



GUNS'N' RHINOS

BY EDWARD R. RICCIUTI

This is the story of one of the most bizarre cases ever investigated by wildlife law enforcement agents. As of this writing, the case remains open, with the U.S. Justice Department trying to extradite two South African nationals on a variety of criminal charges, including smuggling rhinoceros horns. The eight-month undercover investigation that cracked the case had the elements of a cloak-and-dagger thriller. Indeed, the probe exposed an international ring engaged in smuggling not only illegal wildlife but also automatic weapons. The seemingly unlikely link between guns and rhinos came to light three years ago during a conversation in a Connecticut diner.



COURTESY OF PHIL CAYFORD

Special Agent Bob Clifford of the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) sat in his automobile outside a diner in Berlin, Connecticut on the afternoon of June 2, 1988, munching a sandwich. Clifford was doing his buddy, Rich Moulton, a favor. Moulton, a special agent with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, had gone undercover to nab a Connecticut man suspected of illegally smuggling wildlife products from Africa into the U.S. As was usual in the under-manned, under-funded Fish and Wildlife Division of Law Enforcement, Moulton, the only agent stationed in Connecticut, couldn't get his hands on the electronic surveillance equipment he needed for the investigation. So Clifford had secured approval from his superiors to help out with ATF gear.

Inside the diner, Moulton gulped his soup and the suspect, John C. Lukman, Jr., ate a hero while they thrashed out a deal for a mounted cheetah head and rug. The agent wound up paying Lukman \$2,400 for the goods, which Lukman said would be purchased in Namibia by an associate, whom he called Pat, and then mailed to the United States with false customs documents. Moulton was wearing a wire, enabling Clifford to electronically eavesdrop on the transaction.

"He was probably getting bored," says Moulton. But not for long. Suddenly, Clifford was all ears. The conversation had turned from contraband wildlife to Communist-bloc AK-47 assault rifles. Unlike the civilian semi-automatic AKS

version that fires only one round for each pull of the trigger, AK-47s spew bullets as long as the trigger is depressed. In a word, Lukman was offering Moulton machine guns. And machine guns were right up Clifford's alley.

What had started as a routine probe of the illegal sale of wildlife products thus turned into an investigation that unveiled a web of international intrigue centered in southern Africa. It implicated members of the South African Defense Force (SADF) in the killing of rhinoceroses and elephants and the smuggling of armaments, rhino horns, and ivory. The horns, according to the office of the then United States attorney in Connecticut, Stanley A. Twardy, were "apparently from rhinos killed by South African army troops in Angola."

