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### UNDERWORLD: BEHIND THE SCENES OF THE NCA

#### Ep 5 - GOLDEN TICKETS

**NARRATOR** [00:00:00] 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.

**SARA JANE MOORE** [00:00:20] There has not been another job that has dealt with fraudulently obtain genuine passports.

**PAUL GREEN** [00:00:25] He sat at the head of an organisation which was probably about half a dozen people strong, and their role was to find those people and those identities that they could then utilise.

**PETER YORK** [00:00: ] He was very security conscious. He had CCTV on his property. He had an alarm system on his property. You know, we've got to think outside the box. Are there other ways that we can actually gain this evidence, this intelligence that, to use against him? And that's exactly what we had to do in this case.

**SARA JANE MOORE** [00:00: ] Some of those that were caught were wanted for murder, firearms traffickers, drugs traffickers. People would automatically think the worst crime is the murder. When you look at drug traffickers and the harm it causes, all of them are equally as bad t.

**PETER YORK** [00:01:07] You won't see us. We sit in the shadows, we are Mr. and Mrs. Grey, and we're brought in when normal surveillance, normal investigation tactics don't work to gather evidence and intelligence to, to get people in front of the court.

**SARA JANE MOORE** [00:01:21] I don't think we realised what we were looking at until you start uncovering how many people had these and how difficult they were to detect.

**PAUL GREEN PAUL GREEN** [00:01:29] Usually I think they were already out of the country. The fugitives that we saw on this case, their y business was serious organised crime. So that's what they carried on doing.

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**PASSPORT OFFICE** [00:01:39] Good afternoon. Thank you for calling Her Majesty's passport office. You're speaking with (unknown name) and how can I help you?

**ANTHONY BEARD** [00:01:46] Yeah. I want to check the progress of my passport. Please.

**NARRATOR** [00:01:52] This is the story of a crime that enabled drug and firearms traffickers, murderers and fugitives to evade justice in the UK..K. In this episode, you'll hear about Anthony Beard and Christopher Zietek. Two men who headed an organised crime group supplying fraudulent passports that were seen as golden tickets by criminals, providing false identities that allowed them to travel across international borders undetected until an investigation by the NCA finally brought the criminal masterminds to court, culminating in a nine week trial in January 2023.

### Episode Fourfour - Golden Ticket.

Anthony Beard first began obtaining genuine passports for criminals to use two decades ago but the intelligence that led to the NCA investigation, codenamed Operation Strey, began with inquiries from the Dutch National Police working together with Her Majesty's Passport Office in the UK. Paul Green was the senior investigating officer on Operation Strey.

**PAUL GREEN** [00:03:00] The Dutch police, identified that they had a bit of an issue with British expat criminals who they feared were presenting false identities to them. What came from that was a joint investigation team, a JIT, as it's referred to, which was a mechanism which allows different countries, law enforcement to work together as if they are on the same team. We sent officers to Holland and we trained them with them fingerprint identification machines, and they were deployed at Schiphol Airport.

### AIRPORT ANNOUNCEMENT [00:03:26]

**PAUL GREEN** [00:03: ] Additionally, we ran a 24-7 contact line that Dutch police could phone to get checks done real time. So that meant that if they stopped someone on the street, ordinarily, if they didn't have that facility, they would engage with that person, maybe take some details and by the time that's filtered through the system, that interaction

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was over. That person was long gone. So that gave them the ability, that 24-7 contact, to conduct checks real time while they were speaking to the people that had stopped.

**SARA JANE MOORE** [00:04:06] I'm Sara Moore, I'm the lead officer for Operation Strey. Essentially, my role was to oversee the investigators.

**ELLIE FYLNN** [00:04:14] When the Dutch police initially came to you, what was it that they were concerned about? Can you remember what it was that they said at the time?

**SARA JANE MOORE** [00:04:25] In Amsterdam or quite a lot of European countries, you have to have your passport on you as identification. The Dutch police were upset that British criminals were using FOGS in Amsterdam. So if a British person was stopped in Amsterdam, they would show a passport. Unbeknown to the Dutch, it was a fraudulent passport. So the name and the photo didn't match. The Dutch thought they had the right person but when they went to find them, they couldn't find them again. So that's how it started with the Dutch police asking us to try and find out who was doing this in the UK.

