

Gone-to-Ground: Tunneling into America – SA Michael Eschimi

Sean Fearn: Good day everyone and welcome. On behalf of all of us on the DEA Museum staff, I want to welcome you today as we continue on with the Museum's Spring Lecture Series. My name is Sean Fearn. On behalf of all of us on the Museum staff a special welcome too to those who are joining us live watching on the internet from around the world and indeed those who might be watching this after the fact. All our lectures are available on the Museum's website. As a courtesy, if you wouldn't mind both to your fellow audience members as well as to our speaker this morning, if I could ask you to turn cell phones, Blackberries, pagers, iPhones to vibrate, we certainly would appreciate it.

This morning we're going to be talking about drug tunnels, specifically tunnels that cross between the United States border and Mexico, but also tunnels that have been found across the border with Canada. Our speaker today is going to talk about one in particular, the first tunnel that was discovered after September 11th, 2001. It's certainly not the only tunnel ever found. Because we are the DEA museum and have artifacts in our collection, I'll point out on stage right there a section of a cross border drug tunnel the DEA discovered down on the U.S.-Mexico border. And, the photographs that are here in the auditorium around you are also from cases the DEA has made against these operators, these developers of these tunnels.

We're going to hear a lot more about that this morning from Special Agent Mike Eschimi. Special Agent Eschimi started his career with DEA in 1995. After graduating from the Academy, his first post of duty was to Carlsbad, near San Diego, California, where he worked in the then meth capital of America - Vista, California. In 2000, he transferred here to the Washington field division where he worked in a high-intensity drug task force group based in Greenbelt, Maryland. Working undercover, he targeted college-aged Middle Eastern Ecstasy traffickers and their Dutch sources of supply.

In late 2001, Mike was selected for a foreign tour in Tijuana, Mexico where he lived and worked for two years finding drug tunnels and helping bring down the Arellano-Felix Cartel. He jumped back across the border in late 2003 to the San Ysidro Resident Office, was promoted two years later to Group Supervisor in San Diego, where he ran the Mobile Enforcement Task Force. He was rotated here into Headquarters in 2010 working first at our OCDEFT Fusion Center, then promoted to the GS-15 level where he currently serves as Executive Assistant to Mr. Thomas Harrigan, who is DEA's Deputy Administrator and Chief of Operations. I understand, Mike, on good sources, that that includes making him coffee and washing his car - important duties.

Prior to DEA, I should mention Special Agent Eschimi was a captain in the United States Marine Corps and is a graduate of the George Washington University. Please welcome our guest speaker this morning, Special Agent Mike Eschimi.

Special Agent Michael Eschimi: Thank you all, you're all clapping, I haven't said anything yet. I should probably go home right now. But, I'm going to tell you a story today about four Mexican men. Three of them are Mexican cops, one of them is a Mexican businessman, well respected, very well off. Of the three cops, two of them are absolute heroes. They put their life on the line every day and they risked everything they had, personally and professionally, to do the right thing. One of them is a despicable coward. He spent his life killing people, torturing people and hiding behind the badge. The businessman may be the worst of all. Here's a guy who profited off the misery of others and didn't even think he was doing anything wrong.

Now, I'm going to talk about these four Mexican men and I'm going to talk about the very first tunnel that was found after 9/11. But, their story actually starts on 9/11 and that's where I'm going to start today, because the events of that Tuesday in September affected them just as much as it affected everybody in this room. So, I'm going to take you back to a Tuesday in September in 2001. Just before 6:00, a man named Mohamed Atta walks into Logan Airport in Boston and he clears through security and he boards a plane, American 11. At 8:14 in the morning, he and four of his compadres take

American 11. They kill two flight attendants, they slash the throat of a passenger who was trying to keep them from getting into the cockpit, they sprayed mace or pepper spray into the cabin to keep all the passengers back; and they took that plane. At 8:46 in the morning, Mohamed Atta drove that plane directly into the North Tower of the World Trade Center.

At that exact time, 8:46, United 175 was taken. A short time later, 175 like a magic trick disappears into the South Tower. The folks in those buildings had two choices -- burn or jump. There was another plane, United 93, and the passengers on that plane they fought back, they knew what was going on by now; it was a little bit later, almost an hour. The black box was recovered and you can hear the fight that took place. Passengers huddled in the back, they got together, they made a plan and they rushed the cockpit to seize the plane back from the terrorists that were on board that plane.