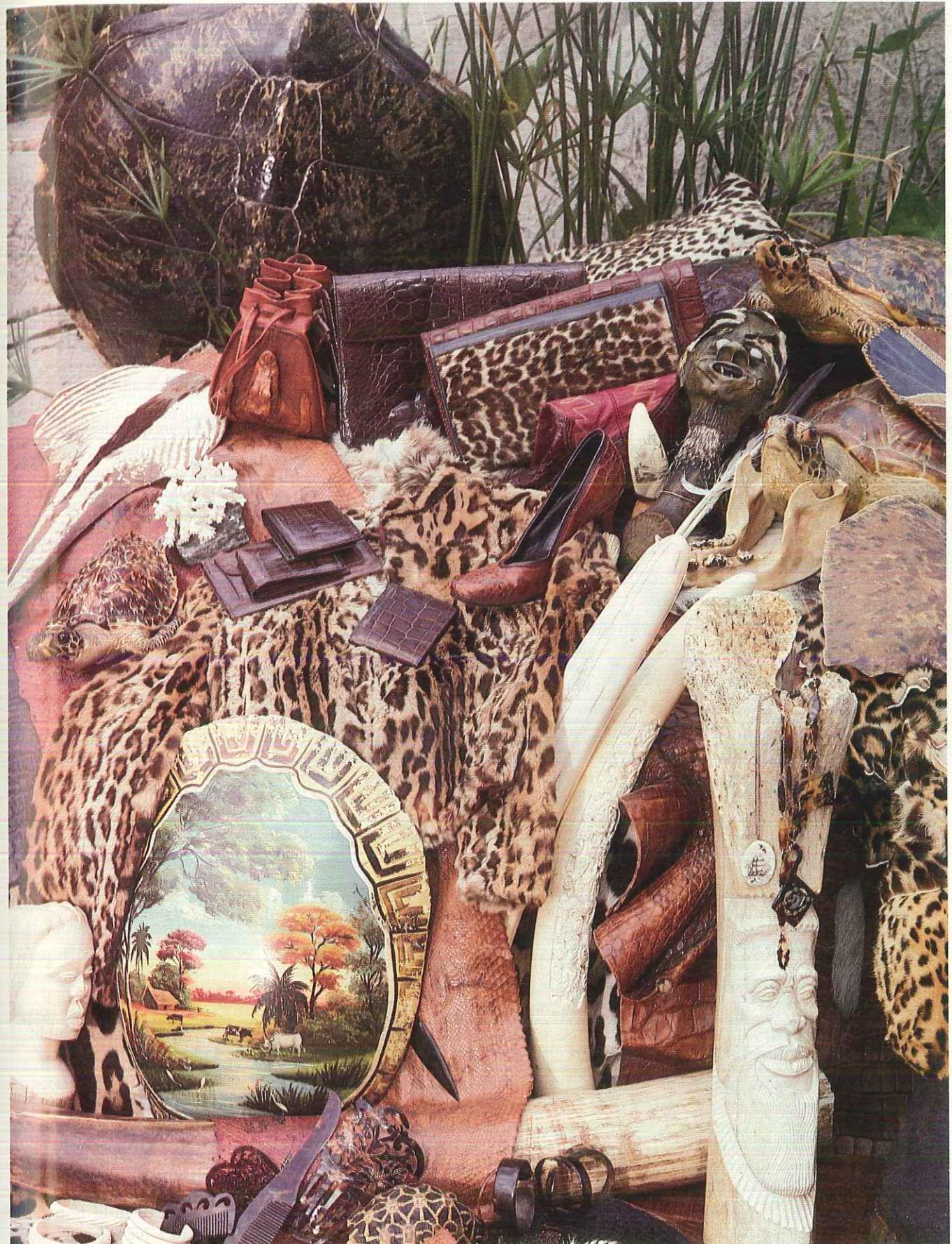
Lukman and three other Connecticut residents were indicted by a federal grand jury in the case. Also indicted as key figures in the smuggling ring were Marius Meiring, a major in an elite special forces battalion of the SADF, and his wife, Pat. They are currently awaiting a South African court decision on their appeal against extradition to the U.S. Allegations against the couple have yet to be proved.

The case was set against the background of Namibia's fight for independence from South Africa, which ended successfully in March 1990, and ongoing conflict in Angola. These conflicts were interrelated in several ways. South Africa supported Angolan rebel groups, especially UNITA (Union for the Total Independence of Angola), that were fighting against the Soviet- and Cuban-supported Angolan