**NARRATOR** [00:04:55] The acronym "FOG" crops up a lot in this episode. But what are FOG passports? And what does that mean?

**PAUL GREEN** [00:05:01] It's a fraudulently obtained genuine passport. It's a passport issued by H.M. Passport Office, but it will have the details of one individual but the photograph of a different individual and that different individual will be what we refer to as the FOG customer or the end user. In this particular investigation, those end users were often people on the run for serious crime offences. They would have an interest and be prepared to pay for an identity document that, to all intents and purposes, when presented at a border or anywhere else, was a genuine UK passport, apart from the fact that it was their picture but not their name that was on it.

**NARRATOR** [00:05:37] Key to the success of Operation Strey was the close working relationship between the NCA and HMPO, the Passport Office. Here's Senior Fraud Officer Sean O'Brien.

**SEAN O'BRIEN** [00:05:48] We regularly meet and share intelligence with the NCA as part of a longstanding joint working relationship that we have. This sharing and meeting, this

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led to the identification of several FOG passports which have been obtained by serious and organised criminals. By using intelligence development and analysis tools to look for commonalities and things like that, we identified a network of links between these FOG passports. Using a combination of our own capabilities and our research, combined with the intelligence and the surveillance available to the NCA, this network of FOG passports gradually expanded over time as we found more of them and the roles of the people involved in facilitating these FOGs those roles solidified and that's that's kind of how we became aware of the scheme.

**NARRATOR** [00:076:45] It soon became clear that the fraud identified by the Dutch was happening on a scale that meant an organised crime group was at work, identifying individuals willing to sell their identities and then applying for and providing the fraudulent documents to dangerous criminals who would use them to travel abroad to dangerous criminals who would use them to travel abroad.

**PAUL GREEN** [00:07:01] There was a central person who was orchestrating many of the applications that we were seeing and HMPO were detecting, and that focus was a man called Anthony Beard, and he's one of the people that we then worked on and from him we were able to identify a wider network of his contacts.

**SARA JANE MOORE** [00:07:17] I don't think we realised what we were looking at until you start uncovering how many people had these and how difficult they were to detect. Because these people get the FOGs, then they disappear and in the UK we just we don't see them again but then they're affecting other countries and other communities.

**PAUL GREEN** [00:07:34] We came to a light upon Beard as a central character. HMPO found an application that they suspected was... was a FOG application and that enabled us to go back to the post office with an application to come from, look at the CCTV footage and an identification of a likely suspect was made and then we started our operational surveillance from that point outwards. But it was only the timeliness of that because as often is the case, CCTV is not around forever. 30 days most people keep it for. So it's only the timeliness of HMPO identifying that that application and then us being able to follow that inquiry up. That then led us to the start of the start of the pathway to identify Beard, his associates and ultimately, his connection to Christopher Zietek

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**NARRATOR** [00:08::24] Christopher Zietek, formerly known as Christopher McCormack, was known to law enforcement in the UK. He was believed to be an enforcer for a notorious London crime family. He was acting as Anthony Beard's broker, through his extensive contacts in the underworld, where fugitives needed the passports Beard could provide. . That often vulnerable with drug or alcohol problems and 10 years. They also needed to bear a physical resemblance to the customer.

**PAUL GREEN** [00:08:59] The identity donor needed to be complicit because these were renewal applications. What that meant was that the old passport was supplied as part of the application process. That passport would need to be acquired from somebody. You would also need that person to not apply for their own passport for the next ten years at least and presumably you'd need somebody who wasn't very likely to travel abroad so they wouldn't need a passport. In that way, those people had to be knowingly involved. Whether they knew what Beard ultimately did with their identity is up for debate. Certainly they would have had to provide their old passport, their details would have appeared on the form, their addresses. Crucially not phone numbers, because what we found was that Beard maintained a very large number of mobile telephones on a rolling basis. With every application, you would have a mobile phone number purporting to be the identity donors and one purporting to be the counter signatory. But if you tried to contact those numbers, it would ring a phone in Beard's pocket and he would deal with it.

