure spoke to his student career as an athlete singlemindedly pumping iron to bulk up to play guard on the football team and then grimly sweating down to wrestle at 183. He became a government agent in 1972 almost as soon as he got out of college.

This is the image he projects: Earnest, smart, hard working, a private man in his pushing-40 prime, sort of hiding behind a neatly trimmed jet-black beard. An accountant, you'd say. More comfortable with brown bagging his lunch at his desk while he worked his calculator than with Chablis and duck on the expense account, you'd think. Maybe that's why they never broke the cover of the man who called himself Musella. In an accent softened by his years in Florida as an agent first for the Internal Revenue Service and then the Customs Service, Mazur told the New York jury that the money tracers of Operation C-Chase first targeted a Colombian named Gonzalo Mora Jr.

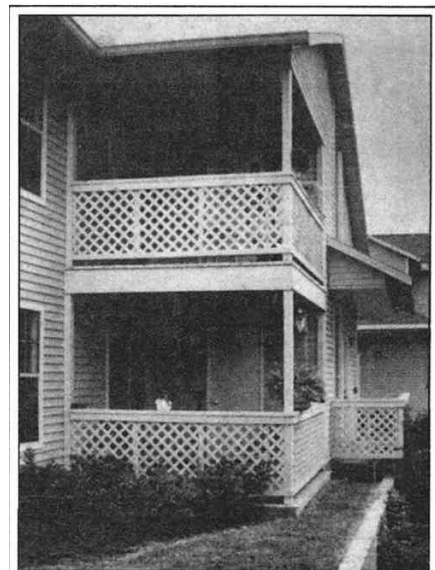
In his role as Musella, Mazur began going to work every day in an office in Port Richey where he hung out the shingle of Financial Consulting Inc., next to a brokerage where only the owner and his wife knew who he really was. Mora was invited to Tampa in December 1986 to get the Musella treatment. During a weekend of entertaining Mora at a beachfront condominium "he thought I owned," showing him Sunbird Airlines which "I told him I ran for a client who was a drug dealer," and "relaxing on a boat we had," the undercover agent and Mora discussed money laundering, according to Mazur's testimony.

The trick to money laundering was to get the cash safely into American bank accounts. From there the money became totally portable. A couple of lines of coded digits could transfer it by wire to any bank in the world in the blink of an eye. Then ordinary checks, backed by the drug cash, could be sent off to Colombia where there was a thriving "black-money market." The checks might pass through half-dozen hands before being cashed in Panama or back in America. Mora was assured that the Musella organization had a way of getting the cash safely into American banks, no questions asked. Mazur said Mora was led to believe it was because Musella had mob connections. What Mora was not told, of course, is that several U.S. banks, including Florida National Bank, were cooperating with the investigation. Just to ice the sting, Mora was given a glimpse of \$200,000 cash crammed into a suitcase before it was taken into the Florida National Bank branch at 4th Street East and Central Avenue in St. Petersburg and deposited with no sign of trouble. Mora and his friend Musella then flew to New York where they were put up in posh suites in the Vista International at the World Trade Center. They got taken on a tour of the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, courtesy of a supposed cousin of Musella's. They even got to hear an investment seminar in the member's dining room after having a few drinks and a light lunch. According to Mazur, after a few hours of bargaining in the hotel suite, Mora agreed to a 50-50 split of the money-lauderer's commission, which ranged from a low of 4 percent in competitive Miami to 8 percent in cash-rich Los Angeles. It was all taken down on tape by the Swiss-made miniature Nagra recorder – it was originally developed to be worn out of sight by movie actors when action took them away from microphone booms – concealed in Musella's briefcase.

According to the testimony, this is how the system worked: Mora would call the undercover home in Calibre Chase to say, in a simple code, that cash was waiting to be picked up in a certain city and give a beeper number to make the contact. A street Customs agent, posing as a runner for the Musella operation, would be detailed to call the beeper number to contact the Colombian handing over the cash – generally in the range of \$200,000 to \$800,000 – and arrange the pickup. Once the cash was handed over, the street agent would take it in to be counted and photographed, checked by a trained dog for drug residue, and then put in a bank where it was wired to the Musella account in the St. Petersburg branch of Florida National Bank, ready to be distributed where and how the clients wanted, after the commission was deducted. Those commissions amounted to more than \$900,000 during the investigation, helping to pay for the lavish Musella lifestyle that had the money launderers fooled. "There were, at times, millions in that account," Mazur testified with a touch of wonder in his voice.

