

# ARMS AND THE MAN

Is Viktor Bout a 'Merchant of Death', supplying weapons to terrorists, as the British and US governments claim, or an innocent victim of an international vendetta? The CIA certainly believes his scalp is worth \$500 million but Bout's friends tell **Christopher Silvester** a different story



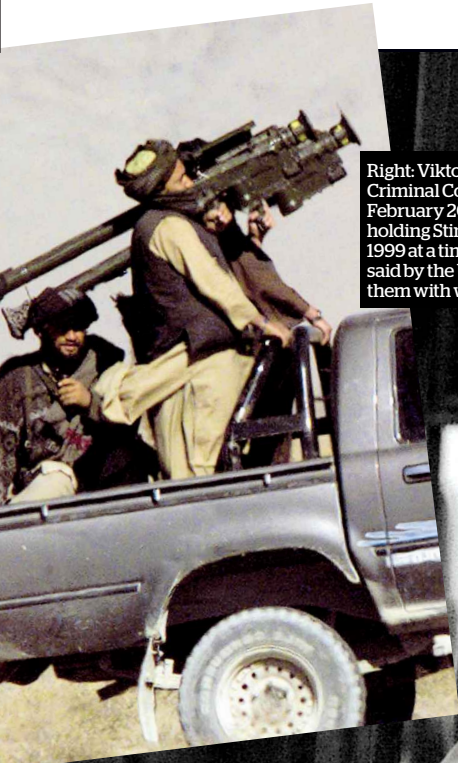
**B**y now, a Russian citizen named Viktor Bout (pronounced Boot) may have been extradited from Thailand, where he has been held since March 2008, to the United States, a country he has never visited before, for allegedly conspiring to smuggle arms to a group of Marxist guerrillas in Colombia, another country he has never visited. 'I think that if that happens none of Viktor's friends will ever see him again,' says one of them, Moscow businessman Mikhail Belozersky. Fifty commandos will guard Bout on the way to a Bangkok military airport, where a US government jet has been waiting on the Tarmac since late August, when a Thai court granted his extradition. The reason for the high-level security is that Bout has been on an American wanted list for several years. Once extradited, he will face other charges and, if convicted, will most likely die in a US jail.

The Americans want him so badly that they have offered a \$500 million package of assistance to the Thai government, including Black Hawk helicopters worth \$296 million and technical assistance and training for

