



The experience with Jose Natividad "Chepe" Luna -- the drug trafficker who had eluded a giant dragnet in 2004 -- had demonstrated that the leaks from the National Police of El Salvador (PNC) were continuous and, in general, all the history of the contraband in the west had an extensive element of police and district attorney collusion. With that in mind, the Special Antinarcotics Group (GEAN) decided to

send the newest police to the stations of La Union and San Miguel to collect intelligence about the movement of drugs and to begin assembling cases against the transporters. Thus was born Operation Chameleon.

Agent 1, one of the GEAN investigators who participated in Operation Chameleon, explained the origins of the name: "The idea was to change what had been there and adapt to the terrain to be able to function, to really be able to obtain information; it was known that the PNC there worked with the drug traffickers."

From the moment the GEAN arrived in Santa Rosa de Lima and to El Tamarindo, one of the beaches suspected of receiving cocaine shipments, they could see the corruption in the police and the politicians in the area.

Oscar Rene Molina Manzanares, one of the members of Los Perrones, who was convicted in 2010 of money laundering, was one of the most familiar names in the area.

**SEE ALSO:** Coverage of the Perrones

"He threw the parties in El Tamarindo," Agent 1 said. "For example, I have seen the checks he used to finance local festivals [1] in the Santa Rosa sector of El Tamarindo. There were letters that some mayors sent to this man asking for him to help them throw these parties. The guy was loved. He had money and brought

musical groups, the expensive groups from Mexico...The parties were courtesy of Mr. Molina Manzanares."

The parties, say the police, not only served to win supporters and buy politicians, but they were also the perfect meeting point for narcotraffickers: "We began to see that expensive cars arrived in the middle of the parties and that [the same] people [we] profiled met in an El Tamarindo hotel to plan things," Agent 1 explained. "This was something that interested the DEA, that we might discover if Mexicans came to these parties."

## Hunting Daniel Quezada



While lawyers and investigators were failing to find properties and commercial holdings on the beaches connected to traffickers, a special unit of the GEAN -- between 15 and 20 agents -- began to comb police stations close to the drop off points. The Antinarcotics Division (DAN), the head of San Miguel regional antinarcotics, and Inspector Darwin Serrano Lemus, alias "Makey," were

all part of the operation.

One of the first things the GEAN did was to send agents from the DAN's "group of field intelligence" to El Tamarindo. The group's job was to verify if the Hotel Playas Negras, a beachfront location and the property of Daniel Quezada -- another of the leaders of Los Perrones -- was being used to receive cocaine from Nicaragua. In addition to placing three specialized agents in the police station of the area, the GEAN sent other undercover field agents into the area. They posed as motorists, street vendors, or businessmen. They also did inspections of maritime routes and of beaches, houses, and stores on isolated islands and islets in the Gulf of Fonseca. [2]

On April 7, 2008, Sergeant Rudis Mauricio Santos Vasquez wrote a report for his boss, Sub inspector Cabrera Soriano, in which he summarized their actions following almost a year of investigations: "I left here at 14:00 hours for the Gulf of Fonseca with the intention to intercept boats and glean information about firearms, drugs, and other illicit contraband."

That same day, agents under the command of Sergeant Santos Vasquez contacted one of the informants of Operation Chameleon, who told them the

story of Pablo Quezada, MS13 gangster and one of the principal intermediaries for receiving cocaine shipments in El Tamarindo.

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The PNC learned later that the profile of Pablo Quezada was very common in the east: a gangster wanted in the United States for serious offenses -- homicide in his case -- who returned to their home country seeking refuge and took advantage of the skills they learned on the east coast of the United States to begin small trafficking or drug dealing operations.

The GEAN informant, who the investigators called "Beto," had this to say about Pablo Quezada:

He had grown up in Virginia, and about two years ago he and his two brothers were involved in a homicide. One of his brothers is in prison in the United States, and he and the other fled to El Salvador, establishing themselves in El Tamarindo. Six months later, they found out Interpol was looking for them, and they decided to leave for Nicaragua, where they stayed for about six months. There they made contact with people that gave them cocaine to take to El Salvador. They made three trips and unloaded the drugs in front of Hotel Playas Negras.