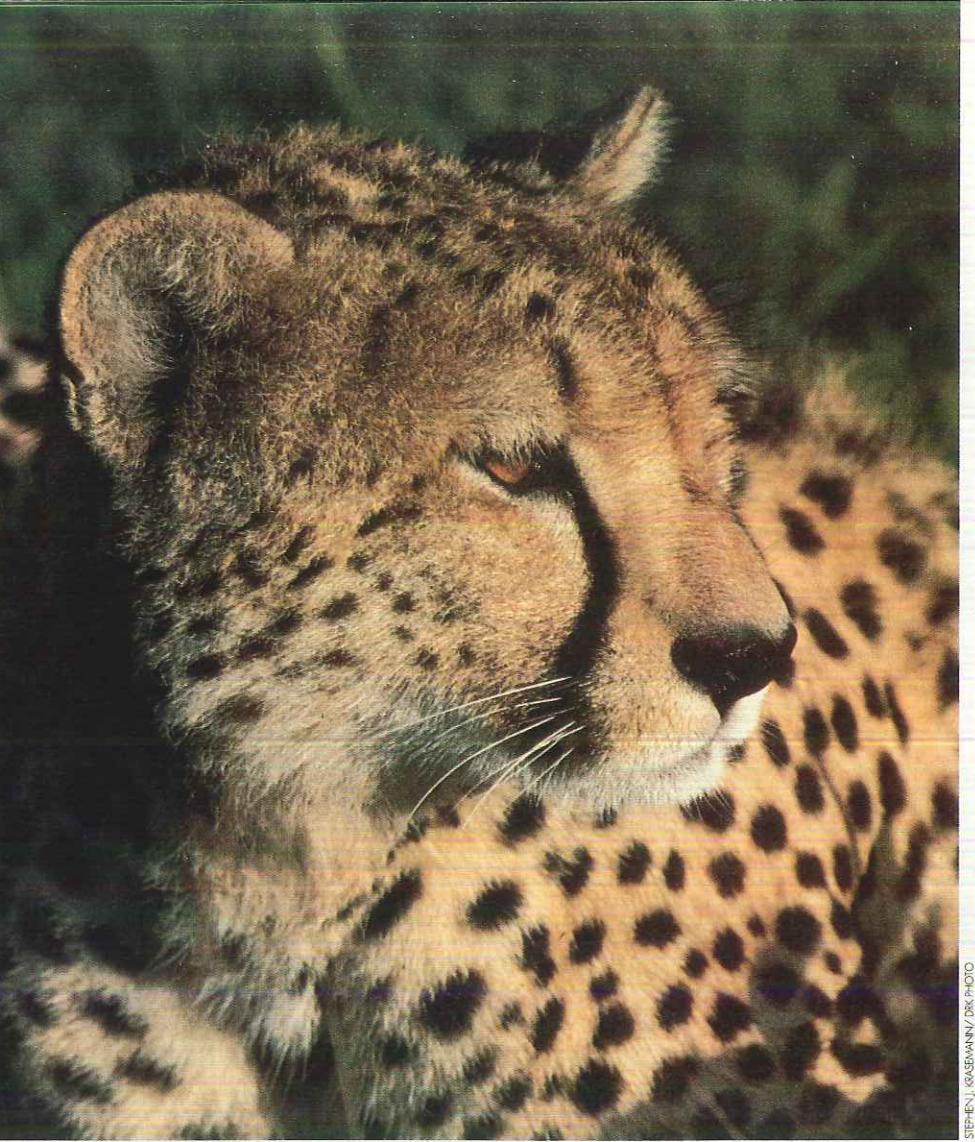
government. Angola, in turn, was encouraging the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO), which was attempting to overthrow South African rule in Namibia. In 1981, South Africa invaded southern Angola through Namibia in an attempt to wipe out SWAPO bases there. South Africa insisted it would never give independence to Namibia until all the Cuban troops left Angola.

As the case progressed, some big names surfaced, including those of Ian Smith, prime minister of the illegal white regime in Rhodesia before it became independent Zimbabwe, and UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi. According to Monitor, a clearinghouse for

When the conversation turned from contraband wildlife to Communist-bloc AK-47 assault rifles, Special Agent Bob Clifford was suddenly all ears. Machine guns were right up his alley.



This small sampling of the wildlife contraband confiscated by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service law enforcement agents every year attests to the breadth and seriousness of the battle being waged internationally against poachers.
PAGE 26: In the netherworld of wildlife smuggling, the horn of this white rhino is literally worth its weight in gold.
PAGE 27: Rows of skulls from dehorned rhinos tell the story of the species' fate at the hands of poachers.



A cheetah, Kenya. An endangered species, the cheetah has been extirpated in much of East Africa and most of South Africa. For the sum of \$2,400, Connecticut businessman John C. Lukman, Jr., sold a mounted cheetah head and rug imported with false customs documents to undercover agent Rich Moulton of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

information about endangered species, UNITA slaughtered more than 100,000 elephants in Angola over a period of about 15 years to pay the cost of its battles.

The political sensitivity of the case was such that, in November 1988, Twardy and assistant U.S. attorney James Genco, the prosecutor in the case, were summoned to Washington to brief Reagan administration officials.

Events that transpired during the probe evoked images of what the sentencing judge in the case called the "international netherworld of marginal characters who deal in guns, join foreign armies, and associate with mercenaries."

The key defendant in the case, Lukman, emerges as something of a mystery man: Someone who never served in the military but was fascinated by the mystique of the mercenary. A man caught up in the allure of Africa, who says that "Africa is where my soul is." A man who, according to the South African newspaper *Johannesburg Star*, "is thought to have been a member of the CIA."

The 37-year-old Lukman had been traveling to Africa repeatedly for years. Tall, darkly bearded, intelligent, and

well spoken, he made many friends there, including people of influence. Said by agents to use the nickname Chaka, apparently after the brilliant nineteenth-century Zulu leader, he had acquaintances among members of the Rhodesian Veterans Association. He also turned up in Nicaragua and El Salvador and possessed a U.S. passport allowing him to visit Cuba.