The air track shows the plane banked hard to the left, hard to the right. On the recording, you will hear dishes break and you will hear their conversations as they rushed the cockpit. They planted that plane into a peaceful field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. And, then there was American 77, right across the street. American 77 was taken. The wife of the Solicitor General of the United States was on board that plane. She called her husband, the Solicitor General of the United States and told him, honey, we are flying way too low over buildings in Arlington, Virginia. Their phone [cut it] off.

The Solicitor General got on the phone and he called the Attorney General of the United States. The Attorney General is the boss of the Department of Justice. That's how the Department of Justice found out what was going on. A few moments later, American 77 belly flopped into the west lawn of the Pentagon. Some of you may have been there; you may have run across the street and like Donald Rumsfeld, our Secretary of Defense at the time, he may have helped carry bodies out of the rubble.

America was under attack, it's September 11th, 2001, but this wasn't Pearl Harbor 60 years earlier, 6000 miles away, a military base, World War II. No, this was here. The war wasn't over there; the war was here, 60 years earlier. But, what some of us may not remember is 60 years earlier that wasn't the last time America was under attack. In 1993, a guy named Ramzi Yousef rents a yellow Ryder truck. He fills it with explosives, drives it through Manhattan and he parks it in the underground parking under the World Trade Center, the North Tower, 1993.

Imagine, like a cartoon, he unrolls a 20 foot fuse and he lights it with a lighter and he runs. A few seconds later, the North Tower of the World Trade Center blew up in the middle of Manhattan. This was Al Qaeda. This was the first time and this is 1993. Their objective: blow up the North Tower, topple it into the South Tower; destroy most of Manhattan. That same year, we're fighting the same enemy in Somalia. A few years later it's 1998. And guess what? We get hit again. This time not here, but we're in Africa -- in Kenya and Tanzania: two car bombs; two U.S. embassies; lots of people dead and wounded.

A few years later it is December, 1999. This man's name is Benni Noris. He's got another name, but we know him as Benni Noris. And, Benni Noris is in Canada, our northern border. And, he rents a Chrysler sedan and he loads it with explosives and he puts it on a car ferry from Canada into the State of Washington. Months before he had come himself, gone to the Los Angeles International Airport and actually did a dry run.

His objective for Al Qaeda was to blow up LAX: put some suitcases, left them, started taking notes, how long did it take for airport security to get to those suitcases? Could he blow up LAX without it being evacuated? So, now it's December, 1999 -- he's the millennium bomber. And, he drives that Chrysler onto the ferry; that ferry comes into the State of Washington. He's going to be on his way to LAX to blow it up on New Year's Eve, [19]99 to 2000.

Well, we got lucky. An inspector accepting that vehicle notices that Benni Noris is a little, and this is her words, not mine, hinky. He takes off running, they catch him; they search his car. In it they find all the materials to make those explosives; all the materials that were going to go into two suitcases and be placed by him on December 31st, 1999 at Los Angeles International Airport.

And, still yet again about a year later, now we're talking about October, 2000. A couple of guys get into a dingy in Yemen, this is the USS Cole and it is parked in the port of Yemen. They belly up to the hull of the USS Cole, a United States Navy warship, and they put a shaped charge on the hull right where the galley is, the kitchen. And, they blow it up waving the whole time as they come up to the hull of that navy ship. Seventeen sailors dead, a lot more injured, more than a black eye for the United States. This is October, 2000, about a year before 9/11, but nothing gets done.

We're in the middle of a presidential election, President Clinton, for all intents and purposes, is a lame duck president at the time. President Bush ultimately wins. He's not going to strike back because too much time has passed. You're looking at the man whose name is Khalid al-Mihdhar, who planned and executed for Al Qaeda the bombing of the Cole in October, 2000. Days after that, days after that successful bombing, this man, Khalid al-Mihdhar, moves to the United States, to San Diego, California. Less than a year later, you're looking at the man who drove the plane into the Pentagon.

The world has changed. South Tower goes down; it takes about 10 seconds to fall. That's it -- 9:59 in the morning, September 11th. The North Tower, 10:38 about 40 minutes later, it takes about 10 seconds; registers a 3 on the Richter Scale. The war is no longer over there, it is here. It's not 6000 miles away in Pearl Harbor; it's here. Things have changed.

