

I am the DEA agent responsible for catching the notorious Mexican drug lord 'El Chapo' — this is how we successfully carried out our undercover operation

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El Chapo is escorted by soldiers during a presentation at the Navy's airstrip in Mexico City, February 2014.

Henry Romero/Reuters

El Chapo Guzmán is a multi-billionaire Mexican drug lord who formerly lead the Sinaloa Cartel.

Special Agent Andrew Hogan headed the D.E.A.'s Sinaloa Cartel desk in Mexico City from 2012.

With a number of undercover operations and careful preparation, Hogan captained the manhunt that led to the capture of El Chapo.

The following is an excerpt from ['Hunting El Chapo: The Inside Story of the American Lawman Who Captured the World's Most-Wanted Drug Lord'](#) by Andrew Hogan:

Just a few hours before our first undercover meeting, Diego was acting as if he didn't have a care in the world. Like any good actor, he was supremely confident in his ability to negotiate his way through any business deal. But his confidence also came from meticulous preparation. We'd spent months creating our undercover legend: Diego would be playing the role of a senior executive, the director of operations for

a US-based company — supposedly a covert criminal network — operating a ton-quantity drug-and-money transportation organization.

He would be meeting with Mercedes Chávez Villalobos, the woman who led a sophisticated money-brokerage-and-laundering cell based in Mexico City and Colombia. When Diego spoke with Mercedes, she had been aggressive, fast-talking, and extremely demanding. She was always looking for a better deal, for someone trustworthy who could move hundreds of millions of dollars quickly — and strictly on a handshake.

"Do you really believe she's sitting on all this money? She's supposedly got a hundred million in Spain. Fifty million in Canada. Ten million in Australia. And some two hundred million in Mexico City?"

"What other options do we have?" Diego said, "We need to play her out to see if she can deliver."

"What we need to know," I said, "is who all of this money *really* belongs to."

Why Panama?

Panama City was the money-laundering capital of the Western Hemisphere. Banks had sprouted up on every corner. There was plenty of legitimate banking business, but some, like HSBC, faced criminal prosecution for "willfully failing to maintain an effective anti-money laundering program" in connection with hundreds of millions of dollars of drug money.

Mercedes had suggested meeting Diego face-to-face in Mexico City, but the DEA brass considered it too dangerous, and our Mexican police counterparts would never allow it. "El Canal" was perfect: Panama was known as a neutral zone for drug traffickers from all around the world to meet without threats of territorial disputes or violence. It was also geographically convenient if you wanted to meet Colombian or Mexican contacts. Many in the narco world felt at ease in this glitzy isthmus.

The undercover operation

We had selected a popular high-end steakhouse called La Rosita for the undercover meet with Mercedes Chávez Villalobos. The plan was this: Diego and Mercedes would sit at an outdoor table so I could keep my eyes on my partner throughout the meeting from inside the cab of a Toyota Hilux pickup, the G-ride that belonged to one of the DEA agents permanently stationed in Panama.

Courtesy of Harper

Neither Diego nor I could carry: Panamanian law wouldn't allow us to bring our handguns into the country. But Diego was armed with one high-tech gadget: a secret key-fob camera that looked like an ordinary car key remote but was capable of

discreetly recording hours of audio and video. I set up the G-ride in the busy parking lot as close as I could to watch Diego enter the restaurant, discreetly parked, but with a perfect line of sight to the terrace tables.

But after two minutes, there was still no sign of Diego.

Three minutes passed. Then five. Then seven. I still couldn't see him on the terrace. I thumb-typed a text in our prearranged code, in case they checked his phone. No reply from Diego.

This was the worst scenario for an undercover meet: we had no backup agents inside the restaurant with eyes on the UC, and no armed Panamanian counterparts watching our backs. I couldn't sit for another second. I bolted from the Toyota and headed straight for the entrance of La Rosita.

What if her people had snatched Diego to pat him down, make sure he wasn't a cop? I scanned every table hard but didn't see him anywhere. I started to feel every yone's eyes locking on me as I frantically walked through the restaurant.

I quickly grabbed a busboy by the shoulder.

"*El baño?*" I asked, and no sooner had the kid gestured to the left than I saw that I was standing right next to Diego — in fact, I was literally looking down on the crown of my partner's head.

Diego was in an intense but muted conversation with Mercedes. And not only Mercedes, but two older males. They were heavy hitters, I could tell. One appeared to be wearing a pistol, bulging behind the flap of his tan blazer.

Three targets? The meet was only supposed to be with Mercedes. I sensed that the sit-down had turned tense. Mercedes and the two henchmen had hard gazes; they weren't buying Diego's story.

Before anyone noticed me looking, I darted for the bathroom. A single trickle of sweat ran from my chest down to my navel. I could hear myself breathing loudly. Right before I reached the bathroom, I noticed a steak knife on a table ready to be cleared. Could I grab it without being seen? There was no other option. I needed a weapon and had to take the chance.

As quickly as I could, I snatched up the knife, placed it flush against my wrist, and slipped it into my pocket.

In the bathroom, I turned on the sink and splashed cold water on my face, attempting to calm my nerves, hoping one of the bad guys wouldn't stroll in suddenly to take a leak.

The door suddenly swung open — I straightened up, my face still dripping with cold water, but it was just a regular restaurant patron. I knew one thing: it was crucial to get photographs of Mercedes and the two heavies so I could identify them if they took Diego by gunpoint. It would also be critical for future indictments, and I couldn't rely on the key fob Diego was carrying.

I had the steak knife ready in one pocket; in the other, I had a small digital camera, which I flipped on to video mode.

I walked slowly past Diego, unable to aim the Canon's lens, just hoping I'd capture the faces of everyone at the table as I walked toward the door. I knew I couldn't hang out in the restaurant alone, so I found a discreet place outside where I could watch Diego through the windows of the front door. I sat there, my hands trembling as I waited for Diego to exit.

Getting closer to El Chapo

After another hour, Diego got up from the table, shook everyone's hands, and gave the half-hug — Mexican style — to all three, then walked out of the restaurant.

I followed him on foot as he walked on into the mall, staying thirty yards behind, making sure we weren't being followed by any of Mercedes's people.

Finally, I looked back over my shoulder three times and met up with him in a back parking lot. We were clean. We jumped in the cab of the Hilux and sped off.

Diego was silent for a long time, staring out the window and trying to make sense of what had just happened. His expression was trancelike.

"That was so intense," Diego said at last. "A straight-up interrogation."

"How'd you play it?"

"Just started making up a story about how we're moving millions in tractor-trailers, our fleet of private aircraft. Ships. Told them we transport coke — by the tons."

"And?"

Diego grinned.

"She bought it, man!" he shouted. "I had all three of them eating out of the palm of my hand."

"Did she say whose money it is?"

"She said it's *his*," Diego repeated.

Diego went quiet, smiling. "His?" I asked. "Chapo?"

"Yes. She said, "It's all Chapo's money."

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