

## **Meet the man who cut a chink in the armour of drug kingpin Pablo Escobar**

By Aqil Haziq Mahmud  
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Robert Mazur infiltrated the Medellin cartel and lived to tell the tale. Here, he talks about the perilous undercover operation and the art of money laundering.



Robert Mazur (right) posing with the pilot of a private jet used during the undercover operation. (Photo: Robert Mazur)

**SINGAPORE:** Robert Mazur, 66, is no stranger to the shadowy underworld of notorious criminals and their dirty money.

The former US federal agent spent years working undercover for law enforcement in multiple countries, infiltrating the inner circles of financial crime and gathering evidence that led to some of the largest money laundering prosecutions in history.

But Mr Mazur is perhaps most well-known for “slowing down” Pablo Escobar’s infamous Medellin cartel, as he humbly put it during a phone interview with Channel NewsAsia from Kuala Lumpur on Tuesday (Sep 19).

Posing as Bob Musella, a money laundering businessman from New Jersey, Mr. Mazur spent five years in the mid-80s penetrating the cartel and dealing with Escobar’s closest associates – all while using a special Renwick briefcase fitted with recorders.

And it was during this treacherous mission, codenamed Operation C-Chase, that Mr. Mazur thought he would lose it all.

#### **NEAR MISS**

While handling millions of dollars of cartel money in New York City, Mr Mazur’s cover was all but blown when the mob identified US agents who were surveilling the operation.

“Gerardo Moncada called my partner, screaming that I had to be a DEA (Drug Enforcement Agency) undercover agent because the cops were all over the place,” he said. Moncada was Escobar’s principal manager who ran more than half of the Colombian drug kingpin’s routes.

To reassure the cartel, Mr. Mazur requested a one-on-one meeting with Moncada’s representatives in Miami, without any sort of back-up. Things then took a turn for the worse.

“So, I met alone and when I did, the briefcase malfunctioned and the recorder fell out of the briefcase,” he said.

“Luckily, it fell into the body of the briefcase and he was on the other side, so he could only see the lid.”

Right before the representative could go around the briefcase, Mr. Mazur coolly put everything back together.

“I was supposed to be delivering some Swiss bank records and I had to act like nothing happened,” he said. “But you combine all of that together, that was probably the tensest moment for me.”

Tense or not, nothing would have prepared the self-described “young and dumb” agent for the boss himself. While Mr. Mazur was never in a room with Escobar, he only had one word to describe the man: Vicious.

When Escobar found out that Moncada and another associate were skimming his money, he had their feet tied and hung the pair upside down, Mr. Mazur said.

“His henchmen pulled their clothes off, used blowtorches on their skeletons and then he chopped them up and burnt them into ashes,” he added. “So that’s Pablo Escobar and the Medellin cartel.”

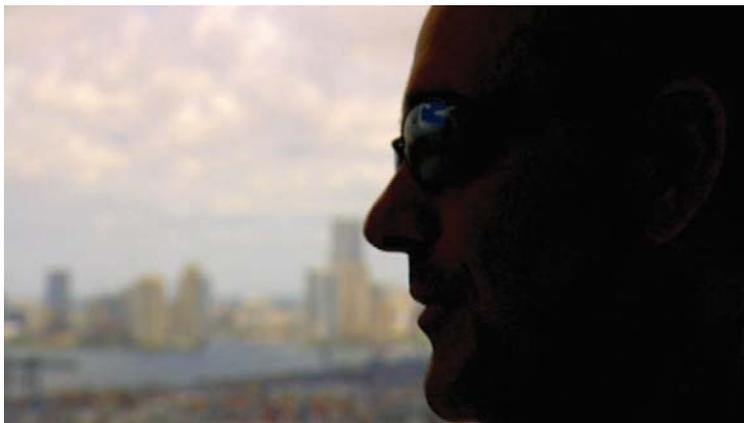
### **"BATTLE VICTORY"**

The high stakes in C-Chase paid off, as it led to more than 100 indictments and proved that one of the biggest privately-held banks in the world, the Bank of Credit and Commerce International, laundered money for Colombian drug traffickers.

“I think shining a light on that helped the world understand that there’s unfortunately a small segment of the international banking and business community that markets this money,” Mr. Mazur noted.

“In other regards, when you look at today, there’s more drugs, more money laundered. So the reality is that I think it was a battle victory in a very difficult war.”

The war still rages on, Mr. Mazur said, as fragments of the Medellin cartel have “revived”. “The efforts of law enforcement changed the business plan of the Colombian cartels, but they thrive,” he added. “They thrive in selling wholesale to the Mexican cartels.”



Mr. Mazur in a typical silhouetted shot. (Photo: Tjardus Greidanus / Universal Pictures)

To this day, Mr. Mazur avoids photos, with the invitation for this interview stating that he has to “hide his identity because the cartel wants him dead”.

However, Mr. Mazur brushed this off. “I don’t know anywhere that they publish that kind of thing,” he said.

“I just use my instinct; that’s what I use when I work undercover and that’s what I use now,” he added. “It’s not my advantage to have a high profile with the bad guys, it’s my interest to try to be a resource for the good guys.”

### **FIGHTING MONEY LAUNDERING**

Nowadays, Mr. Mazur helps the good guys in a different way. He was speaking in Kuala Lumpur on Wednesday at the Business Defence Forum, organised by security firm BAE Systems, on how money launderers operate and what businesses can do in response. Mr. Mazur explained that money launderers are motivated by greed and power, aided by a small number of banks that have questionable “moral compasses”.

“The reality is there’s US\$2 trillion dollars seeking money laundering services every year,” he said, citing growing figures from a United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime report. “That kind of money, unfortunately, makes some good people do bad things.”



During the undercover operation, Mr. Mazur received dozens of suitcases filled with US currency from the cartel. (Photo: Robert Mazur)

Money launderers are also starting to move away from banks to avoid scrutiny, noted BAE Systems’ head of sales for Southeast Asia Divya Khangarot.

“With the evolution of payment systems, growing use of cryptocurrencies and real-time payments across ASEAN, we are seeing that criminals are shifting to casino gambling, real estate and trade-based money laundering,” she said.

In a local context, Ms. Khangarot praised Singapore for its “zero tolerance” approach to crime and fraud, but added that “there’s always room for constant innovation and improvement”.

This year, Singapore dropped from second to fourth in the Basel Anti Money Laundering Index Report, which ranks Asia's lowest-risk countries. A 2016 PwC study on global economic crime also revealed that money laundering is the fourth-most common financial crime in the Republic.

Ms. Khangarot said financial institutions can fight back by implementing the right

technology, educating staff, and having good governance control as well as information sharing across law enforcement.

In April, the Monetary Authority of Singapore and Commercial Affairs Department launched a partnership involving regulators, banks and law enforcement agencies to counter money laundering and terrorism financing.

Mr. Mazur said the battle against dirty money is a “complicated thing”, as he pointed out that there are “countless ways” that money can be laundered.

“It’s a long array of resources that need to be applied to effectively deflect the risk that comes from handling this type of money,” he added. “There’s no one silver bullet.”