So, you're asking me, Mike, I thought you were going to talk about four Mexican men and the drug tunnel. Why are you talking about 19 Middle Eastern guys, casually dressed, who lived in places ultimately like San Diego and by the way, Greenbelt,

Maryland. Well, I'm talking about those guys because the events of 9/11 had as much as an effect on these four Mexican men as did all of us in this room today. I talked to three of these guys over long periods of time personally; and the fourth, I did not. All three of them had very distinct feelings about 9/11. And, although they are Mexican, they hurt just as much as we did. So, why am I talking about 9/11 before I talk about the tunnel and these three men? 9/11, after that date a wall went up between the United States and Mexico.

Certainly, we always had border security, but now a physical wall went up. Towers came down -- a wall went up. If you've never been to the border, I'll take you on a little tour right now. You're standing on a beach in San Diego, California. You're looking at the Pacific Ocean and these huge metal spikes look like as if aliens had sent them down and planted them into the earth. It's low tide right now. At high tide, you could literally get impaled on one of those things. Look a little closer, you could see how tall they are.

You see the woman, she's standing there, I mean maybe she's about five and a half feet tall; those things are 20 feet tall. On the weekends in San Diego Mexican families who live in San Diego picnic right there on the beach. Their relatives who have not come into the United States, picnic right on the other side. Inevitably, at some point during each day, those families meet, belly up to those spikes and they try and exchange things. It's illegal to hand something across the border. They try to exchange things though, like a baby, in hopes that the border patrol doesn't see them. At times, groups of Mexican people mass on the south side and they run across through the ocean on the north side in hopes that some of them will make it; not captured by the border patrol.

Move a little bit now to the east, you're still on the Pacific Ocean in San Diego and that those spikes, those spears turn into a wall. The wall is about 12 or 14 feet high, at one point you see this chain link fence. The chain link fence is there because this used to be road before 9/11 that went into Mexico and I imagine in case of emergency,

it's easier to get that chain link fence down than it is to get those metal walls down. Now, you look south from that same exact position and you're going to see buildings in Mexico, in Tijuana. And, you are looking directly south now and if there's one thing I want you to notice it's that where those windows, those windows, the view from those buildings are looking north. The Pacific Ocean is to your right, by yards, yet those windows are looking north.

The only view that is important and desired by the people on the south side of that border is America and there's a reason for that. Again, just shift your view a little bit; you have people in Mexico standing on top of the hill watching the border patrol, gauging their patrol, seeing when they can radio to others to kind of come across. A little bit further to the east now and now you're kind of getting right into like the main runway -- the southern part of San Diego. And, now our border is not one wall, but it's three. And, in between those three is about an eighth of a mile of no man's land. If you were to take run, if you were to run for it from Tijuana you got to not only hop three different fences, but you have to navigate across and open eighth of a mile.

We make it very difficult, but let me tell you, we also built the country's biggest outlet mall right there -- the Mall of Americas; because we want our neighbors to come, we want them to spend money, it is about the economy. If you haven't seen it that's the San Ysidro Port of Entry, the busiest land border in the world. This is off hours. Down below, south, Mexico, up north San Diego, the Pacific Ocean is up top, people, drugs, whatever, coming in; money going south. This is first thing they see when they're coming north into the United States of America. If you've ever been in San Diego, you know who King Stahlman is, he's a bail bondsman. In Spanish, we tell them, you're going to get arrested, call me; I'll help you out - King Stahlman. Now, we're going to move way out east, about 70 miles from actual San Diego. It's still San Diego County, but now we're in the high desert: scrub brush, rocks, wind; it's very dry. This is where our story about the tunnel begins.

On the top just to orient you, you can see the U.S. border, the red line, right below the D is where I'm talking about, about 70 miles east of the city, east of the Gaslamp District; east of the fun of San Diego. On the bottom I put that picture there just to show you. I bet every one of you, if I told you water is very expensive no matter where you are; I bet you can tell me where the border is. On the bottom, green pastures; a little over half way up - dust. Where's the border? On the right, this is where our story starts. You're looking at the pool, water, of a hotel in Mexicali which is even further east and that's where shortly after 9/11 we meet a guy and I'm going to call him Marco and I'm sorry I blurred out his face. Marco is a Mexican cop; he is short, built like a fireplug. He is sharp and he is smart. And, let me tell you something about him, he knows if he has information, he cannot do a thing about it in Mexico.