Today, having served time in a federal prison after his conviction, he runs a company called African Investments Ltd., which advertises in *Soldier of Fortune* magazine, whose managing editor, John Coleman, he calls a close friend. Lukman says the firm works on "legitimate investments in Africa" and that he will never again engage in illegal activities. "I'm sorry for my past transgressions. I regret them terribly."

Lukman now is cooperating with the federal government in the effort to prosecute Marius and Pat Meiring. Successful extradition of the couple would be a major coup for U.S. Fish and Wildlife law enforcement agents.

Besides cracking an international smuggling ring, the "rhino vice" investigation, as agents came to call it, dramatizes some important aspects of wildlife crime and its prosecution. Once condescendingly known as duck cops, Fish and Wildlife agents operate with professional effectiveness akin to that of other federal law enforcement agencies that have far more resources and manpower.

Wildlife criminals, moreover, are likely as not to be involved in other sorts of illegal activities.

The events leading up to the Connecticut diner conversation began in February 1988. Moulton had little more than a tip that Lukman was marketing a full leopard mount, which Lukman later told agents had been stored in the garage of Ian Smith's home in Harare, Zimbabwe. Although, with proper papers, U.S. sport hunters can import leopard trophies, selling them is a violation of federal law.

Moulton telephoned Lukman and asked, "You the guy who's got the leopard for sale?" Lukman told him the mount had been sold the day before to a New Jersey man called "Z," later identified as Isaac Z. Saada, a man known to Fish and Wildlife authorities.

Lukman then offered Moulton a leopard-head mount for \$500. Moulton said he would think it over. Later, Lukman

called Moulton and offered a leopard rug for \$1,200. Moulton agreed to buy it. The hunt was on.

They met in the parking lot of a candy shop near Sturbridge, Massachusetts. Accompanied by another agent, Kevin O'Brien, whom he introduced as his business associate, Lukman gave Lukman \$550 cash for the head, which Lukman gave him on the spot, and a \$1,000 check for the rug, which he would receive when the check cleared. Lukman had obtained the rug from Martin Sher, a former Rhodesian soldier living in Ohio, whom he had met through the Rhodesian Veterans Association.

The plot thickened when Lukman told Moulton he had additional items from endangered African species for sale via sources in Namibia and Zimbabwe. When asked about rhino horn, Lukman responded negatively, calling the subject taboo.

After Moulton's check cleared, Lukman delivered the rug to him in the parking lot of a motion picture theater in East Hartford, Connecticut. Lukman drove up in a Land Rover with a Connecticut license plate that read ZAMBIA and emblazoned with a sticker proclaiming "I love Africa." With him was a friend, Mary Ann McAllister.

Gradually, Moulton gained Lukman's confidence, so much so that even now Lukman says of the agent, "I still like the guy. He was just doing his job." Lukman occasionally drops by Moulton's Hartford office to chat.

By late May 1988, Lukman had offered Moulton the cheetah rug and head that became the subject of their meet-

ing at the Berlin, Connecticut, diner. The plan called for these items to be airmailed from Namibia by Pat Meiring and labeled "curios" and "carved African head." He warned that if the fraud were detected, the items would be confiscated by Fish and Wildlife. But customs officials, occupied with the drug trade from Latin America, inspected few packages from Africa.

The stage was set for their June 2 rendezvous at the diner. The \$2,400 Moulton used to pay for the cheetah items was borrowed from Customs, given that Fish and Wildlife has few greenbacks to spare for such things. The goods were to be delivered to an undercover post office box in Connecticut.

Minutes after the cash changed hands, ATF agent Bob Clifford heard Lukman volunteer that he had

access to automatic weapons, handled with gloves to avoid fingerprints. "AKs are nice," Lukman said.

"He certainly got my attention," Clifford says.