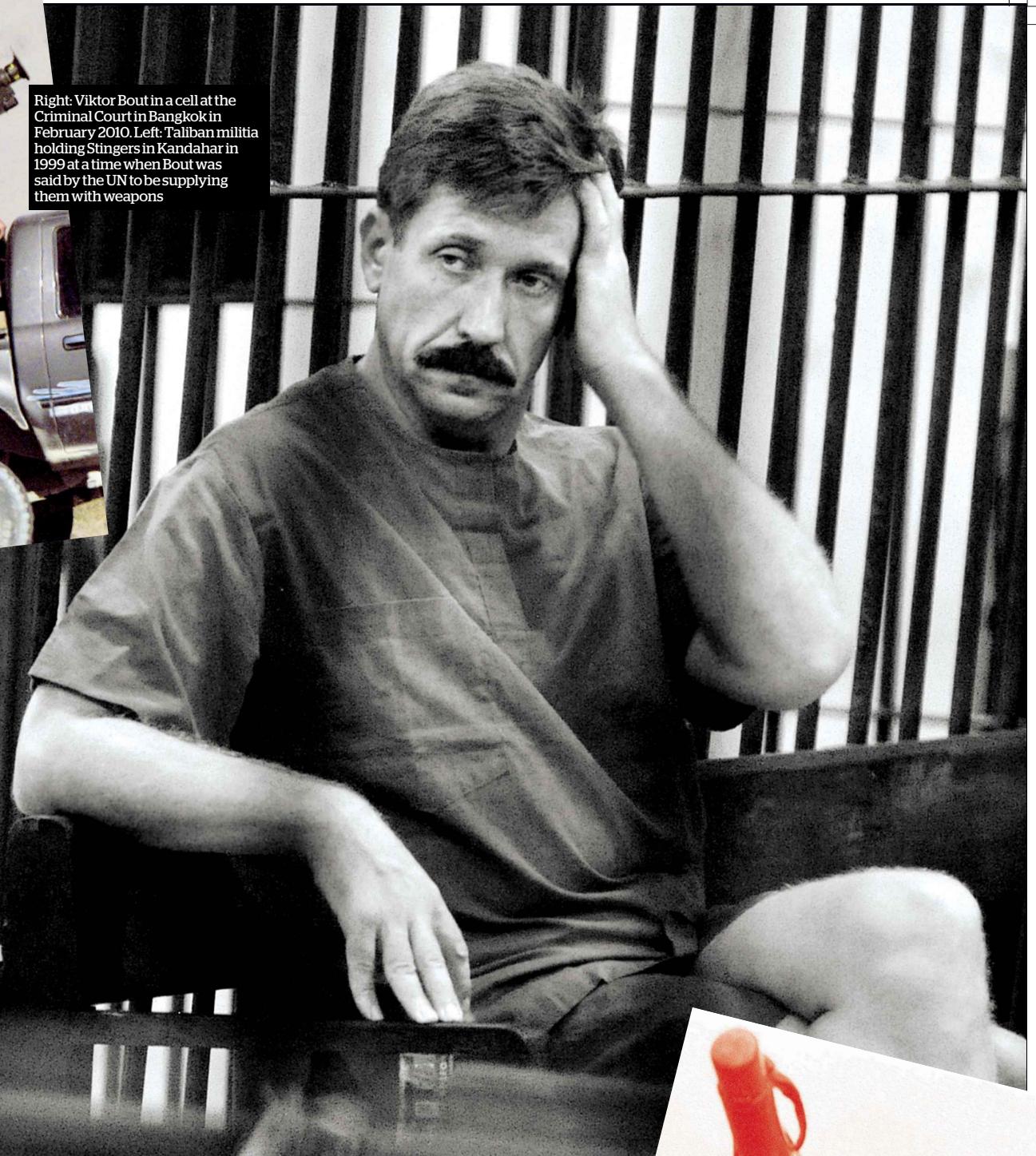
Thai police and special forces worth a further \$200 million. Nicknamed 'the Merchant of Death' after British Foreign Office minister Peter Hain referred to him as 'Africa's chief merchant of death' in 2002, Bout has been in the sights of American agencies for over a decade, while his moves have been monitored by British intelligence for just as long. In 2002, an MI6 plan to arrest him on arrival in Athens was thwarted when he was supposedly tipped off at the last minute by the CIA. MI6 agents sent an encrypted message to Whitehall after his plane took off from Moldova, but the plane was then diverted into mountainous terrain, vanishing from radar screens for 90 minutes before it landed in Athens without Bout on board. As one European intelligence official has since explained: 'There were only two intelligence services that could have decrypted the British transmission in so short a time: the Russians and the Americans.'

A tall, portly man with a Stalin moustache, Bout, branded 'one of the world's most prolific arms traffickers', was the model for Yuri Orlov, an unscrupulous arms trafficker played by Nicolas Cage in the 2005 Hollywood film *Lord of War*, while a Russian film,

ALAMY. REUTERS. LAIF. GETTY IMAGES



Right: Viktor Bout in a cell at the Criminal Court in Bangkok in February 2010. Left: Taliban militia holding Stingers in Kandahar in 1999 at a time when Bout was said by the UN to be supplying them with weapons



Left: Viktor Bout (left) in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2001. Right: a Colombian soldier demonstrates a weapon confiscated from FARC, 2002





Below: Viktor Bout's wife Alla speaking at a press conference about her husband's extradition in Moscow in September



Left: Mikhail Belozersky. Right: Richard Chichakli with Viktor Bout in Moscow, 2007

Kandahar, was based on an incident in 1995 when one of Bout's planes was seized by the Taliban in Afghanistan.

**B**ut what exactly is his value to the Americans? Douglas Farah, a former reporter and security consultant who has written a book about Bout called *Merchant of Death: Money, Guns, Planes, and the Man Who Makes War Possible*, has speculated about what he could offer the US authorities in a plea bargain. 'He could tell a great deal about the Russian-led networks that continue to arm jihadi movements in Somalia and Yemen. It is likely he also knows how the Russian military intelligence and arms structure works, including its interests from Iran to Venezuela and elsewhere. His knowledge base, although he is only 43, goes back more than two decades and possibly extends to the heart of Russian campaigns around the globe.'

'Usually you'd expect these kinds of activities to affect the person, both outwardly and inwardly,' Belozersky told an interviewer for the global TV network *Russia Today* in 2008. 'I would think a person who brings death to people should look somewhat different from ordinary people. However, there was nothing of the kind in Viktor.'