**NARRATOR** [00:09:52] The NCA intelligence team working on Operation Strey had a huge job on their hands, analysing data and attempting to attribute those phone numbers to Anthony Beard.

**PAUL GREEN** [00:1001] The volume of phones that Beard used basically two per application, over 100 applications. We can all do the maths, it's a lot of phones, but he didn't keep them for particularly long. So the work around those would be to attribute them to him and bearing in mind quite often we were working after the fact. So HMPO would contact us and say we think we found another FOG passport, maybe three, four, five, six, seven years old, and we'd have the phone numbers on that but of course you wouldn't have any call data going back that far. So then it was a case of how we could attribute those phones to Beard. Often phone calls were made to HMPO chasing up the applications and they keep recordings. Much like any commercial organisation, if you ring your bank or insurer, they will keep recordings of the calls that they receive and HMPO are

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no different in that respect and so we were able to then use voice analysis of those calls to a sample from Beard from when he was interviewed by the police some years ago to do that comparison and show that that was him.

**SARA JANE MOORE** [00:11:01] There has not been another job that has dealt with fraudulently obtained genuine passports. You know, there's a lot of fraud which could be anything from money laundering, romance fraud but I suppose the lucky thing for us, when you've got a FOG, you've got a physical item. So when you do money laundering, you are looking at bank accounts. With the FOGs, we had a physical thing to look at and also a physical application form. For Strey I would say it was quite different because we had to find different ways of investigating and proving that guilty knowledge of perverting the course of justice.

**ELLIE FYLNN** [00:11:1:34] And was there a trigger point when you realised, oh wait, this is, this is bigger than we thought it was and you know, I'm going to need to investigate this further.

**SARA JANE MOORE** [00:11:4439] So our initial subject, if you like, was Anthony Beard. He was the one that was responsible for applying for the passports. I suppose we probably realised it was a bigger thing when he visited Christopher Zietek's address. At at that point that we identified Christopher's Zietek and we knew his history as Christopher McCormack, ou knew he was doing it on behalf of someone who was, you know, sort of in the criminal fraternity, historically, quite, um, quite well known.

**NARRATOR** [00:12:12] As the case progressed, the evidence began to show that Beard's FOGFOG passport scam was a sophisticated crime that he developed over a number of years.

**PAUL GREEN** [00:12:19] Beard was prolific in bursts. Up until summer of 2018, he'd been quite prolific. He continued to be so but there was more focus increasingly applying for passports that Zietek seemed to be requiring from him. His focus narrowed in terms of the amount of applications and to the clients that Zietek provided. The criminal nature of those customers was at the top level. Subjects of serious organised crime investigations, mainly in Scotland.

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[00:12:49] Peter York is the National Technical Operations manager for the NCA. His team became involved in Operation Strey early on in the investigation. He led the team responsible for deploying surveillance equipment to covertly gather evidence and intelligence.

**PETER YORK** [00:13:032] We were brought in right at the outset to try and identify the false passports in transit to work out were they actually false false passports or were they forged? So we actually got engaged at that stage, and at the outset we really didn't know how broad of a remit we were going to be given, what we were going to be asked to do. There wasn't anything that really said that we were going to go and work against the, the principal months down the line. After that, we then got tasked with trying to gather evidence against Mr. Zietek at his home address.

**PAUL GREEN** [00:13:38] What became apparent was that Beard, when he met with his associates, he would have meetings in cafes or in pubs or sometimes even just on the street. When he met with Christopher Zietek, with a very few exceptions, those meetings all took place at Zietek's home address, and that presents some real challenges for law enforcement and for gathering evidence. When Beard sits in a cafe and talks to his friends or associates, we got the ability to conduct covert surveillance, have offices in that premises, and on many occasions they've either heard things being said that were significant or saw actions that were taking place.