Nibbling at the Bait

In the spring of 1987, the man who called himself Musella met with an officer of the Tampa branch of the Bank of Credit and Commerce International. He was assured there would be no problem in opening confidential accounts in BCCI's Panama branch if that was what his clients needed. Could BCCI check his bank references he was asked? Sure, he replied, signing a release. Soon this letter went out from the downtown St. Petersburg branch of Florida National Bank to BCCI in



This apartment in Calibre Chase was a base of operations for agent Robert Mazur, the man called Musella.

Tampa: “In regards to your inquiry... Financial Consulting Inc. maintains a good account relationship with Florida National Bank and Mr. Robert L. Musella is a very reputable businessman.” It was signed by a vice president.

It wasn't until November of that year that BCCI bankers nibbled, according to prosecution documents on file in the case. One of the Colombian check cashers had botched the writing job, failing to match the written amount with the numbered amount on a check for several hundred thousand dollars. In the course of straightening that out, Musella talked by telephone with the BCCI operations officer, Syed Aftab Hussain, while the tape recorders rolled

BCCI was formed by private Pakistani bankers with backing from oil-rich Saudis when Pakistan nationalized its banks in 1973. Hussain, who like most of the BCCI bankers was a native of Pakistan, assured Musella that BCCI could handle all the business he could provide and that it was a “full service bank.” They arranged a meeting in a remote lobby of the Brickell Key condominium in Miami and then the next day in BCCI's nearby offices. Hussain, according to government documents, criticized the use of checks as crude and subject to discovery. Instead, he suggested, the cash could be converted to ultra-secret certificates of deposit in Europe which would back offsetting loans from almost any BCCI branch in the world. Musella clients could then cash out those loans with no fear of the origin of the money ever being discovered.

Hussain soon introduced Musella to two Miami-based BCCI employees, Amjad Awan and Akbar Bilgrami. Awan would later tell a congressional committee that he was the personal banker for Panamanian strong man Manuel Noriega. All three were among the BCCI employees enticed to the Musella wedding and arrested in the Tampa “take-down” of Operation C-Chase.

Agent Mazur's testimony during the New York trial last month helped convict the Colombian accountant from Long Island. The trial of Mora, the bankers and BCCI – who all maintain their innocence – is not expected to begin until next year. Until then, and maybe for years afterward, he might well be under the same constant guard and tight security that surrounded his appearance in the New York courthouse. Why did he become the man who called himself Musella? Why did he put himself out as a lonely point man in the battle against drugs? He had a simple answer for the defense lawyer in New York. “It was something I chose to do,” he said quietly. He paused, and then added, “And asked to do.”

Dirty cash isn't easy to launder

In America's underground drug economy, ounces of cocaine become pounds of money. The \$20s, \$10s, even \$5s and \$1s, stream in from the street deals, pooling in tattered green piles that, in turn, are crammed into cardboard boxes and stuffed into plastic garbage bags. The bulk and heft of this torrent of cash presents the drug barons with one of their most formidable problems. They have found it easier to smuggle the cocaine in than to smuggle the vast cash profits out.

U.S. Customs Senior Special Agent Robert Mazur has been active in the Tampa area for years in trying to trace and stem the illegal flow of drug money. One of the biggest cases locally before Operation C-Chase involved a St. Petersburg divorce lawyer named George N. Meros. In the 1970s, Meros thought he had found a way to clean his clients' surplus marijuana money through secret, numbered bank accounts in Switzerland and pretend investments in an Atlantic City casino. For almost a decade it worked. Then a former smuggling colleague, caught red-handed, made a deal with federal investigators and wore a body bug to rendezvous with Meros in a remote, nearly deserted state park on the Georgia coast. One of the Customs agents who moved in to make the arrest was Mazur. Meros got 40 years. Mazur, who as the case agent sat at the prosecution table during the 20-week trial, took a long-overdue vacation. Less than a year later, Mazur became Robert L. Musella, and Operation C-Chase was under way.

- By Bentley Orrick