It is now January 2002, a few months after 2001. If Marco and his team were to do anything significant with information they had which hurt the cartels in any way, he would be killed. I said he's smart. He knows, meet the gringos, meet the Americans and tell them what I think I have. If they act on it, I've got plausible deniability. If they act on it and they call me, I can respond. No cartel in Mexico can blame me for responding, they understand that. So, Mario, poolside that day, first he starts talking about an Argentinian man who is smuggling, running a team smuggling cocaine and heroin from Mexicali to New York.

And, that is a true story and I'll finish it up right here, because that Argentinian eventually got arrested in New York and he was charged with running an organization smuggling heroin and cocaine into the United States. But, Mario spoke no English. Luckily, my teammate spoke a lot of Spanish. My Spanish is horrible, but as the night went on at that pool in Mexicali, the real story came out. And, Mario started telling us about a place we'll call in Tierra Del Sol, which is in San Diego and it's called Johnson's Pig Farm and I'll tell you why in a minute. And, he says, hey, you know what guys? Johnson's Pig Farm, I hear rumors that there might be a tunnel there. And, I hear rumors that millions of dollars proceeds might be buried there as well.

But, shortly after September 11, 2001 the wall goes up and it separates Tierra Del Sol from Roca Magisteria, Magic Rock, which is on the Mexican side. And, neighbors who used to talk can't talk anymore. Drugs that used to cross easily can't cross anymore. Take a little closer look at the wall right there and you can see the only way these neighbors are able to communicate is through little holes they kind of pull down or pry down, I mean this is a strong wall. They use a crowbar and these are the people you'll meet. They are very hard people and they live yards from America; but they will not speak English to you. As a matter of fact, shortly after 9/11 when the wall went up and you can see on the U.S. side, the National Guard built that wall and they spray painted on it for our lost souls during 9/11.

Well, the people of Majestic Rock put up a sign of their own right there and if you can't read Spanish, basically it says, and that sign is facing north towards the United States just a few yards away. You will only see it if you look through that hole right there. It says "keep out, private property to no one but us over here." So, Marco tells us about the pig farm and lo and behold it was a pig farm -- Johnson's Pig Farm, old man Johnson owned this place. Elbert Lushen Johnson. Well, a year before, right around the same time the Cole got blown up, Octoberish 2000, but in September 2000, so a little bit before, Elbert Lushen Johnson is in a truck and he is driving that truck through Bill Clinton's home town of Hope, Arkansas. Elbert Lushen Johnson gets pulled over and old man Johnson has 2,200 pounds of cocaine in his truck. The owner of Johnson's Pig Farm get arrested, sentenced 35 years in a U.S. prison. This is all we know at the time.

Marco has rumors of millions of drug proceeds buried in the ground, maybe there's a tunnel. Because, when old man Johnson gets arrested, there's a lot of interest in his property. It goes on the real estate market and there are a lot of people interested in this place for whatever reason. Well, a couple of days later, we drive back out not to Mexicali this time, but a little bit closer to Tierra del Sol and Marco introduces us to a guy named Primo. Now, the guy on the left and the guy on the right, they're the same guy. Primo, he went on a diet. At some point he realized he was getting soft in the

middle and he went on a diet. And, I'll explain that in a minute; he eventually lost some weight.

But, Primo, on the left to me, anyway, this is when I met him, that's what he looked like. He didn't look Mexican; I mean he kind of looked like a short Irish guy, like a leprechaun. And, when we pulled up with Marco to meet this guy, there was nobody there. A couple of moments later, no kidding, a guy with a facemask on, Primo, emerges from some of the scrub brush, runs to our car and jumps in the back. He knows, too, if he's going to talk to the Americans, he's got to keep it a secret. Primo's a cop. He's got information. He doesn't need anybody else knowing he's about to give up information to the gringos.

Primo tells us, hey, this land went on the market; there are a hell of a lot of people interested in it. I told Marco earlier, Marco relayed to you, but I'm here to tell you firsthand, I have a couple of people who told me there may be a tunnel there and there may be millions of dollars buried [under] ground. Old man Johnson may have buried his drug proceeds somewhere there. But, old man Johnson's in prison in Arkansas for the next 35 years. We have enough at this point to get a search warrant. A judge in San Diego signs it based on the history of the property and the two independent sources we have saying, there might be something there of interest to the DEA.