**PETER YORK** [00:14:18] Before we can operate, we have to go to the investigations team. We will tell them what we want to do, where we want to do it, and they've then got to go and get that legal authority to allow us to operate and without that, I don't that I don't let my staff go out the door. It's as simple as that.

**PAUL GREEN** [00:14:32] When those meetings take place in a location that we can't get into someone's home address, that's a real challenge. And it was soon identified that if we were going to deal with Zietek and convict Zietek and gather the evidence we needed, we would need to come up with a solution to achieve that, that evidence gathering. And that's where our technical operations department came into the fore, and we were able to achieve making audio recordings of conversations that were taking place in that premises. And from that gave us our significant evidence of the linkage between Zietek and Beard. It

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also gave us the evidence that we needed to pursue that conspiracy to pervert the course of justice offence.

**PETER YORK** [00:15:16] If a surveillance officer is trying to obtain audio in a particular location, their devices are potentially only going to cover a small distance, say you and I here. If that fails, if that can't be directed enough, then they'll come to us and say, this is the problem we've got. Can you solve it for us? I'll give you an example. A subject could be sitting, having a criminal meet in a pub garden over a pint, case team can't get surveillance officers anywhere near it and he does this on a weekly basis. Can we now put audio in around that area that is much better quality and much more focused against those individuals? And that's the sort of tactics that we'll bring to bear.

**NARRATOR** [00:15:57] For Peter and his team tasked with monitoring Zietek's home. The first stage of their work involved putting together a detailed picture of the suspect's everyday routine.

**PETER YORK** [00:16:05] When we're actually tasked with a property like this, we will go back to the case team with an outline plan of what we want to try and achieve and normally that will start with what we call a pattern of life for that property. So, Zietek living at his top floor maisonette. Yeah, we would want to know when does he leave the property? Who else comes and goes from the property? Does anybody else have a key to his property? Do the people that live downstairs have a relationship with him? Do they have a key? Are they going to go upstairs and feed a cat? Has he got friends or family living close by? If so, how far away? All to give us an understanding of what is actually happening in that property. Once we've got that, then we can actually work out what can or can't be achieved. Now that might mean that we need to do a pattern of life. We need to put cameras outside somebody's property, a factory, and observe what they're doing. We will put the cameras in. We don't get involved in what's going on there. We will pass that product to a central monitoring unit. They will actually then do all of that evidence gathering and intelligence building with the case team.

**NARRATOR** [00:17:18] When it came to Zietek's top floor maisonette, they faced a series of challenges.

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**PETER YORK** [00:17:23] He was very security conscious. He had CCTV on his property, he had alarm system on his property and that meant, you know, we've got to think outside the box. You know, we're not going to hide from cameras, we're not going to be able to defeat alarm systems, you know, without a lot of research and a bit of thought process. So we have to think about are there other ways that we can actually gain this evidence, this intelligence that to use against him? And that's exactly what we had to do in this case. We had to sit back and it took months and months of actual careful planning and thought to work out how we could achieve what our actual team were asking us to do.

**MATT** [00:17:59] I'm Matt – I'm the case officer for Operation Strey, so my role primarily in the early phases was to be engaged in the surveillance and the day to day investigation, latterly then compiling the case file, which was quite substantial in this case, going forwards - the statements, the exhibits - and putting that to the CPS for a charging decision and then being engaged in the pre-trial work that was needed for that. The actual product is listened to by a team in another part of the agency and then we would review that, parallel review that partly because we know the case, but partly because the people that were speaking, they were from the South. They spoke in a particular way. We could understand some more of that perhaps, and others could. Certain Cockney slang and stuff was a little bit more familiar to us than it would be to others but also so you understand the people you're working on , you know, when you actually listen to these people talking in their own words, you get an understanding of one, how they speak and what they mean when they say certain words. If they're coding it up or if they're trying to hide it. But you also get an understanding of how they're thinking. And sometimes we would be able to sort of identify where they were going with something before they'd even done it, if you see what I mean.

