

Underworld: Behind the Scenes of the NCA Episode 1 – The Crime Lord

00:00:00:00 - 00:00:19:18

Ellie Flynn

I'm Ellie Flynn, and this is Underworld: Behind the scenes of the NCA. This podcast series unearths the murky world of dangerous criminals across the UK and the incredible work undertaken by the National Crime Agency to bring them to justice.

00:00:19:20 - 00:00:38:14

Robert Hickinbottom, NCA Senior Investigating Officer

He was one of the number one criminals in Europe. I mean, they've compared him to El Chapo, for example, the El Chapo of Europe. They regarded him as the biggest drugs supplier on the continent.

International Liaison officer

Where he sat within the sort of echelons of European organized crime in the sort of top ten elements that the whole of Europe is kind of looking at and that is where we come to see that individual.

00:00:38:14 - 00:00:55:05

Andy Young, Crown Prosecution Service

It is probably one of the most successful cases I've dealt with where we haven't had a trial in the UK.

Carl Fellstrom, Journalist

When I started writing about him, he sent people over to threaten me that if I carried on writing about it, then I was going to get burnt.

Rob Hickinbottom

He's a dangerous man. He's a nasty, violent, horrible man. And that is the man I'm looking at face to face that day. I know what that guy's done, essentially, and what he's ordered, essentially, over the years.

Andy Young

He's a very dangerous man and capable of operating remotely all around the world. He was probably as big as you can get in the transport side of things.

00:01:16:04 - 00:01:40:17

Andy Young

He had the ability to move vast quantities of drugs.

Ellie Flynn

The man you're about to hear about was a notorious figure in the British criminal underworld, the head of a global organized crime group, a major player in the international drug trade and one of the most influential and feared organized criminals in Europe until he was captured at his Spanish villa in 2015.

00:01:40:19 - 00:02:15:10

Ellie Flynn

This is the story of how the NCA finally caught up with Robert Dawes.

Episode one - The Crime Lord.

The name Robert Dawes was known to British law enforcement agencies long before the NCA came into being. By the time the files landed on NCA desks, Dawes' criminal networks spread across the globe. Robert Hickinbottom led what became an international investigation to bring Dawes to justice.

00:02:15:11 - 00:02:42:04

Rob Hickinbottom

Robert Dawes has been a name that's been around the agency, the National Crime Agency, for a number of years, for decades, essentially. He was probably one of our first renowned high-end criminals who was based overseas, but he's from the Midlands area. But we'd worked with international partners for the best part of 20 years in terms of his criminal activities.

00:02:42:06 - 00:03:01:09

Rob Hickinbottom

So for a long time I've known about the name Rob Dawes.

Ellie Flynn

Dawes' criminal career started before he was even a teenager. As you'll hear, he came from a family with a background in crime. He grew up in a town called Sutton in Ashfield.

Rob Hickinbottom

So he's from the Nottinghamshire area, a small mining town. What was a mining town. And he was associated to a number of well-known criminals in the Nottingham area. When cocaine started coming into the Nottingham area. He was very much prevalent on the cocaine supply front and during the eighties and nineties Nottingham earned its reputation as - in fact at one time it was called Nottingham because of the gun crime that was going on in the city.

00:03:25:18 - 00:03:49:08

Rob Hickinbottom

And in that time because of the violence that was used, he went up the echelons and so forth in terms of the supply of cocaine and drugs and forged essentially the, the character that he became. So he ruled by violence and the fear of the violence was such that it became very high level.

Ellie Flynn

And how would you describe his character?

00:03:49:11 - 00:04:13:09

Rob Hickinbottom

When I refer to him, he is clearly an intelligent guy. You know, you don't become somebody like him without being intelligent. So he is that. And he's also, however, somebody that some friends referred to him as psycho, because one minute he's perfectly fine with them, but the next minute he can turn extremely violent. And when he makes a threat, he ensures it's carried out. So you don't mess with Rob Dawes.

00:04:16:00 - 00:04:39:01

Ellie Flynn

The journalist Carl Fellstrom has been writing about Robert Dawes for over 15 years and became fascinated with him in the mid 2000s.

Carl Fellstrom

Doors had really just been a minor criminal in many ways. Although he started early, he was doing burglaries at the age of 12 and then moved into vehicle crime and also a few convictions for violence.