### **Police, Protection, and Leaks**

Beto confirmed in 2008 various pieces of information the PNC had been hearing since 2006 from other informants about drug trafficking on the beaches of La Union and the participation of police who protected these traffickers. Beto also reinforced or confirmed things another informant, a woman, had begun telling the PNC in 2006. The most relevant: the transfer was important, included suppliers in Colombia, traveled by boat and was unloaded into planes in a runway in El Jaguey, [3] in the eastern part of El Salvador, and had police protection from the stations near the runway and in Playas Negras. [4]

Beto also confirmed that the agents assigned to the station in El Tamarindo, near the hotel, worked for Daniel Quezada, the brother of the gang member Pablo Quezada.

"This man [Daniel Quezada] presumably has the police of the area on his side and is the one in control there," Beto said.

Beto explained that Quezada was a fisherman in the 1990s who began to acquire properties from 2000 onwards. He then got control of the police.

Specifically, Beto said that: "Vehicles of the PNC, and the police facilitated and certainly gave coverage to the disembarkations" at Playas Negras.

In his April 2008 report, Sergeant Santos Vasquez cited another informant who gave more details of the participation of agents in El Tamarindo, but this time not in the Hotel Playas Negras: "The 28 of March, [the witness] saw a boat that was transporting drugs docked in front of the police station on the beach where the police were unloading the packages; they were trafficking drugs." [5]

Agent 1 explained that all the information the field teams gathered between 2007 and 2008 served as the basis for subsequent investigations into Los Perrones and corrupt police. Chameleon, says Agent 1, confronted serious obstacles from the beginning, mainly concerning PNC leaks, which put at risk the necessary secrecy with which this type of operation typically functions.

The leaks were numerous and came from those who were not part of the plan. In San Miguel [6] and at the beach, some suspected the police had tinkered with the regular rotation. Little by little, according to reports by the GEAN, police outside of the loop in San Miguel began to sound the alarm that in El Tamarindo, the DAN and the GEAN controlled the police station. The reaction of the narcos was immediate.

"The first incident was at this beach when a large pick-up that belonged to the narcos pulled up alongside a patrol the narcos knew was the DAN, that is, they were not the police with whom they had been working. Then they opened fire," says one report on Operation Chameleon.

But leaks also came from the leadership.

"In the reports we were receiving, it was clear in the east that there were heads of investigation, officials moving in the drug traffickers' vehicles, all this had an effect," said Agent 1. "By God, if the information they had was that the same agents were guarding the shipments; the drug traffickers had bought the police."

The doubts of the GEAN -- or at least, of some officials -- grew around Inspector Makey, an official vetted by the DEA and selected to receive an advanced course in investigation with United States instructors in 2007. [7] The rumors connecting this official grew as the operation moved ahead. In one report, the GEAN said they had received tips about the participation of Makey in the sale of cocaine in Santa Rosa de Lima and in the protection of vehicles loaded with drugs. Later the attorney general would bring charges of drug trafficking against a junior employee of Makey named Jose Contreras Mejia, alias "Tanque."

The PNC captured Tanque on April 7 of 2008 after confiscating \$23,000 he was trying to take through the border crossing at La Hachadura, in the Ahuachapan province, in the west of El Salvador, to buy three kilos of cocaine in Guatemala. [8] Just over one year later, in May 2009, the attorney general offered a deal: his liberty in exchange for information. Tanque remained a free man.

Makey, mentioned in a journalistic investigation as one of those responsible for the failure of Operation Chameleon, later denied publishing a letter alleging he was the object of political and media persecution. In a meeting with the reporters conducting the investigation linking him with drug traffickers, Makey issued a warning: "Be careful this doesn't become a Mexico-like situation; in Mexico the journalists play police, and when the police meddle with the narcos they end up dead." [9]

### **The Misery of Scant Results**

The final assessment of the operation does not provoke heartache among the agents that participated or knew of it. Both Agent 1 and Agent 2, another of the investigators that participated in Chameleon, recognized that it gave them more information about the routes and the drug traffickers in the east than anything they had done prior. Judge Jorge Gonzalez, [10] of the Specialized Court of San Miguel, brought charges against both Daniel Quezada and Juan Colorado, who also formed part of the structure of the Perrones, and recognized that the investigation that helped these cases get made was supported, "through the accumulative acts of the investigation... of plan Chameleon deployed by the DAN."