**NARRATOR** [00:19:07] Slowly over the course of the investigation, Paul Green and his team put together a picture of Anthony Beard's day to day movements, including his meetings at Zietek's house as well as trips to other locations such as the high street printing and processing store Snappy Snaps.

**PAUL GREEN** [00:19:22] We saw Beard in many different locations. He used to frequent Snappy Snaps and print out pictures quite often. That was easier to achieve than someone who works effectively out of their home address.

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### AUDIO FROM SNAPPY SNAPS FOOTAGE [00:19:34]

**NARRATOR** [00:19:49] The team also undertook work on Christopher Zietek's DNA in order to try and connect him to the passports being delivered to criminals in order to try and connect him to the passports being distributed to criminals and this involved a covert airport search on a third party working for Zietek and Beard.

**PAUL GREEN** [[00:20:02] From previous offences, he did have a sample on the system and what that meant was that at one point we were able to conduct what we call a covert baggage search which is pretty much as it sounds. We are able to when someone goes through an airport travelling with the proper authority, we're able to check their bag without their knowledge.

### Airport announcement sound effect

**PAUL GREEN** [00:20:27 ] We did that to someone who was acting as a courier for Zietek. They were carrying identity documents, not in this particular instance, a FOG passport, but rather a counterfeit Latvian passport. During the course of that search, we were able to obtain a DNA sample that matched with Christopher Zietek. That was significant evidence and that made a big difference to our case. We were able to show conversations that we recorded taking place in his home address about that document, the transportation of that document and, and get that DNA. So therefore, making that circle complete, if you like.

**PETER YORK** [00:21:01] People moving in and out of the country all the time will put documentation, phones, laptops into their baggage. You can't carry it through. So we'll work with Border Force to access the actual baggage themselves, and we can do a search of that to allow us to then try and enhance the intelligence and evidence picture. Mr. Zietek and his organisation were moving false passports in and out of the UK. It was crucial that the team could actually identify those in transit. You know, it was very successful. We were very reliant on the support with our partners there to actually be able to identify their actual suitcases once they're checked in through the system using the, the carrier system, the tags on the bags so we can identify them and then get hold of them before they're actually put into the aircraft.

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**ELLIE FYLNN** [00:21:44] How did you then go about tracing the passports, I guess, that they were talking about in their meetings?

**SARA JANE MOORE** [00:21:49] So the tracing of the passports was more the joint investigation team that we had. Strey wasn't just an NCA job, it ~~was~~ joint with the Dutch police and it was joint with the passport office. So we worked really closely with the passport office and Dutch police every day. Effectively, they were an extension of our case team. So if you've got that amount of information available to you, it makes the investigation a lot easier.

**PAUL GREEN** [00:22:12] We were able to recover a fair portion of the passports. Some of them we not only did we recover them, we delivered them ourselves on some occasions. So one of the benefits of the partnership working that we had was that we were able to affect what we call a controlled delivery, which is a tactic we use in other commodity based crimes, such as drug trafficking quite often. But this was almost unique, I think, in terms of FOG passports. So we were able to identify an application as it was in process with the help of HMPO. We would then, if we could identify who it was going to, could then assess what sort of criminal activity they engage in and what that looks like in terms of risk. We were able to assure HMPO that we would endeavour and commit resources to that investigation of that specific passport from end to end so that meant they processed the application, they cleared it at senior level within HMPO, and then we arranged for it to be delivered by an undercover officer to the person that was expecting it, which is another reason how we know that the identity donors are complicit because it goes to their address. And then we were able then to surveil that as it left their address sometimes through a couple of different stages. And ended up with usually with Beard, and then Beard would keep control of that until they receive payment and then release it to the customer.

[RECORDED TELEPHONE AUDIO]

**HM PASSPORT OFFICE OPERATOR** [00:23:37] Good afternoon. Thank you for calling the passport office you're speaking to (unknown name). How can I help you?

**BEARD:** Yeah, I wanna check the progress of my passport please.

**HM PASSPORT OFFICE OPERATOR:** Yeah, what's your reference number do you have one?

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**BEARD:** Yes. I do. 072450.