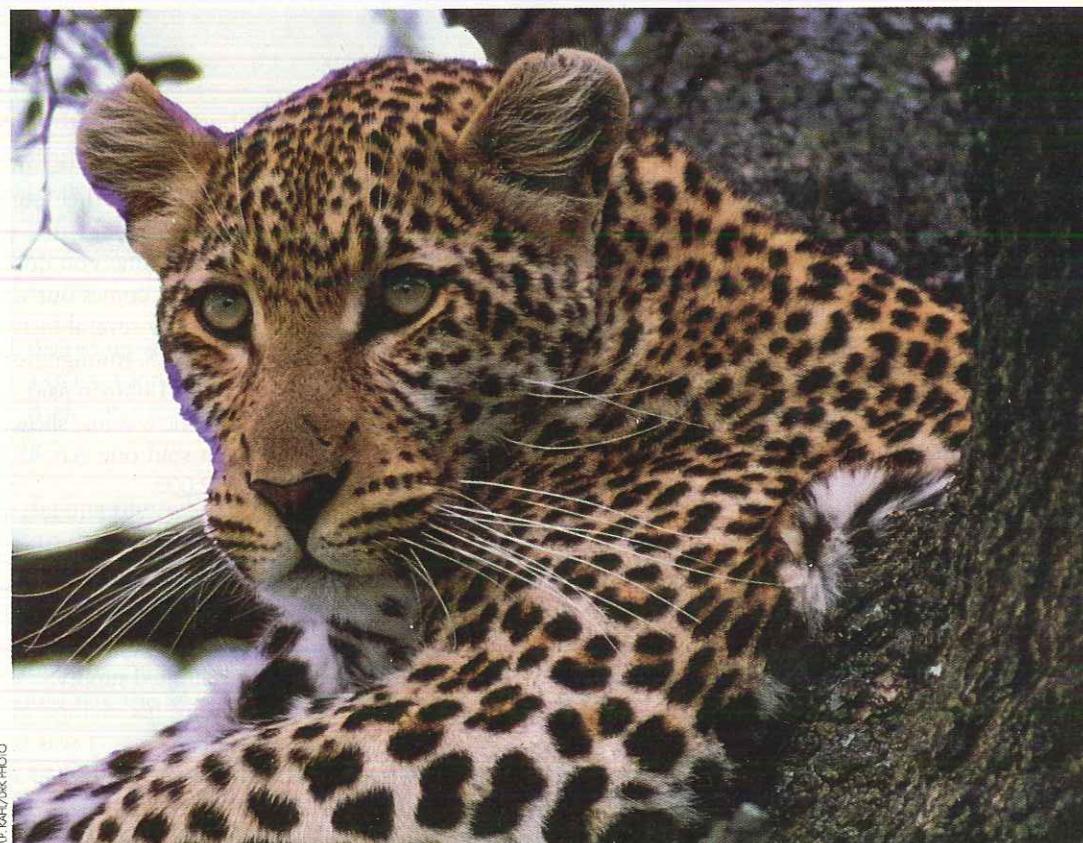
Contrary to what many people believe, federal law allows private citizens to own machine guns, but the paperwork, background checking, and fees make possession difficult. Illegal possession of a machine gun is a big-time crime.

A

few days later, in the same diner, Lukman revealed that he had access not only to machine guns from his African sources, but also munitions, such as Soviet fragmentation grenades and land mines. The firearms supposedly were captured from Cuban soldiers in Angola by South African troops.

Lukman further confided that he regularly sent military items received from Africa for resale to his friend Chris, later identified as Christopher Smith. Lukman had met Smith, who lived in Georgia, near Fort Benning, through the Rhodesian Veterans Association. The proceeds from the arms sales were split by Smith, Lukman, and his African contacts.

The weapons, Lukman said, were "brand new, ready to go." He asked Moulton if he had ever handled an AK-47. Moulton played dumb about firearms, adding that he had an ex-marine friend, Bobby (Clifford), who was into guns.



A leopard, Tanzania. An endangered species in West Africa, the leopard is threatened with extinction in central and East Africa. For the sum of \$1,700, undercover agent Rich Moulton bought a mounted leopard head and rug from Connecticut businessman John C. Lukman, Jr.

The bloated carcass of a black rhino killed for its horn, Kenya.

The bulk of the pressure from the trade in rhino horns falls on the black rhino in Africa and, to a much lesser extent, the Sumatran rhino in Asia.



BOYD NORTON

"You tell your Marine buddy that if he's interested in anything that's Communist-bloc-oriented, there's nothing we can't get," said Lukman.

Arrangements were made for Lukman to meet Bobby. The meeting was delayed, however, because Lukman was invited to the White House while Jonas Savimbi was there seeking U.S. support for his UNITA cause.

When he got back, Lukman called Moulton, saying, "Tell your marine buddy I have a few things that those pig stickers attach to," referring to bayonets that attach to AK-47s.

Early in July, Moulton and Clifford got together with Lukman in his Newington, Connecticut, apartment. Lukman pulled down the window shades, turned on a lamp, and, presto, produced two AK-47s. "Within five minutes I had two machine guns in my hands," says Clifford.