In one of the resolutions he signed against Daniel Quezada, Judge Gonzalez made a special request of the attorney general: in light of the information they established as part of the investigation, he asked the attorney general's office to continue investigating the links between drug traffickers and the PNC in El Tamarindo, Conchagua, Playas Negras, El Jaguey, Los Ranchos, and other neighboring areas.



Four years later and owing to the judicial plea, Judge Gonzalez confirmed that the Inspector General, under the brief direction of Inspector Zaira Navas, opened

administrative records to investigate these accusations. But this archive, as with others referring to drug trafficking, was closed by orders of General David Munguia Payes, then minister of security in the administration of President Mauricio Funes.

While it started some investigations, the operation did nothing to address "jealous institutions" [11] and leaks from the PNC; it also led to the death of an undercover agent: Walter Nahun Ayala Castillo.

Agent Nahun Ayala, who had made a name in the DAN thanks to various arrests of drug dealers and was called in 2008 to work undercover in Operation Chameleon, was shot dead in El Tamarindo. It was a strange death, one of his colleagues said.

"I wouldn't call it revenge, but another form of scaring the staff, to say: it stops here!" the colleague added. "What more of a message could they send to the personnel [that were investigating the people of Daniel Quezada]?"

Agent 1 said it was in El Tamarindo during the operation that many began to suspect that police commanders in San Miguel were beginning to act as intermediaries for Daniel Quezada. Agent Nahun Ayala -- who handled informants, some of whom spoke to him about cocaine distribution in that area -- may have found out too much.

One day, an informant provided a tip that a small drug cargo would be departing from Playas Negras. Nahun Ayala told his support team he was going back to Daniel Quezada's territory to find the drugs. No one arrived to help him. There, in the sticky dirt paths that separate the beach from the salted village woods, a group of assassins were waiting for him.

"But the team heard nothing, and the team was there. It was premeditated," Agent 1 said.

The PNC never opened an internal investigation into the homicide.

Romeo, a collaborator of Reynerio Flores Lazo, one of the leaders of Los Perrones, said that he had heard Daniel Quezada had a clandestine grave in El Tamarindo: "In Santa Rosa, they always said this man, the policeman [Ayala], is buried there."

*\* This is a shortened version of an investigation by the Salvadoran journalist Hector Silva. The contents are part of a soon to be released book entitled: "The Infiltrators: the story of corruption in the police of El Salvador." This is the third*

*article of a five-part series on police corruption in El Salvador. See whole series here.*

*Silva is a journalist who worked for 15 years in La Prensa Grafica of El Salvador. Since 2012, he has been a fellow at the Center for Latin American and Latino Studies at American University. For additional information, please contact the author by email .*

## **Footnotes**

[1] The patronage festivals, done to honor the patron or patroness of the Catholic saint of the cities and towns, were organized and financed largely by the mayors. In the Salvadoran political tradition these events were very important to collect money and seek votes.

[2] One of the agents that participated in Operation Chameleon facilitated access to a good quantity of the police dispatches and reports that GEAN gathered in the area in 2008.

[3] This runway served the Armed Forces during the war for supply operations and to watch the routes that in the first decade of the 21st century was used by the narcos and in the 1980s by guerrillas to supply arms. See the interview with Jose Luis Tobar Prieto, head of the DAN, El Diario Hoy, June 1997.

[4] GEAN report Ref. 06-SASGEAN7-06-114-UEDNA7-09, added to the judicial investigation for trafficking of drugs against Daniel Quezada in the Specialized Court of San Miguel.

[5] Testimony of sergeant Rudis Mauricio Santos Vasquez, annexed to open judicial investigation against Daniel Quezada in the Specialized Court of San Miguel.

[6] Although the strategic command and tactics of GEAN and of Operation Chameleon functioned in San Salvador, the special ops and undercover agents supported the regional DAN of San Miguel, normally charged with operations in the western area.

[7] Cable 06SanSalvador851, sent to the embassy informing about personnel of the PNC approved by the DEA and taken to received specialized training.

[8] See "Narcotraficantes infiltrant a la PNC," El Faro, 11 May 2009.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Interview with the author, August 2012.

[11] Quote from Agent 1.

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