Depending on which source one chooses to believe, Bout was born in 1967, in Tajikistan (according to his USSR passport) or Turkmenistan (his own claim in a radio interview) or Uzbekistan (*The Guardian*), or Ukraine (the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee). His father was an administrator and his mother worked in accounting. Bout went to Moscow, where he studied economics and trained as a military interpreter, learning to speak at least five languages, after which he served as a lieutenant in the Russian air force, partly in Mozambique. While in Angola, he met and fell in love with a married Russian woman called Alla. He wooed her with poems of his own composition. After

her divorce, the couple married and had a daughter Elizabeth, who is now a teenager and lives in Spain, while Alla lives in Moscow and frequently visits her husband in his Thai prison.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Bout found himself stranded in Angola, where he decided to go into the aviation cargo business, purchasing three Antonov An-12 aircraft for \$120,000. His fleet business in the 1990s, operating through a complex network of companies in different countries, was based in Ostend, Belgium, and later in Sharjah, one of the Gulf states belonging to the United Arab Emirates, where his brother Sergei joined as operations manager. From the Sharjah hub his planes ferried frozen chickens and fresh vegetables to mining camps, gladioli from South Africa to Dubai, Ikea furniture into the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and the mineral coltan, a component in electronic technology, from the Congo to East Africa. At the same time, so UN investigators and Western intelligence agencies allege, his planes carried weapons from the CIS and Eastern Europe to rebel groups in sub-Saharan Africa in contravention of UN sanctions, sometimes in return for payment in blood diamonds. He supplied arms to the legitimate government in Afghanistan and allegedly to that country's Northern Alliance of warlords and later to the Taliban prior to 9/11. The Americans have made persistent efforts to link his aircraft to al-Qaeda.

In 2000, a UN report on sanctions busting and arms smuggling in Africa named Bout as a gun runner, along with Richard Chichakli, a Syrian-born naturalised US citizen, who had been commercial director of the Sharjah International Airport Free Zone.

Bout became an international public enemy. It has been alleged that during the 'second Congo war' (2000-2002) Bout supplied weapons to more than 20 armed groups from eight states involved in the conflict. In addition to all this, Bout has said that his mother wept when she read a newspaper report claiming he was a major in the KGB.

A costly Belgian investigation of Bout for alleged money laundering, as well as arms trafficking, launched in 2002, had initially resulted in an arrest warrant being issued by a Belgian judge. This expired under a statute of limitation in 2007 after no evidence was submitted to the court. Yet despite this and despite Bout being under investigation in the US, some of his companies still worked for the UK Ministry of Defence, flying armoured vehicles and troops to Kosovo, and for the Pentagon, supplying operations in Iraq and transporting personnel to Afghanistan.

'If you arrest every taxi driver who gave a ride to some bad person, there won't be any taxi drivers left in the streets,' Bout told the Russian business newspaper *Kommersant* in 2008. 'I am a shipper. I get an order, I get paid. I send a request, get an approval, instruct my crew, the crew comes in, loads the aircraft, gets the shipping papers, clears Customs. All these tales about illegal flights are not supported with anything. I am sorry, everyone in the transport business ships weapons if it is not an illegal cargo, if the papers meet all regulations... What sanctions did I break? Where's the evidence? Nobody has presented any data.'

Since I cannot speak with Bout, I contacted his friend Chichakli, whom the US authorities believe is the financial mastermind of Bout's alleged arms trafficking empire. Chichakli was

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VIKTOR BOUT

working as an accountant in Texas when the US government decided to target him in an investigation of Bout in 2002. In 2005 he was 'designated' by the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), a subsidiary of the US Treasury, which meant that all his assets in America were frozen and his property confiscated and sold. Bout had already been designated and, according to an informant, was prevented from receiving \$6 billion in profits as a result, a figure that Chichakli dismisses as fantasy. The US press routinely describes Chichakli as having 'on the run' since 2005. But although Chichakli did indeed leave the States, because he 'couldn't buy a hamburger' there, no indictment had been filed against him until earlier this year when he was indicted on various charges alongside Bout.

**C**hichakli is an easy man to contact. He has a website refuting the various allegations against him, with relevant documents on display, and he has posted several videos on YouTube in which he demonstrates the flaws in the US government's case against him. Send him an email and he responds within hours. I interviewed him on his mobile phone in Russia - he currently lives in Moscow - and he methodically explained the twists and turns of the Bout saga as he sees them.

'I have known Victor Bout for 16 years,' he told me. 'I know his family, I ate in his house, I slept in his bed, I know his daughter, his wife, his mother. I was the only foreign man at the funeral of his father among 20 people, all of them Russian.' He tells me he will talk to Alla Bout about hiring a US lawyer for Viktor. 'I'm not sure how we are going to pay for it,' he continues. 'This battle in Thailand has cost hundreds of thousands, if not close to a million dollars, so far, and without his brother [Sergei], this man does not control a dime. I say he is broke. I said that in 2001 and, trust me, if I hadn't given him a credit card he would not have been able to stay alive or stay the same weight. I got a credit card with his name and his wife's name on it to buy what they needed. He rebuilt his life a little bit, but he's not the six-billion-dollar man.'