**EMERGENCY PASSPORT OFFICE OPERATOR:** Yep and just confirm your first and last name for me.

**BEARD:** It's Christopher Lloyd.

**HM PASSPORT OFFICE OPERATOR:** Yep that's great. Yeah. I stuck a fix on stopping the checks.

**BEARD:** Cause he's coming up the three weeks, uh, next week, Right?

**HM PASSPORT OFFICE OPERATOR:** Mhm. Right. It says there's a little note here, have you received a letter from us?

**BEARD:** No. Who's it been sent to me?

**HM PASSPORT OFFICE OPERATOR:** Yeah there would have been a letter sent on the 14th and what they've said there's a note if you do call please advise to put any concerns of please in writing to the address on letter. So they've sent you a letter out.

**BEARD:** Oh have they?

**HM PASSPORT OFFICE OPERATOR:** Yeah, on the 14th. Okay, so you should maybe received the letter today.

**BEARD:** Oh so that was Tuesday weren't it?

**EMERGENCY PASSPORT OFFICE OPERATOR:** Yeah I think it was probably sent second class though so if you don't received it today you'll probably received it tomorrow.

**BEARD:** And what does that say on in that letter?

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**HM PASSPORT OFFICE OPERATOR:** I don't. I don't know. We don't. I mean, I've not got on here. What it says on the letter.

**BEARD:** Oh, gotcha. Yeah. So on the 14th, which is Monday, I should have got it by now. I'll check when I go home.

**HM PASSPORT OFFICE OPERATOR:** Yeah, Check when you go home. Oh, right. And just whatever it said, just get back to the soon as you can.

**BEARD:** Okay? Oh, God bless you. Oh, Good.

**HM PASSPORT OFFICE OPERATOR:** Take care Sir.

[PHONE RING]

**HM PASSPORT OFFICE**

Thank you for calling Her Majesty's Passport Office advice line. My name is John. How can I help you today?

**BEARD:** Hello, John. Yeah, I just want to check the progress. I'll tell you why. Because I haven't received the texts. Right. And it's been just over two weeks. So I want to, because everyone one I know has received the texts before they got their passport. I just want to know, I've done check and pay right. So I just wanna check to see if you've received that. That's all I'm phoning for.

**HM PASSPORT OFFICE :** Right. What's your surname?

**BEARD:** Cordell.

**HM PASSPORT OFFICE :** And what's your postcode Mr Cordell?

**BEARD:** ME5 7PX.

**HM PASSPORT OFFICE :** Thank you. And what's your reference number? On their receipt from the check and send

**BEARD:** One, sorry. Zero one. So. Yes. One sec while I've got my glasses on. 017747.

**HM PASSPORT OFFICE :** So just confirm your full name and date of birth for security for me, please.

**BEARD:** Yeah. David. John. Cordell. 24th of July, 1985.

**HM PASSPORT OFFICE :** Yeah. They've received it in there only ten days ago, on the 16th of May. So it's just gone through standard checks. All right. Anything else I can do for you?

**BEARD:** No. It's just gone from standard checks?

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**HM PASSPORT OFFICE** :Yeah. Yeah, It's a three week non-guaranteed service. It's only been in there for ten days, so it's just going through standard checks, I suspect.

**BEARD**: All right. I appreciate that. Thank you very much.

**HM PASSPORT OFFICE** :Not a problem at all. All right. Bye bye.

**SARA JANE MOORE** [00:27:42] In policing you normally have to put in Data Protection Act requests to third party companies, as in the passport office. But because we had the JIT we could literally just send them an email and say we've been out on surveillance today. Beard has gone to this address. Can you look at this address? They would look at that address and say, Oh, a passport was delivered there last year. We then identify that's actually a FOG passport because Mr. Beard was quite good at going back to places he knew.

**PAUL GREEN** [00:28:10] It was a full time occupation virtually for him, at many stages in the investigation. He was always travelling around, meeting with people, submitting forms because the other thing that we know is that he completed many of the forms himself. We had handwriting analysis done. The trial dealt with 12 FOG passports. As part of the sentencing and there were a further 74 taken into consideration, 44 of those, the entire evidence was based on the handwriting analysis that Beard had completed both the applicant and the donor section of the forms.

