

A drug-running Goliath

Pilot describes huge operation led by 'El Chapo'

BY JOHN RILEY

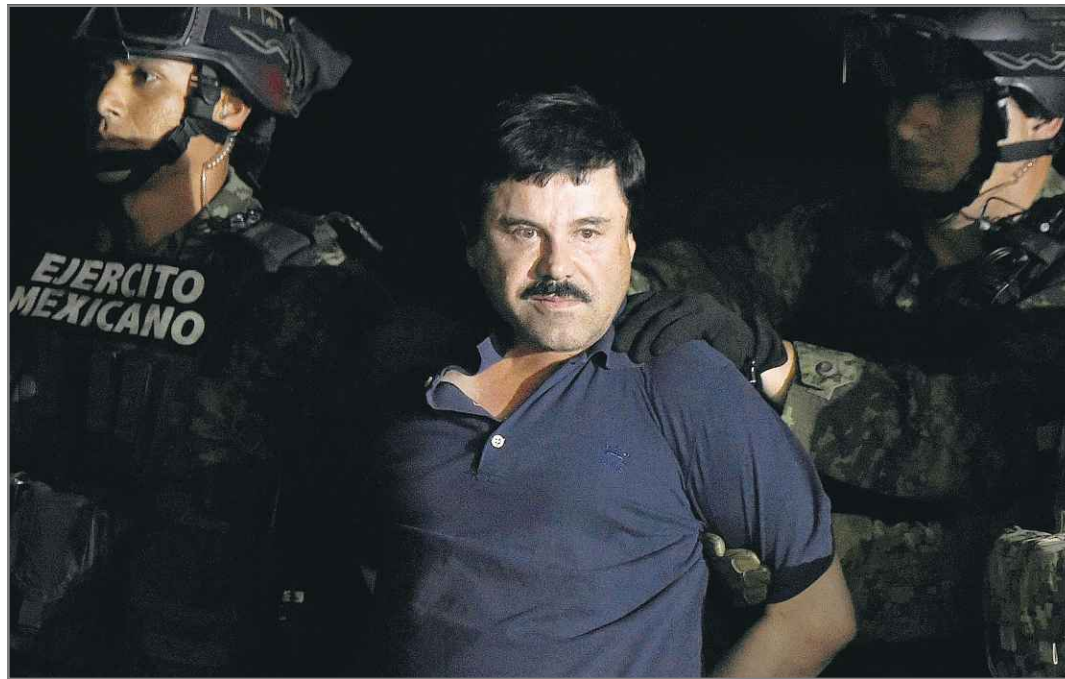
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The planes were “girls.” The jet fuel was “vino.” The money was “documents.” The cocaine was “shirts.” A whistle meant “all clear.” And to the Colombian suppliers who flew scores of loads to Mexico’s Sinaloa Cartel in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzman Loera was always “mi papa.”

The codes were mandatory radio protocol as the cartel blossomed into a drug-running Goliath, according to testimony Monday at Guzman’s Brooklyn federal court trafficking trial from ex-aide Miguel Angel Martinez Martinez, who oversaw 10 or more flights at a time from Colombia when he was told to “organize a party.”

“Mr. Guzman told me to always be very careful, because the American government could be listening to our radio conversations,” Martinez told jurors as the trial of the accused kingpin entered its third week.

Guzman, 58, a near-legendary figure who twice escaped from Mexican prisons, was extradited last year to face charges that he was responsible for trafficking \$14 billion in cocaine into the



Suspected drug kingpin Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzman Loera is recaptured by Mexico police in 2016.

United States over 25 years.

Martinez, the second informant to testify, identified Guzman as the “boss” of the trafficking operation, tied him to millions in police bribes, and said he worked on dozens of drug deals for Guzman from 1986 to 1998, first as a pilot and then as chief contact with Colombian cartels in Medellin, Cali and Bogota.

Guzman watched him intently as he entered court, and the two men’s eyes met when Martinez — dressed in street clothes — was asked to identify his ex-

boss. Sketch artists were ordered to not portray his face by U.S. District Judge Brian Cogan because of security concerns.

Martinez said he received flight training in the U.S. and was using his piloting skills to smuggle electronics when he was recruited by Guzman to begin piloting or guiding cocaine flights from Colombia to rural Mexican airstrips where local police had been paid off.

He described harrowing early flights where planes crash-landed on the airstrips after run-

ning out of gas, and a trip to Los Angeles with Guzman to buy two planes for \$3 million. He said his own flying career ended when he broke a propeller on a bad landing with the boss and a bodyguard on board.

“Mr. Guzman told me I was a really bad pilot,” Martinez said, but gave him a job running operations in Mexico City and organizing regular Colombian shipments — an estimated 150 to 200 flights from 1987 to 1991 carrying between 650 to 800 kilos of cocaine each, with Guzman getting

a 45 percent share in return for smuggling it into the U.S.

Like the government’s first cooperating witness, Jesus “Rey” Zambada Garcia, who testified last week, Martinez said police corruption was central to Guzman’s operation, testifying that a Mexico City federal official in charge of the attorney general’s police received two or three bribes of \$10 million.

“He told him everything,” Martinez said. “If there was an investigation against him or his people. Locating people Mr. Guzman was looking for. Where Mr. Guzman could be safe. What he should do to be safe.”

In 1991, Martinez said, after the U.S. set up a base to intercept drug planes from Colombia to Mexico, the cocaine supply chain shifted to the water. Using merchant ships and tuna and shrimp boats, he said, Colombian ships would transfer their loads to Guzman’s fleet in international waters, and he would bring the loads from offshore to oceanfront property he owned using Zodiac boats.

That system, he said, delivered 25 to 30 tons a year for trafficking into the United States. From the time he began working for Guzman until 1993, he said, the drug organization went from about 20 workers to 200, ranging from boat captains and plane pilots to money launderers, accountants and gunmen.

“It was like a kind of corporation,” Martinez testified. His testimony will continue Tuesday.

FDA: Now OK to eat properly labeled romaine

The Associated Press

It’s OK to eat some romaine lettuce again, U.S. health officials said. Just check the label.

The Food and Drug Administration narrowed its blanket warning from last week, when it said people shouldn’t eat any type of romaine because of an E. coli outbreak. The agency said Monday that romaine recently harvested in Arizona, Florida, Mexico and California’s Imperial Valley is OK to eat. It says romaine from those places wasn’t yet shipping when the illnesses began.

It says the tainted romaine appears to have come from the Cen-

tral Coast region of California.

The produce industry agreed to start putting harvest dates and regions on labels. For romaine that doesn’t come in packaging, grocers and retailers are being asked to post the information by the register.

The FDA warned Americans not to eat romaine that isn’t labeled with that information, and it said it had commitments from the industry that such labeling will become standard for romaine. It also noted hydroponically grown romaine and romaine grown in greenhouses aren’t implicated in the outbreak.

The labeling arrangement

was worked out as the produce industry called on the FDA to narrow the scope of its warning so it wouldn’t have to waste freshly harvested romaine. An industry group said people can expect to start seeing labels as early as this week. It noted the labels are voluntary, and that it will monitor whether to expand the measure to other leafy greens and produce.

The FDA still hasn’t identified a source of contamination in the latest outbreak. There have been no reported deaths, but health officials say 43 people in 12 states have been sickened. Twenty-two people in Canada were also sickened.



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