00:04:39:03 - 00:05:07:00

Carl Fellstrom

But it's not until we get to 1994 when he's convicted of a, of a robbery that he faces his first significant amount of time in prison. He gets five years for that.

Ellie Flynn

Peter Jones remembers the Dawes family well at the time he was a detective inspector with the Nottinghamshire Constabulary. Although Robert Dawes would go on to become the leader of an international organized crime group or OCG, Peters investigation was focused on his brother.

00:05:07:02 - 00:05:33:07

Peter Jones

Robert was, was the main man. He was the one with the intelligence I think. John, John was more of a hands on and local thug cum drug dealer, but I think it was Robert that was the main dealer.

Carl Fellstrom

Within two years, his brother had been arrested and his father and they went down for significant jail terms ofm of - well his brother went down for over 20 years.

00:05:33:09 - 00:06:07:16

Carl Fellstrom

So that didn't seem to have any impact on his criminal empire. He, in fact, began expanding. As well as the cells which he had working in the UK, primarily around his home area of Nottinghamshire, he also began setting up cells in the Netherlands.

Ellie Flynn

Those highly secretive, semi-autonomous cells meant that Robert Dawes could compartmentalize his criminal activities, making it more difficult to track him down. If one cell was disrupted, the OCG could continue to operate through its other cells.

00:06:07:18 - 00:06:39:12

Ellie Flynn

By now, police chiefs were concerned enough to launch a detailed investigation into his activities. What they discovered was that Dawes had criminal connections all over the country.

Carl Fellstrom

In particular, he had very good connections to Merseyside and Manchester and also down south to London. He was starting to mix with other criminal organized crime groups all the way along. He was learning new, new information about how to stay one step ahead of the authorities.

00:06:39:14 - 00:07:00:16

Carl Fellstrom

He had a tip off that he could be in trouble around 2001, and that's when he decided to move to Spain.

Ellie Flynn

Robert Dawes was no longer interested in the local crime scene and reinvented himself as the head of an international drug trafficking operation. When the Robert Dawes file landed on Robert Hickinbottom's desk, it was clear that he'd need to engage with law enforcement agencies overseas.

00:07:00:22 - 00:07:34:23

Rob Hickinbottom

Somebody like Dawes is an international player. You cannot do this or that type of investigation just from the UK. It's essential that we work with our international partners. We are able to share information and build investigations with those partners. So without that cooperation we would get nowhere. So it is an absolute essential part of, of any investigation which is truly global and in this case, because of what Dawes does and did, it was truly global.

00:07:34:23 - 00:08:05:22

Rob Hickinbottom

So that reliance on those, that cooperation with international partners is absolute essential.

Ellie Flynn

NCA staff posted abroad act as a point of contact between police forces, officers back home and a network of local law enforcement contacts. The international liaison officer working out of offices in Spain, explained his role during the Robert Dawes investigation.

ILO (Anonymous)

My role in this particular area was around how we can gather, how we can share information with the Spanish and being a point of contact between the two, the two countries, the two agencies, from the law enforcement perspective.

00:08:05:22 - 00:08:30:10

ILO

So where we have information, where we might want to share with the Spanish, that really helps us drive those relationships over a number of years across, across all the world, not just in this one post, but across all of our posts and all the work that my colleagues do there

Rob Hickinbottom

We worked with very closely Colombian officials, in Ecuador, in Venezuela, in South America.

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Rob Hickinbottom

But then mainly with European partners - it was the French, but also the Spanish here. But also we began parallel investigations with the Italians and the Dutch, for example, because these people are all connected to the trafficking network that Dawes had set up. So his network is intricate. It's extensive. It's got corrupt officials across the globe working for him.

00:08:56:14 - 00:09:29:02

Rob Hickinbottom

He was also operating an encrypted communications, which made it very, very difficult for law enforcement to get inside and understand what they were doing. And in this particular case, when I started looking at it, it became one of the first investigations that we'd had in the UK that saw the extensive use of what we call encrypted communications.

Carl Fellstrom

In terms of the telephone network, you have to remember that his rise came at a time of the explosion of the mobile phone. You know, that has increased the capabilities of organized crime groups to carry out their work.

00:09:29:04 - 00:10:03:18

Carl Fellstrom

But in the early days, he would send a text, coded text, that the other person at the other end knew how to decode. And it would be like something like the name of a football team or something like that. And that would generate the new phone number that the person was to use to contact him. After that, when we start getting encrypted communications going on, he, this is in the sort of 2010 decade, he starts to operate a mobile phone network called Number One BC.