**NARRATOR** [00:28:412] As well as handwriting analysis, the case officers also looked at fingerprints found on the passports. NCA officer, Nat Tidball, was the reporting fingerprint expert responsible for reviewing dozens of documents in order to try and connect them to Beard and Zietek.

**NAT TIDBALL** [00:28:59] There was an awful lot of work involved in this particular case over quite a number of years. I know this investigation went on for quite some time. So for us, we received multiple submissions, some of which in my experience were actually quite massive compared to the submissions received for other jobs. Items such as passports or passport applications would be sent to a forensic laboratory and the laboratory staff would be responsible for enhancing them, recovering any fingerprints that were found on those items and as part of the process, they would also photograph those fingerprints and it's those photographs that are then sent to us to examine as part of a fingerprint comparison process.

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**NARRATOR** [00:29:41] Fingerprint analysis is detailed, time consuming work, all part of the process to build an evidential case leading towards an eventual trial.

**NAT TIDBALL** [00:29:51] Primarily with this investigation, it was quite suspect led. So our investigators had a number of suspects that they were they were looking into. So it was very much a case of manually comparing the fingerprints of those suspects and when I said manually comparing, what I mean is using those fingerprints photographs that come from the laboratory and comparing that using an eyeglass to magnify those fingerprints and comparing the detail found against a fingerprint form so it's all very much in the manual process when we're conducting suspect comparisons.

**MATT**[00:30:26] Moving from what was an intelligence project to then you've got a particular person who you start focusing on with surveillance and whatever else is going on that gives you different leads, but also it enables you to put a face to the crime group so you've then got somebody to focus your attention on, then as it works on and he meets with Zietek and then we start identifying other people within that group. You've then got a whole sort of gallery of people that you know are responsible. It makes it a bit more personal in that sense because you're not just looking at generic tasking, you're actually looking at human beings doing the activity and watching what they're doing to then give yourself extra leads or take the case forwards.

**NAT TIDBALL** [00:31:05] Sometimes you don't know whether you're looking for a bit of finger, arm, whether it could actually be a plantar mark, which is a footprint. You don't know which way up the detail is that you're looking at. So it's often like looking for a needle in a haystack, which is why it really takes a certain kind of individual to be able to commit to dealing with the sizes of submissions that we dealt with in this particular case.

**NARRATOR** [00:31:26] After three years of meticulous work, Senior Investigating Officer Paul Green made the decision that the evidential basis was in place to finally arrest both men but the pandemic changed their plans at the last minute.

**PAUL GREEN** [00:31:43] Early 2020, we were looking at planning for an arrest phase on the operation Christopher Zietek bases himself between Spain and the UK, he regularly travelled spending usually no more than a couple of weeks at a time at each place.

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Unfortunately, with the advent of COVID, he left the UK and then decided that he was going to sit it out in Spain, which meant our arrest phase was put on hold. We were waiting for him to come back, although we also developed a strategy to seek an international arrest warrant, and then we would have picked him up in Spain and had him extradited back. But before that could come to fruition, he travelled back to the UK unexpectedly and we were able to put the strike phase as we like call it together in a very short space of time.

**SARA JANE MOORE** [00:32:32] We had effectively five days to put together the arrest phase, the arrests and the searches of premises and two of those days were over a weekend, which, you know, but that is quite challenging. So the run up to the arrest phase itself took 327 officers for the actual day of action. Then the trial, it was 10 weeks. It was listed for 11. When you're trying to get that amount of material together for seven defendants, as we had, albeit Mr. Beard went guilty at the start of trial. So it all had to be done before the Christmas break. Yeah, it was it was a challenge.

**PAUL GREEN** [00:33:14] The trial at Reading Crown Court earlier this year featured seven defendants. Beard pleaded guilty on day one, Zietek and Alan Thompson were found guilty. Certainly the most significant people for us were Beard and Zietek. Beard because of the application for FOG passports and Zietek because of that high level connection to serious criminals and fugitives, both in Spain and elsewhere.