On February 27th, 2002 just a few months after 2001, September 11th, we get a search warrant and we hit this. This is 55 acres of a couple of shacks, pigs, grain silos. There's one Mexican man there and he says he's the tender of the land. And, when we ask him how he got the job, he literally pulls out a newspaper that has a help wanted ad for years before and shows, help wanted farmer, guard the property, take care of the pigs. From years before he had that, the only newspaper in his little shack. Well, we also, we spent hours, hours looking for this tunnel and we spend the same amount of time thinking, OK, well, the information about millions buried might be near a big rock.

There are a lot of big rocks on 55 acres of property. So, we're looking around, there's maybe about 30 of us at this point and we don't find anything. We're scaling back and we start focusing much more on this house, barn, it's a house -- two bedrooms, upstairs, downstairs. One thing you'll notice if you look at it there's bars on the window which is not typical. There's also, and you probably can't see it from here, but motion sensor lights. So, if you get close to the house the lights come on. So, we start spending a little bit more time here and one of the guys notices when he goes inside and he goes up to the second floor, the stairs move just a little bit, a tiny bit.

But, you wouldn't expect stairs to move when you stepped on them. So, he reaches down from the first floor and grabs that bottom stair and lo and behold the bottom four stairs folded on a hidden hinge on top of the top four stairs. And, it revealed this -- a Brinks safe. OK, we didn't find the tunnel and let me tell you, we weren't concerned about drugs coming through the tunnel; this is a couple of month after 9/11. Drugs were the least of our concerns. People were talking that anthrax was happening, dirty bombs were in the media; drugs were the least of our concern.

What do we find? We find a staircase, a hidden hinge and we find a Brinks safe. OK, no tunnel, but at least maybe old man Johnson's millions of dollars are hidden in this Brinks safe. We spend about an hour or so prying this open. We ain't very smart, we use crowbars, we don't do anything fancy and we finally get this open; and it is empty. A little bit disappointing, but then we knock on the bottom of it and it echoes. So, now, now we're a little bit more excited.

We've got an empty safe hidden under stairs and they're on a hidden hinge; and it's echoing when we knock on the bottom. It takes us about two hours to get this thing out of the ground, but finally we get it out of the ground and it's about 10:00 in the morning now on February 27th; and it reveals a hole. And, there are straight out of Indiana Jones: rickety old ladders, fraying ropes, cobwebs 30 feet down. We immediately get on the phone and we call Marco. Now, remember I told you Marco was a Mexican cop; he cannot act on information like this independently. If he does he will

get killed. So, Marco and Primo, also a cop, are 30 miles away in Mexico in two buses with their team.

We call Marco and we tell him, we think we found the exit to a tunnel. We haven't been down there yet, but we've got a 30 foot hole, ropes, ladders; we think we found an exit. First thing Marco says is, Mike, exit? That's an entrance, you gringos want to come down to Mexico, come on through. It takes about a half hour, but Marco and Primo and that team, they get to Majestic Rock and they basically invade that town off of two school buses. And, within moments, not minutes but moments, they key in on this house. They key in on it because, oh, I mean there's only about a half a dozen houses there, but they maybe talked to some folks within the first few seconds and maybe they see that there are bars on the window and the generator outside and that seems kind of out of place for Majestic Rock.

They key in on this place. And Marco and Primo and their team, they go inside with consent, and they find this fireplace. And, just to describe it for you if you can't really tell, that fireplace pulls out of the wall. And, you wouldn't know it looking at it, but if somebody told you or you were to grab it and break the seal that was around it, you would be able to pull that fireplace out of the wall. When they did that under inches of ash from burnt logs, they find a metal plate in the ground. The thing weighs about 100 pounds. We didn't know at the time, but there was a switch to throw that would lift that plate up on hydraulics. Now, a common trend on other tunnels that we found and learned about is the switch is hidden.