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Rob Hickinbottom

Criminals have used various different efforts to frustrate law enforcement because they know full well that we'd use things like what our foreign colleagues refer to as wiretap or telephone intercept. So they'd use SIM card swappers, they would use different burner phones and all those sorts of things historically. But what came on the market probably a decade or so ago were various types of encrypted communications devices which criminals would pay 1500 pounds for just for their use, and that would be paid every six months, essentially.

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Rob Hickinbottom

But what it meant was end to end encryption, and they were able to use it to frustrate law enforcement because it was often sent by text message that then couldn't be intercepted. And so Dawes significantly was one of the first crime groups to be able to use this type of technology. And he wouldn't deal with anybody unless they were using the same type of technology.

00:11:03:03 - 00:11:25:17

Ellie Flynn

And how difficult does that make your job?

Rob Hickinbottom

We'd not seen it used like this before, so we worked with different partners in terms of being able to try and crack the code, as you can imagine, and do different things with that. But when you're dealing with international law enforcement, in particular, those based in Europe, they put a lot of weight into what we refer to as the wire tap technology.

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Rob Hickinbottom

So without it, it really does guide their investigation overseas. So they, they've always used it traditionally. I'm not divulging anything new here. So they've relied very much

and have been able to use it and they can use it evidentially on the continent, whereas we cannot here, of course. In that regard, a lot of the investigation is based upon that.

00:11:46:04 - 00:12:09:04

Rob Hickinbottom

And so of course, when they were not picking up Dawes on the wiretap evidence, they found it very, very difficult to investigate. And actually, we were at a point where the Spanish judge said, we can't continue with this because we're not picking anything up that's anything criminal. Because I knew what was going on, because I'd come across this technology effectively.

00:12:09:04 - 00:12:40:09

Rob Hickinbottom

I had a meeting with a Spanish judge and explained to him that we need to do things differently. And that's when we started looking at other ways in which we might be able to investigate him.

Ellie Flynn

Doing things differently meant using all the covert resources available to the NCA – what investigators often referred to as tradecraft. If Dawes had been living in the UK, Robert Hickinbottom would have worked closely with the Crown Prosecution Service, building an evidential case that would hopefully lead to a trial and successful prosecution.

00:12:40:11 - 00:13:06:22

Ellie Flynn

But Dawes' international residency meant they had to take a new approach. Andy Young is a barrister and at the time of the investigation he was a specialist prosecutor with international justice and organized crime. He told us about the challenges of mounting a prosecution abroad.

Andy Young

It is more difficult to prosecute the main offender, especially given the way he disguised communications.

00:13:06:24 - 00:13:38:23

Andy Young

How do you attribute the man on top to Robert Dawes? We all knew it from intelligence, but didn't, didn't have evidence that would have allowed an extradition at that time.

Ellie Flynn

In April 2013, covert investigations provided a lead that would ultimately lead to Robert Dawes's downfall.

Robert Hickinbottom

From that April information that we were getting from our covert inquiries, we picked up that they were going to be transporting 1.3 tonnes of cocaine into France.

00:13:39:00 - 00:14:09:24

Robert Hickinbottom

So from that we were able to start an undercover operation with the French. So sure enough, in September 2013, an Air France plane arrived in Paris with the 32 suitcases within the hold. We had good engagement with our French colleagues, the National

Drugs Unit in Nanterre in Paris, so we got the information that the plane had landed. So I went over and met with our colleagues in France and discussed our next steps.

00:14:10:01 - 00:14:43:12

Robert Hickinbottom

The suitcases had been taken into a warehouse ready for delivery, and it was our understanding that they would be broken into four different shipments by lorry. At that point, we were expecting the first one to be taken to the UK, so we're expecting amounts of about 250 plus kilos to be sent to various different places. As it turned out, the the initial lorry load was an Italian truck and because it was then started heading out of, of France together with the French, we decided that it was a good time to interdict.

00:14:43:12 - 00:15:10:20

Robert Hickinbottom

And the first arrests were then made. There were British nationals involved, but there were also mid-tier members of Camorra mafia from Naples within that warehouse. That's significant because the Camorra mafia, you would expect to be heading up on this sort of thing. But as it turned out, they were merely purchasing from the Dawes Network, who had command of the logistics of the cocaine supply into Paris.