**NARRATOR** [00:33:38]

Christopher Zietek and Anthony Beard were sentenced in May 2023 but at a hearing in August, the Court of Appeal ruled that the prison terms were unduly lenient and the judge increased them to a total of 22 years.

Zietek's prison term was raised from 8 to 12 years and Beard's from 6 years to 10 years and 2 months.

Alan Thompson, from Sutton in Surrey, was also found guilty in May, and sentenced for 3 years. He worked as Zietek's "gofor" driving him to criminal meetings and delivering FOG passports. A FOG passport and several photographs of FOG customers were found at his home. While Operation Strey focused on Beard and Zietek, the work led to the capture of a number of fugitives around the world. Beard admitted supplying over 70 FOGs used by other criminals, including the Irish crime boss, Christy Kinahan, the firearms trafficker

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Richard Burdett and Jamie Acourt who pleaded guilty to conspiracy to supply cannabis resin between January 2014 and February 2016. By identifying their FOG identities, the NCA worked with international partners to track them down, and bring them to justice.

**SEAN O'BRIEN** [00:34:48] There's been a few sort of key outcomes for HMPO. We formed a specialist team which focuses on the prevention and detection of passport fraud linked to serious and organised criminality, and this increased awareness has allowed investigators to kind of develop and explore their cases further, you know, to look out for serious and organised crime.

**NARRATOR** [00:35:09] Imogen Smart also works at the Passport Office as a Higher Counter Fraud Officer.

**IMOGEN SMART** [00:35:13] We've always had a really strong relationship with the NCA and other law enforcement partners, but Operation Strey took this partnership to a whole new level. The level of mutual trust and respect that we developed with the NCA is what made the success of Strey possible I think.

**SARA JANE MOORE** [00:35:27] The one thing I'll take from it is how many people have been involved in this investigation and like Matt says, yeah, there's the international angle. I've not known any other jobs to have as many intel checks, for instance, because if you imagine on a passport application form, you've got a name and address of an applicant, you've got a name and address a counter signatory, you've got a mobile number for the applicant. So all of these things that you have then got to go and investigate, it starts to make all of your checks maybe triple what it would be on a normal investigation. For me, it's definitely the biggest job that I've ever been involved in.

**IMOGEN SMART** [00:36:02] We produced over 200 witness statements and probably over 1000 exhibits for the NCA. We worked really closely with them and other law enforcement agencies to make sure that we had the best possible case for them to present before the court so that those committing the crime faced the full consequences of the law.

**PETER YORK** [00:36:19] It's absolutely fantastic for my officers to see the results that they are actually achieving. As I said at the outset, you know, we are kind of Mr. and Mrs. Grey. We don't get to see that. We don't want to be seen in the, you know, the public domain.

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We don't want to be seen in court. So when we hear those results it is absolutely fantastic elation because we know that all the hard work, months of planning, lots of stressful activity is come to fruition. And it's great that we can actually say that we've been part of it.

**SEAN O'BRIEN** [00:36:49] False identity documents fund and facilitate organised crime groups and enabled dangerous individuals in the UK to go undetected and this causes harm and misery to our communities. But thanks to the close working between the NCA and the HMPO these individuals have been brought to justice and we think that the success demonstrates the government's commitment to tackle and dismantle these organised crime groups who seek to exploit and threaten public safety for profit.

**MATT** [00:37:16] For me personally, it is the biggest investigation I've ever worked on. You might understand that the NCA has got an international liaison officer network which means there's officers posted all around the world. I mean something like 80 odd countries and, you know, in the lifetime of Strey, we pretty much spoke to all of them to have intelligence checks done overseas with partner agencies, host law enforcement. We would share intel with an ILO to say, well, this FOG-holder, we think might be in your country, and they would go and do border checks and whatever else they do in their own country to say, yes, that person is here or they have been here. And then since the trial, we've been asked to go and speak to people, deliver best practice. For me personally, yeh, it's been massive.

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