If you were to look at a regular outlet on the wall, you would unscrew that outlet, take it out, reach your hand in off to the side, there's the switch. How hard is that to find? We didn't know that this thing would come up on hydraulics, so we spent a hell of a lot of time prying this thing open and what did we find? Yup, Indiana Jones ladders, Indiana Jones ropes, 30 feet down and we end up, us Americans, we say the entrance to a tunnel, Mario continues to joke; that's the exit. Just to give you a little bit more of a perspective, you can see how big it is; it's about four feet tall, four feet wide. There is a

ventilation system that runs through this entire thing; electricity and a generator that lights it. There are rails on the ground upon which that electric cart right there shuttles whatever, in this case, drugs, north about 800 feet. The wood, the outline of this tunnel is professionally done and guess what? It's brand new.

OK, February 27th, 2002, this thing was built shortly after 9/11. Just another view to give you some perspective, it's about 800 feet long, it started at that house, behind that fireplace, under that metal plate, 30 feet down, in Majestic Rock, shoots north about 800 feet, under the border into that house into Tierra del Sol, Johnson's Pig Farm. When they actually built that shortly after 9/11 the azimuth that these guys shot OK, they shot it perfectly from fireplace to stairwell, but the actual laborers were a little bit off. So, it may be hard to tell, but they had to take a dogleg just a little bit to the right to get under those stairs. As a matter of fact, I'll tell you a story, when we popped the Brinks safe out of the ground and we saw that 30 foot hole; look, this was the first tunnel that had been found in about eight years.

We had no experience in tunnels, but we did know this, that air was probably was not good. So, we got the most junior DEA agent on scene, no, and we sent him down but we did put SCBA, but not the underwater, a self-contained breathing apparatus on him and an oxygen meter, just like we would use if we were going into a meth lab. And, we sent him down, a couple of minutes later; we tied a rope to him just in case we had to pull him out. No kidding, a couple of minutes later he comes shuffling up this rickety old ladder and the ratings -- not enough oxygen for human consumption. Finally, when Marco and his team get to the south side and they pop out that fireplace and pop it open, we spend about two hours with massive, massive fans aerating that thing. OK, because we were about to do something stupid and we were about to crawl through a tunnel.

We went through and we popped up on the Mexican side and it was a complete tunnel and I just remember my partner who was behind me said, Mike, if this thing is going to collapse the last thing I'm going to see is your big butt. On the Mexican side,

just to give you some perspective, coming right out of the house, this is months later, they actually unburied this whole thing and this is kind of, it goes down a bit to about to 25 or 30 feet. But, this is kind of close to the house and you can kind of see. On the U. S. side at the time the land was still owned by old man Johnson who was in prison and he wouldn't give us permission to dig up his property or fill it in and he's still had rights at that time, but ultimately we got to it. So, we're talking about four Mexican men and this tunnel; the first one in eight years, the first one after 9/11. And, I mentioned Marco and I also mentioned his partner, OK, Primo, we knew him as Primo.

Well, it turns out and we found this out in the first couple of weeks, so his real name was Armando Martinez Duarte and he was a subcomandante. For you in DEA, he was kind of like an ASAC in charge of the Federal Police in Mexicali. Again, same, just lighter, shaved and skinnier. Not only was he a subcomandante for the Mexican Police in Mexicali, but he was also wanted by the FBI and the DEA; armed and dangerous. Armando Martinez Duarte was also known as Loco Duarte and, in this case loco certainly means crazy; but in this case for Loco Duarte it means sick. He was a sick, sick man who hid behind a Federal-Mexican badge to work for the Arellano Felix Cartel. He was also on the outs with them. He was getting old. Whatever had happened between him and the AFO, the Arellano Felix Cartel had happened, and he was desperate to get to the United States. And, more importantly for him, he wanted to get his son papers to cross into the U.S., so he son could go to college in San Diego.

I say he was an assassin and let me tell you, he wasn't the James Bond type assassin. He was not good looking. His fingers were stained black from the meth pipe. He didn't have James Bond girls around him. Any woman he had he paid for. Loco Duarte was Marco's partner; Marco didn't know it. This man is working with my partner.

His name is Jose Nemesio Lugo and he is -- Mexico, at this time, Mexico's version of a CIA agent. And, I'm able to tell you that now and you'll see why in a minute. He's Mexico's version of a CIA agent, but, there in Mexico his job working with my partner in Tijuana is to target corrupt police in Tijuana. This is called DEA Operation

Crossfire and you can read about it. Jose Nemesio Lugo and my partner are gathering evidence against corrupt police in Tijuana. Just so you know, his middle name Nemesio is very rare, uncommon, it means vengeance, the wrath of God or justice. And, he's going to bring down with my partner about 40 dirty Tijuana cops. The biggest catch that he's about to have is Loco Duarte, Primo.