00:15:10:22 - 00:15:34:04

Robert Hickinbottom

So the fact that they were just part of it is really significant. But throughout from April to September, we started what we referred to as Operation Enamoured, which, which I led.

Ellie Flynn

The seizure of drugs in France was a huge success and led to a number of arrests across the Robert Dawes Organized Crime Group.

Robert Hickinbottom

As a result of the seizure that the French made a number of arrests - I think it was 50 odd arrests - were made in Venezuela, because to be able to do that requires a huge amount of corruption. So a lot of people were arrested at the airport and connected to it in Venezuela. So, so they were all dealt with, arrested and charged in Venezuela. But the way we looked at doing it was to connect Dawes to the main people that we felt were responsible, and connected to the shipment.

00:16:04:17 - 00:16:43:18

Robert Hickinbottom

We looked at a crime group that was based in the UK. We targeted various people that we knew were connected to that crime group. We also worked with our regional partners, the East Midlands Special Operations Unit, as well as Nottinghamshire Police, because those persons working to Dawes were all from his home area, his home region essentially. And in fact the people that had gone out to Venezuela on his behalf in April were from that, from that area of the UK. By the end of two years, we'd have arrested something like 100 people, numerous high end drug seizures, all of which resulted in convictions at court.

00:16:43:23 - 00:17:06:15

Ellie Flynn

And that should have been the end of it all. But it wasn't because Robert Dawes was still a free man.

Robert Hickinbottom

It would have been 1.3 tonnes cocaine seizure in Paris and that would have been it. That was what normally happens. You arrest people who are on the ground or immediately connected to it, but because of our intelligence that we had, we knew that Dawes was the man behind it.

00:17:06:15 - 00:17:30:13

Robert Hickinbottom

So we set about trying to prove that he was the person who was behind that shipment of cocaine. And that is what's significantly different about this whole investigation and why it is probably one of the best examples of an agency that we've got of looking at and having an investigation which looks at what we refer to as a local to global investigation.

00:17:30:13 - 00:17:54:24

Robert Hickinbottom

IE taking out the top player right down to the people that he worked with even into the East Midlands region of the UK. So we had various investigations then which connected him or we looked to connect him to that particular seizure.

Ellie Flynn

For the Operation Enamoured team, the work continued.

Robert Hickinbottom

Bit by bit, we put together a picture over two years of how Dawes operates his network.

00:17:54:24 - 00:18:20:11

Robert Hickinbottom

Who was part of it. Who was connected to it, who's making the decisions? And from that we're building up a whole picture of how we might go about essentially capturing him. And effectively, that led us in 2015 to a hotel in Madrid.

Ellie Flynn

The Guardia Civil had been monitoring Dawes' phones, but by this stage his heavily encrypted system meant nothing was coming through from telephone intercepts.

00:18:20:13 - 00:18:42:13

Ellie Flynn

They decided to go back to basics with 24/7 physical surveillance, which led to the discovery that Dawes had an important meeting at the Five Star Villa Magna Hotel in Madrid. With only hours' notice, a plan was hatched to put surveillance in place. We joined Robert Hickinbottom on a trip to visit that hotel, a location that became pivotal to the operation to capture Dawes.

00:18:42:15 - 00:19:04:15

Robert Hickinbottom

So we are stood outside the Villa Magna Hotel. It's a little bit different to how I'd imagined actually - it's a fairly modern building, quite swanky, and it's a very nice area of north central Madrid. It's a busy thoroughfare, but it's in an area, I guess which you would describe as similar to Park Lane, Mayfair in London. It's that sort of an area.

00:19:04:17 - 00:19:25:23

Robert Hickinbottom

Always a bit of a strange thing, having seen it on video, having listened to a number of times, to actually be here, it's quite interesting. It's, it's got easy access on the road. But also I note the underground car park next to it, which is possibly on the video surveillance or whatever, but it means he can secrete his car away off the main public area.

00:19:25:23 - 00:19:46:03

Robert Hickinbottom

So probably a good reason for choosing this particular hotel I think. The Guardia Civil had literally hours to prepare for it. So it wasn't a it wasn't long in the planning. It was very opportunistic. But it's sufficient time essentially to to get things in place to arrange for devices to be arranged and video footage to be gained.