The suspect confided that, as with the wildlife contraband, his arms suppliers were the Meirings. On a counter was a photograph of Major Meiring in full battle dress. While Clifford distracted Lukman in conversation, Moulton jotted down the spelling of the officer's name from the back of the picture.

Then, suddenly, Lukman pulled out a Czechoslovakian

9mm pistol. The agents, unarmed because they couldn't conceal weapons in their summer clothes, began to sweat. Had Lukman made them?

"When someone you don't know well, who is involved in criminal acts, comes out with a pistol in hand, the danger level is raised by several increments," says Clifford, now an agent for the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service.

The pistol, Lukman said, had come from Meiring. As it turned out, "he was just showing off his stuff," says Clifford.

Lukman sold one AK-47 to Clifford, who ordered five more for \$2,000.

"I have just sold you a totally illegal weapon," said Lukman.

On July 18, Lukman telephoned Moulton, this time about the previously taboo subject, rhino horn. Major Meiring, said Lukman, had called and offered horns, of which he had an "unlimited supply."

Explaining his change of heart regarding rhino horn, Lukman now says, "I was trying to make a buck," adding that he knew the rhinos had already been killed.

Lukman related that Meiring had one horn weighing about eight pounds at his home in Windhoek, Namibia. Moulton replied that his Asian customers in New York City would pay \$58,000 for the horn—about \$450 an ounce—the price of gold at the time. According to court documents, Lukman called Meiring and arranged to pay

him \$30,000 for the horn. Of the \$28,000 profit, Lukman was to get \$10,000 and Moulton \$18,000. Their shares were to be concealed from the Meirings.

A few days later, Lukman got an overseas phone call, which he later described to Moulton.

"Well, you sent the guy some packages, everything was fine," Lukman told his caller.

"Yeah, but do you know him? I mean, this is much bigger."

"Well, Pat, everything is trust," said Lukman.

After he and Moulton sealed the deal for the horn, Lukman traveled to Chicago to pick it up from a sergeant major in the SADF, who was a member of a parachute team headed for a sky-diving competition in Quincy, Illinois. The sergeant major was identified as Waldemar Schutte, who, like the Meirings, was indicted in the case. He remains in South Africa.

Moulton had noticed the number of Lukman's Chicago flight written on a piece of paper in his apartment, so federal agents were able to shadow him to the Windy City. Lukman knew Schutte only by description, including that he was heavyset. While at O'Hare Airport, he saw a big man handcuffed and led away by customs officers. It was a bad moment for Lukman, until he realized that the man had arrived on a flight from Belgium, while Schutte was due from London.

Lukman was to fly to Namibia.

Lukman directed Rich Moulton to take a different route than usual to the airport. Moulton began to sweat again. Had he been found out? Agents in the car tailing Moulton wondered the same thing. Then, at Lukman's direction, Moulton suddenly took three right turns, a method agents have of alerting their backup that they are in trouble. But it was a false alarm; Lukman was merely trying to find a pharmacy.

Finally, at Bradley Airport, Moulton gave Lukman another \$10,000—part of the \$30,000 for Meiring. As they walked through the airport, Moulton experienced another cliff-hanger. Heading down the hall toward them was a U.S. customs inspector whom Moulton knew well. If she greeted him, the jig was up. As Moulton held his breath, Lukman looked at the inspector and said, "There's the enemy." The customs inspector, however, was concentrating on paperwork in her hand and walked into an office without looking up. Moulton breathed a sigh of relief. They flew to JFK without further incident.

Meanwhile, U.S. customs agent Pete Harrington had been logging air miles quick-time. First, he traveled to Boston, where he obtained from a customs office the remainder of the funds to give to Lukman. Then, he jumped on a plane and flew to JFK, arriving ahead of Moulton and his target.

Harrington gave the money to Lukman, who added it to the \$10,000 concealed in his luggage. All told, he was carrying more than \$34,000 out of the country. Federal law mandates that international transportation of cash in excess of \$10,000 be reported to customs. Prior to boarding his Namibia flight, Lukman signed a customs declaration saying he had only \$2,000 with him.

After Lukman delivered the money to Meiring in Namibia, he called Beveridge, who turned over the horn to Moulton and Clifford.