But, they don't know what he looks like and they don't know how to get in touch with him, but we do. So, a few months later after we find this tunnel, we get a call and Lugo is asking us, can you call Loco Duarte and lure him to a spot in TJ so we can arrest him? They had made all the other arrests; this was the cherry on top of their cake. We called him up and we met him and on top you could see the U.S. Consulate at the time; it's since moved in Tijuana. On the bottom is where the meet location was. There's a lot of distance between there and that's significant in a minute. Called Loco Duarte and I said, Primo, because he didn't know we knew who he was.

Good news, you found that tunnel for us, you gave us the information, guess what? I've got papers for your son, he can cross legally into the United States now; you can take care of your family and get him to college in the U.S. Two hours later, Primo, Loco Duarte, arrives in a van, we meet him, identify him right there by touching his head, luckily he was wearing a Yankee hat. I'm a Yankee fan, so I was able to take his hat off. And, no kidding, Lugo and his team which were the Mexican military popped out of manhole covers, out of trees and driving up in Humvees, they crashed into his van, they got him on the ground, they hog tied him, threw him in the back, got him out of there, got him down to Mexico City where he could be safely imprisoned.

The next day, these were the Mexican newspapers: Loco Duarte, an assassin for the Arellanos, the man who gave us the information regarding these tunnels, he was known for what's known as bone tickling. He would take drug cartel rivals and take a screwdriver and put it into their thigh until it hit their femur and then scratched their femur. That's called bone tickling. Another thing that he liked to do was put a clear plastic bag over the head of people he was torturing, cinch it up so they couldn't

breathe; and then pound on their chest so they would need to breathe. On the far, your right is a list of the people he has killed according to the Mexican newspapers at the time or have disappeared in bodies they haven't found; probably because he dissolved them in barrels of acid.

Now, we went on, this was the first tunnel, and we went on and found a couple of more tunnels in different stages of being built. The one thing about this I'd like to point out is if you can see this picture right here, that's a well and the well is empty of water now, but you can clearly see there's an entrance there and that entrance is, when you look down that's what you see on the right. So, one of the things we found out was that these traffickers like to hide the entrance of their tunnels under water. Nobody would ever find it if the water was in there, but you drain the water and it reveals the tunnel. Now, in this case, picture on the far right it went up, so even though that well was filled with water and it blocked the actual entrance, it didn't fill the whole tunnel with water. We went on; we found several of these tunnels in different parts of their construction. The Tunnel Task Force we know of today started right then.

So, we decided, hey, wait a second, I mean there's probably a hell of a lot more tunnels out there, we share a 2000-mile border with Mexico. We ended up getting information on our third guy or our fourth guy, his name is Felipe Corona-Verbera. He's our businessman. He's our businessman because he was a well-respected and very wealthy architect in Mexico. This was the man who was building tunnels, building really good tunnels, not stuck up under the border, but 800 foot long, hydraulics, ventilation, lighting, electric carts. This is him right here. Well, lo and behold, the information we had on this guy Felipe Corona-Verbera revealed that he was the guy who built, we had evidence on him, a tunnel in 1990 in Agua Prieta, Arizona.

So, we asked Jose Nemesio Lugo to find him. We had an arrest warrant for him for that tunnel. Find him, arrest him on our provisional arrest warrant and maybe he'll talk, maybe he'll tell us about other tunnels he built. Well, Jose Lugo found him, Jose Lugo arrested him; he didn't talk. We were lucky enough to find some more, but not

from him; he didn't talk. He was eventually extradited to Arizona, United States, sentenced to 30 years in prison. Jose Lugo, the man who captured Loco Duarte, the assassin, the man who captured Felipe Corona-Verbera, the tunnel architect.

2007, he is the equivalent, it's called [sanapi] now, he's the equivalent of our Deputy Administrator or the second in charge of the FBI for Mexico's Intelligence Service. And, he is driving to work one day and he is parking his car in Mexico City and 18 bullets go through his window and he is dead. So, now we have our four Mexican men, you got Loco Duarte on the far left, a cop; a comandante in Mexicali, the reason he lost that weight was basically when he got locked up by us in Mexico, he had to fight for his food in Mexican prison, extradited to the United States -- 35 years in prison. Next to him, Felipe Corona-Verbera, the architect of these tunnels, never talked but he got extradited to the U.S., spending 30 years in prison. Next to him, Justice Jose Lugo, helped catch those two guys, gunned down, assassinated. Next to him is Marco. Marco is still out there, still doing good things. In my opinion, he's the reason hope is still alive in Mexico.