00:19:46:05 - 00:20:11:23

Robert Hickinbottom

So just long enough for it to be achieved. Basically, yeah.

Ellie Flynn

Robert Dawes wasn't in Madrid for a holiday or a city break. He was there on business, serious business.

Robert Hickinbottom

He was meeting with two foreign nationals, a Colombian called Sapida and a Venezuelan national called Rincon. Two very interesting people. Sapida himself was quite a high level member of the Cali Mafia from Colombia.

00:20:12:00 - 00:20:40:07

Robert Hickinbottom

Rincon con probably a lower level criminal. Interesting also that during the discussion that they had in the hotel, he gave instructions about the use of secure communication devices and one of these devices he gave to Rincon during the actual meeting. So he gave him instructions to go out the next day over to Venezuela and then on to Colombia to meet a particular person.

00:20:40:09 - 00:21:04:12

Robert Hickinbottom

Interestingly enough, we did look at doing a surveillance operation on Rincon that next day. We covered him over to Caracas, got him at Caracas airport. But rather frustratingly, there was a shootout in the actual airport. Nothing to do with our particular operation, but it obviously distracted things. And so he was lost at the airport. So we never actually covered the meeting he had post meeting with Dawes here in this hotel.

00:21:04:14 - 00:21:38:17

Ellie Flynn

The Guardia Civil faced an immediate challenge. How could they monitor what Dawes was saying to his business associates and record that evidence in a busy hotel lounge?

Robert Hickinbottom

At that time, it was using what we refer to as dropdowns so recording devices that if we were able to get close to him, that we were able to then put a recording device close to a meeting that he was having and be able to record the conversation essentially. So it's a technique that we've used a lot here and we continue to use.

00:21:38:17 - 00:22:03:04

Robert Hickinbottom

But it wasn't widely used by our investigating colleagues in Spain. So we we bought the technology for them to use. They then deployed that technology and to good success.

Ellie Flynn

In the recording made that day, which you are about to hear, Robert Dawes can be heard bragging about the Paris seizure, telling his associate that it was the biggest job they did last year crashed.

00:22:03:06 - 00:22:27:23

Robert Dawes (recorded audio)

It crashed. It is all over the news. You don't see it?

Cepeda

Yes I know. I thought from Peru

Dawes

It's the biggest one they ever had.

Cepeda

And that belonged to you?

Dawes

Yes from Venezuela. The biggest one they ever did in Charles de Gaulle.

Cepeda

To Paris?

Dawes

Yes Charles de Gaulle.

Cepeda

[Explains to Rincon in Spanish]

Dawes

If he knows anyone in Venezuela, they know that story. It is the biggest one they ever had.

Cepeda

[Explains to Rincon in Spanish]

Dawes

Fucking, every fucking police involved from Europe is talking to Venezuela. Many people have a problem in Venezuela.

Cepeda
How much? 1700?

Dawes
1200
[End of recorded audio]

ILO (anonymous)
I remember the day quite clearly. A phone call of we've got something if you want to pop over and have a little listen and then had the pleasure ringing Rob up to say, by the way, I've got something you might be interested in.

00:23:02:10 - 00:23:22:01

ILO (Anonymous)

Yeah. And I think you nearly fell off his seat when he saw, when I was able, I was able to brief him on what would you know the Spanish managed to achieve and how we had helped get through that and hear from the horse's mouth around the sort of scale of their operation, the penetration that they had managed to achieve globally and corruption elements that they'd pushed.

00:23:22:05 - 00:23:39:16

ILO (anonymous)

And then that key nugget really for us in terms of oh and by the way, the big seizure we're talking around. That was that was my piece of work. That was me. That was - you know, that was that was phenomenal to hear that. And then obviously hear it repeated in Spanish because he didn't speak enough Spanish to communicate it to another person.

00:23:39:16 - 00:24:03:10

ILO (anonymous)

So to hear it twice. And so we worked a bit with them on in terms of going through that, understanding what part, the bits and explaining where some of the English colloquialism, what they meant as well and how some of that work came through. So yeah, really positive experience there.

Rob Hickinbottom

It was a fairly eureka moment because I was in discussion with our liaison officer that we have here in Madrid.