Although Bout's US assets were frozen in 2004, he remained at liberty in Russia, where the authorities refused to admit his complicity in arms trafficking. Some say that he is valuable to the Russian military and intelligence apparatus as a sort of junkyard dog. So how could the Americans bring him down?

The US Drug Enforcement Administration devised a strategy, which they first used to ensnare Syrian-born arms dealer Monzer al-Kassar. Undercover DEA operatives posed

as representatives of FARC, the Colombian Marxist guerrilla group, seeking surface-to-air missiles and grenade launchers, and met with al-Kassar in Spain. Since FARC is classified as a terrorist organisation by the US and as the missiles might be used to attack American helicopters, the US authorities were able to issue an arrest warrant. Six months later, exactly the same fiction would be used to entrap Bout. 'When we first started talking about going after Bout, there was heated dialogue among my agents over whether we should use the same scenario we did for al-Kassar,' former DEA operations chief Michael Braun has said. 'I was convinced that guys like Bout and al-Kassar have enormous egos and simply couldn't believe that the US would use the same gambit twice.'

Undercover DEA operatives began negotiating with Andrew Smulian, a 48-year-old British-born, military-trained pilot who had worked for one of Bout's companies, to buy surface-to-air missiles as well as helicopters at a series of meetings in the Netherlands, Antilles, Denmark and Romania. Smulian spoke with Bout in a series of phone calls that were monitored and recorded, and emails were sent from a newly created Gmail address to a bogus FARC email address agreeing the date for a meeting in Thailand. The Gmail account was created under the subscriber name 'Viktor But', who has a Moscow address and a telephone number that was the same as the one used to communicate with Smulian in Romania. The emails are described in the US indictment, but can the US prosecutor prove that it was Bout who actually sent them? Bout has insisted that the DEA case against him is entirely a matter of *odna babka skazala*, a Russian proverb meaning 'an old lady said' - in other words, hearsay and gossip.

In March 2008, Bout travelled to Thailand in the company of Belozersky. They were friends who swam and trained together at the same Moscow fitness club. Belozersky, who

had known Bout for a little over three years, runs a foundation providing aid to law enforcement and armed forces veterans living on meagre Russian state pensions. He says that Bout participated in its charitable activities. According to Belozersky, Bout had given up the air cargo business entirely in the last few years. Instead, he had been involved with the construction industry in Russia and had also tried to start a business repairing

light aircraft. 'As for psychology,' says Belozersky, 'he's an absolutely ordinary man, he rarely drinks, he loves his family very much.' Belozersky also knew Smulian. Early in 2008, Belozersky told *Russia Today*, Smulian had approached his ex-employer Bout with a business proposition. He said he knew a Danish company that wanted to export machinery for the manufacture of disposable needles and syringes in Russia, some of which were to be sent as aid to Africa. Bout told Belozersky, who offered to provide the site and recruit the manpower. Either this is an elaborate cover story for the FARC deal or Smulian had misled Bout and Belozersky. After a brief exchange with Smulian in the lobby of the Bangkok Sofitel on 6 March 2008, Bout and Belozersky were arrested by DEA agents, though interestingly Belozersky was released and told to leave for home without delay. Smulian is something of a figure of mystery - there are no images of him on the internet, but he is remembered as a 'nice guy' on a networking site for pilots. He was subsequently arrested and is expected

to give evidence against Bout as part of a plea-bargain arrangement.

For the past two and a half years Bout has been languishing in a top-security Thai jail while his lawyer has fought the extradition bid and the Russian government has lobbied for his release. At first, the Thai courts found in his favour, on the grounds that he had not committed any crime on Thai soil, but this was overturned on appeal as

the US government exerted immense political and diplomatic pressure - and dangled that \$500 million carrot under the Thai government's nose.

For his part, Bout may remember what he told an interviewer back in 2003: 'My clients [are] the governments. I keep my mouth shut. If I told you everything I'd get the red hole right here.' He pointed to his forehead.



Above: Nicolas Cage plays a character modelled on Bout in *Lord of War* (2005)

**UNDERCOVER  
DEA OPERATIVES  
POSED AS  
REPRESENTATIVES  
OF FARC, THE  
COLOMBIAN  
MARXIST  
GUERRILLA GROUP,  
SEEKING GRENADE  
LAUNCHERS**