That's all I have. Thanks.

Sean Fearn: Let's take a minute and open up for questions. If I can ask folks from the audience that have questions, if you could just raise your hands and so we have a microphone on the aisle so we can ask Mike some really tough ones.

Mike Eschimi: All right, Sean, no questions.

Sean Fearn: Give it a minute.

Mike Eschimi: All right.

Mike Eschimi: We found about, I think 800 pounds of marijuana in that tunnel. Not a lot. Nobody got arrested for it. Like I said, Corona got arrested for a tunnel in 1990;

Loco Duarte got arrested for being a corrupt cop; but nobody got arrested for that tunnel. Tunnel Task Force lives on. They found a hell of a lot of tunnels since then. It is both ICE and CBP and also DEA. Yes.

Female Voice: Anybody ever found [unintelligible]?

Sean Fearn: Cash on the pig farm.

Mike Eschimi: Yeah, cash on the pig farm, so that's a really great question because Loco Duarte's two informers were two women. And, let me tell you, the only reason they gave up what they knew was because they wanted a portion of that money. That's 55 acres of land and I'm willing to bet somewhere on there, there's a few million dollars buried by a big rock; but it's never been found. So, go on the treasure hunt.

Male Voice: Question here. About excavation, what did they do with the material? You know the dirt that they took out?

Mike Eschimi: Yeah, that's a really good question, because we, subsequent to the finding of this, we did a lot of work with the Department of Defense and some satellite imagery and we were looking for a new word, I'll probably mess it up now, but it's called [fluvient]. We were looking for what they doing with the dirt they were digging. What we found out is the laborers that they used and they used laborers with shovels and picks; they would house in motels miles and miles away. Pick them up every morning, 3[:00] or 4[:00] in the morning, blindfold them, put them in the back of a van, drive that van around for an hour even though their trip was 15 minutes, get them to the site. Inside the tunnel, still blindfolded so they had no idea where they were, they would dig, they would take the dirt and they would load it on to another truck that was underneath some canopy so that they didn't know where they were until they were done at night.

That truck would go and leave and dump the dirt somewhere else and on the backend, our information, in at least in some of them, is those laborers were killed. That's what we know.

Mike Eschimi: Oh, right here.

Male Voice: We've heard a lot about large quantities of marijuana that have been found as you mentioned initially, but the main concern was about other things about smuggling weapons or anthrax or people, or even other drugs. To the degree you can talk about it, what else has been found, have they actually been using it to smuggle terrorists?

Mike Eschimi: Nope. Yeah, my understanding is and that was always on the top of our mind is not once, to date, this is just what I know, but not once to date have they been used for that. As a matter of fact, the only terrorist we caught came through the northern border; and that's the millennium bomber, Benni Noris.

Female Voice: At the beginning you had mentioned Canada and that really piqued my interest. Can you tell a little more about that?

Mike Eschimi: So, very interesting. Because, like I just said, Benni Noris and forget, his name is Ahmed something with a K, he was the millennium bomber and he loaded up that Chrysler with explosives, put it on the car ferry, came into Washington State, was going to drive it down to the Los Angeles International Airport, blow up LAX on December 31st, 1999. Years later, we found a very significant tunnel from Vancouver into Washington. Just as sophisticated as this one: hydraulics, ventilation, a track which shoveled drugs across on the northern border. And, that was our office; I had nothing to do that. That was our office up there in Vancouver and those guys got the information and they worked it.

Sean Fearn: Mike. Thank you very much, Mike. Our educator Catie Drew has a small token of appreciation for your time today. Just a quick administrative item, this coming Saturday, April 28th, is DEA's Prescription Drug Take-Back Day. Please visit dea.gov if you haven't already done so to find the nearest location for dropping off unused or expired medications. Thank you all very much for being here today. Again, Special Agent Mike Eschimi, thank you for speaking.

Mike Eschimi: Thank you, Sean. Thank you.

End of recording.