00:24:03:12 - 00:24:34:07

Robert Hickinbottom

He relayed the facts of what was discussed to me, and I just couldn't get over the fact that that they had got this, this footage. And not only that, it was so much detail, it was precise, but it was also fairly wide ranging. They'd had a two hour discussion talking about the whole criminality. Dawes was talking about what he did, who he did things with, high level corruption across the globe, how he did things.

00:24:34:07 - 00:24:55:11

Robert Hickinbottom

But again, importantly, the most important thing for us was what he discussed in terms of that seizure in Paris, the 1.3 tonnes of cocaine.

Carl Fellstrom

I think he broke his own golden rule, you know, which was, you know, not to, to brag about these things. And I just think it's one of those crazy moments where you catch somebody off guard.

00:24:55:11 - 00:25:25:11

Carl Fellstrom

And the significance of it to him was massive, because what's transpired since is that was the only element that he thought was going to take him down. I think that was the moment for sure - the conversation in the hotel - because he's, he's convicted on his own words. You know, had that conversation not taken place, he would have been in a strong position in court to defend himself.

00:25:25:11 - 00:25:47:04

Robert Hickinbottom

He could have come here and he could have discussed anything. It could have been something fairly sort of minor. But in this case, it wasn't discussed everything we could have possibly wished for, and therefore it led to his downfall.

Ellie Flynn

The evidence gathered at the Villa Magna Hotel should have been enough to trigger an arrest. But for prosecutor Andy Young, there was a lot of work to do.

00:25:47:07 - 00:26:10:05

Andy Young

I'd been involved in the arrangements with the French all the way through. I was the legal lead, if you like, in the coordination meetings and the joint investigation team we had with the French. I was involved in persuading the French to invite the Spaniards. And it was at that stage that the Spaniards were persuaded to reveal to the French that the evidence they had gathered.

00:26:10:05 - 00:26:35:03

Ellie Flynn

So what came next then? How did you end up making that arrest?

Robert Hickinbottom

You're talking about cooperation of international partners, but what it also showed at that time was how complicated it all is, because our laws don't match those in Spain and those in France. They are prosecutor led, for example, whereas we're not. I went over to Spain and I watched the coverage because we captured on video from the hotel, as well as the audio coverage.

00:26:35:05 - 00:27:04:20

Robert Hickinbottom

And I was in the office of the Guardia Civil headquarters in Madrid. And I watched this and I knew we'd captured the evidence that was significant. So I went back to our French colleagues who we were engaging frequently with. We had something with them called a JIT, a joint investigation team and JIT meetings are conducted through something called Eurojust in The Hague, where it would be prosecutors sat round the table discussing the case.

00:27:04:20 - 00:27:24:06

Robert Hickinbottom

And so I told them the news that the Spanish had captured what we wanted. They invited them along to the next joint investigation team meeting and at the coffee

break, the head of the national Drugs French team came to me and said, Rob, when you saw that video and listened to it, were you drunk? I said, Well, what do you mean?

00:27:24:12 - 00:27:48:01

Robert Hickinbottom

He says the Spanish are saying they don't have it, they don't have that information, which I was completely perplexed about and the Spanish at that meeting, refused then to say that they had actually got it. The meeting finished because we didn't have the evidence.

Ellie Flynn

What followed was due to a change in Spanish law. Although the recording had been lawfully obtained, a recent constitutional court ruling meant that it was no longer admissible.

00:27:48:03 - 00:28:10:05

Ellie Flynn

However, when a new law was passed, the Spanish were finally able to share the covert recordings with the French after all. Finally, the prosecution could go ahead. On the day of the arrest, Robert and his NCA colleagues flew out to Spain and met at a hotel not far from Dawes's Villa.

Robert Hickinbottom

So we were outside the Sunset Beach Hotel Beachside in Benalmadena.

00:28:10:07 - 00:28:35:14

Robert Hickinbottom

And this is where on the evening before the searches took place, we met with our Spanish, French and Europol partners for a briefing. So this was about 815 in the evening, if I recall rightly. This briefing would last for about an hour to discuss the tactical options for the next day, which premises would be searched, the order, who would go there, who would go to which property.

00:28:35:16 - 00:29:09:04

Robert Hickinbottom

And this was all decided upon from this particular hotel. So just coming in, my recollection, I seem to recall that the meeting room itself was over to the left, down a corridor down to the left. We brought the team across with us from the UK for this briefing, by the way, well for the actual action day. So essentially we decided who was going where the next morning and naturally, as the senior investigating officer, I was keen to go to the actual to residents of Dawes.

00:29:09:06 - 00:29:35:09

Robert Hickinbottom

So myself and two or three other of our guys were assigned to that particular address. So this is two years of work in cooperation and it was interesting that, you know, we're here with the French as well as Europol because it was a collective effort. We're working with partners here, two years of collaborations. It's finally is about to come to some real results, hopefully.

00:29:35:09 - 00:29:55:00

Robert Hickinbottom

And we were we were quite nervous in terms of how it would all play out. Would we be there, for example, and some of our Intel building over the week beforehand determined that actually Dawes was not home. So we were concerned that he might not be there, but very last minute information that we got confirmed that he was.

00:29:55:02 - 00:30:20:20

Robert Hickinbottom

So, yeah, two years of good cooperation. What's going to happen? Are we going to find anything in? What's going to play out? So so the excitement is there. The nerves are also there. Yeah, the adrenaline is pumping by this stage. And yeah, we're really looking forward to seeing what might play out the next day.

Ellie Flynn

The following morning they were up before sunrise to rendezvous with the Guardia Civil.

00:30:20:20 - 00:30:48:03

Robert Hickinbottom

Our Spanish colleagues, of course, were very, very professional. At the end of that briefing, essentially we were left knowing that we would be meeting here, at this service station at 415 in the morning. So this service station is on the outskirts of Benalmadena. It's fairly busy right now, but at that time of morning it's fairly quiet. When we when we got here, we saw a huge number of officers, all in ballistics gear, all armed.

00:30:48:05 - 00:31:22:01

Robert Hickinbottom

There was an armed hummer as well. Further instructions were given to us at that point that we would travel in convoy from the service station and go directly to the home address of Dawes from here. The whole operation about going in through the gates, in through the doors, getting to him has to be extremely quick. And they they did it to perfection, essentially.

00:31:22:01 - 00:31:45:24

Robert Hickinbottom

But they were all armed, of course, you know, to do that because of the risk that he presented. He's arrested, he's extradited to France. But because of the terrorist attacks in Paris, his trial is delayed and delayed and delayed. And he is actually not then in court up until December 2018. So it take three years.

00:31:46:04 - 00:32:22:24

Robert Hickinbottom

Interestingly enough, they brought various witnesses to the hearing, but the only one in terms of international law enforcement to give evidence is myself. So I gave information. I gave my evidence for about 4 hours in the cour d'assises in Paris. I did that by video link from the French Embassy here in London. And at the end of that trial, Dawes is essentially, given 22 years. He's found guilty and he's given 22 years imprisonment, which is absolutely hugely significant in France, because those sentences are not normally anywhere near that.

00:32:23:01 - 00:32:56:24

Robert Hickinbottom

And the reason why it's so important that he was heard in the cour d'assises was the amount of sentence that would be given to him and handed to him. It's a great result.

But only this year. Now he's been given another five years in April of this year. And it goes back to the Spanish judge and the, the recording that was made in that public space in the hotel. Dawes had paid his defense counsel to introduce forged documents in the court file.

00:32:57:01 - 00:33:16:21

Robert Hickinbottom

So there's a document there that purports to come from the Spanish judge saying that it wasn't legal at the time as an effort to basically get off the whole thing, because he knew that the whole, the recording was pivotal in terms of his guilty finding. So he's been given them the five years now as well as a result of that.

Ellie Flynn

To serve in France?

00:33:16:23 - 00:33:49:09

Robert Hickinbottom

Yes.

ILO (anonymous)

A lot of colleagues had worked against him, his crime group, throughout a number of years, and not as well known as others, but the spread and breadth of where, of that activity globally, the violence that was imposed as well with significant amounts of money laundering, the scale of the volumes of cocaine that we were seen moving and just the network of other criminal contacts.

00:33:49:09 - 00:34:07:00

Ellie Flynn

You mentioned that you gave evidence in his trial. Does that put you at any sort of risk?

Robert Hickinbottom

Yes, it does. Of course, it's er... There was intelligence there to connect him to various other acts of violence. But that's, that's why you do the job, because if you, if you didn't aim to get people like him, there's no point in doing the job.

00:34:07:02 - 00:34:29:04

Robert Hickinbottom

You've got to go for the, the worst. And you're looking at the proportionality and risk every day.

Carl Fellstrom

Dawes was one of those people that, he was quite happy to operate under the radar and you know, got very, very upset when I started writing about him, you know, to the extent where he sent people over to threaten me, that if I carried on writing about it, then I was going to get burnt.

00:34:29:04 - 00:34:59:01

Carl Fellstrom

And then I just felt that. And this is a feeling a lot of writers who go into this area feel. You're almost safer to carry on than you are to, you know, give up on it and say, well, you know, that's as far as I'm going to go. I'm glad that I did. But I think dealing with it over time, you sort of, you kind of know that, you know, it's always in the back of your head that something bad might happen.

00:34:59:01 - 00:35:23:22

Carl Fellstrom

But at the same time, you kind of, you you your mind and body learns to deal with it over time. And so it becomes not so much of a, a stressful thing. I don't know if that explains it properly but it's the best I can do to explain, explain how it goes. But of course, you have to worry for the people around you as well, which is much more to me, much more worrying.

00:35:23:22 - 00:35:49:13

Carl Fellstrom

You know, my wife and and you know, and my family. If I had children, I would never have even thought about writing in detail about some of these guys, that's for sure.

Robert Hickinbottom

You look at him and you realize this is not just an ordinary man. This is a man that is a very high end criminal boss who's behind a lot of nasty events, violence.

00:35:49:15 - 00:36:37:07

Robert Hickinbottom

We've got a lot of pride in terms of bringing this sort of a person to justice. That's what we do. That's what we do a job for, to bring that type of person to justice. And that gives a great deal of satisfaction.

Carl Fellstrom

I think the violence ultimately is about sending a message. And so he creates this aura around himself that really everybody who deals with him on a criminal basis is worried that if they don't carry out the orders that he gives them or something goes wrong, that they're going to be in a lot of trouble and may well, not just themselves face violence, but their families may well face some violence as a result.

00:36:37:09 - 00:37:01:03

Carl Fellstrom

And so when you create, as with all of these criminals, when you create that kind of atmosphere, sometimes you don't have to do anything at all because the the the myth is already there and it creates fear to the extent that people not only will follow orders, but if they are arrested, they won't say anything.

ILO (anonymous)

I think from the potential challenges we had right at the beginning, it was fantastic. It was, it was really good to sort of get to that point with all those hurdles and barriers and challenges were overcome. But I think importantly as well, to look at the status of the individual, the reach they had, the damage they were causing, the networks they had through into the Camorra mafia, into the biker gangs in Holland and all that sort of breadth into South America and the relationships they were doing were right at the top end of what we're trying to deliver with that impact coming through to the UK.

Robert Hickinbottom

This was truly probably one of our best examples of taking out an organized crime group, dismantling it from top to bottom, top being Dawes. But then all his different operating platforms based over in the continent and in South America.

Carl Fellstrom

Towards the end of the story, you know, you have a guy who who has connections globally all over the place.

00:37:50:19 - 00:38:25:12

Carl Fellstrom

I mean, you know, like banking connections in 60 different countries. And, you know, he knew he had connections to people who had airport workers and Port Authority workers. And in virtually every city where he he could offer up to to get drugs into that country. And, you know, that's the significance of him, I think, that he he is linked to so many other groups who who are of significance that you have to say some of those networks wouldn't have existed without him.

00:38:25:17 - 00:38:45:24

ILO (anonymous)

I found a cutting from an article in a Spanish newspaper the other day that followed the arrest phase that we did in Spain with the Guardia Civil. And it was titled eight years to hunt the crime lord and I thought that was a fairly apt title. And it also put in the scale, the context, the time it took to do that, and he certainly featured very highly for us within the NCA, within Spain.

00:38:46:00 - 00:39:23:23

Robert Hickinbottom

This is not me saying that he was the most prolific drug supplier in Europe. This is the Spanish saying this. You know, they had deduced that he'd achieved that status from the work that the investigations that they had got. And the only way you're going to do that is having a sophisticated criminal network at your disposal. So that's the people he associates with at political level, his corruption, the threats and the violence that he employs, it all comes together and that's why he achieved the status he did.

00:39:24:00 - 00:40:21:07

Robert Hickinbottom

So it's absolutely a high end operation. He chose the dark side, and that's what he did. And unfortunately, now he's paying the consequences for it.