On August 22, Lukman returned to Connecticut with a leopard rug. According to an affidavit filed by Moulton, the rug had been smuggled out of Zimbabwe for Ian Smith. Lukman asked Moulton to sell it for Smith, who allegedly would need the money while attending a meeting of the Rhodesian Veterans Association in Las Vegas.

The rug entered the country boxed and camouflaged with a zebra rug. Lukman also was carrying zebra meat, which he knew would be confiscated, to distract the attention of customs inspectors.

"New York is the [expletive deleted] easiest customs I've ever seen in my life," Lukman asserted to Moulton, not real-

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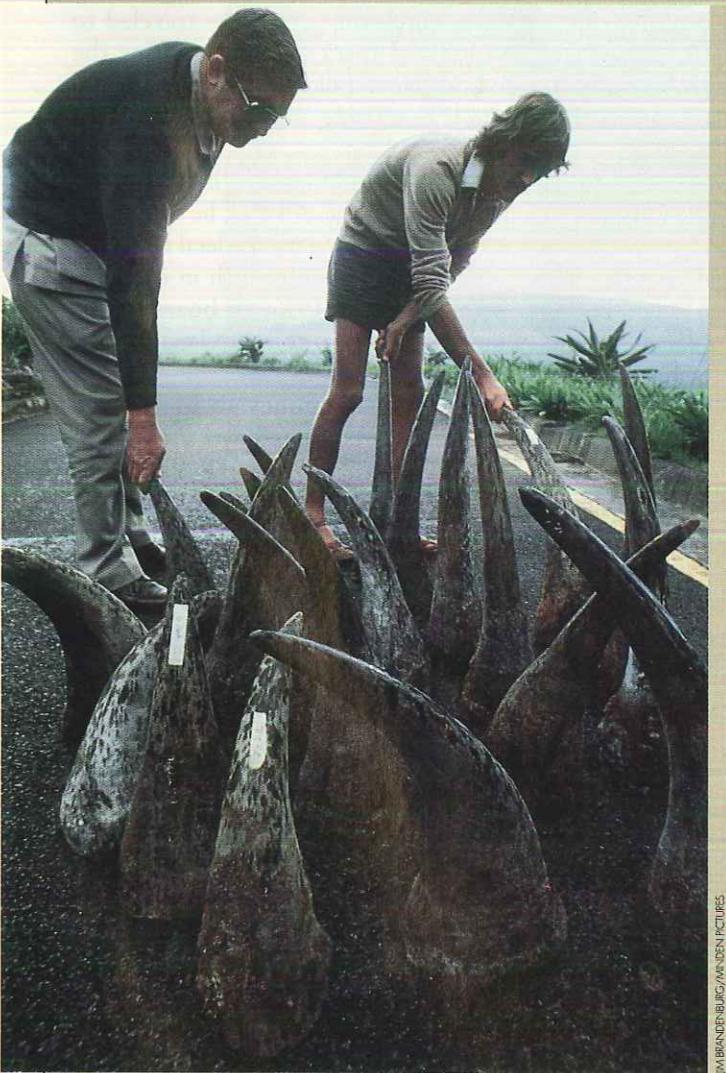
the information that he had access to

an "unlimited supply."

RHINO VICE SQUAD

The rhino vice case was one of several scandals involving smuggling of rhinoceros horns and elephant ivory that led to the formation of a special Endangered Species Protection Unit of the South Africa police, operating covertly to smash the criminal rings that have led to the country's being dubbed a "wildlife outlaw."

The special unit began operations in 1989, after an international hue and cry over the way South Africa has been used as a funnel for illegal wildlife products, especially ivory and rhino horn. In a December 1988 letter to the South African Ministry of Environmental Affairs and Water Affairs, Dr. John Ledger, director of the nation's Endangered Wildlife Trust, cited the Connecticut case as evidence that South Africa is "guilty" on the charge of being a "wildlife outlaw."



MBANDI BUGANDA PICTURES

Confiscated horns from white rhinos, Natal, South Africa. There are probably no white rhinos now living outside protected areas or zoos.

He added that "the truckloads of ivory and rhino horn entering South Africa are carrying the remains of elephants and rhinos from Zaire, Zambia, Angola, and Zimbabwe. It is South African criminals who have made it possible for poachers in these countries to find a ready market for tusks and horns."

Ledger led the campaign for the creation of the special police unit to stop wildlife smuggling, adding that conservation agencies in the country could not handle the scope of the smuggling operations. South African news media reported that the individuals involved in the smuggling were major criminals and labeled them the "South African Mafia."

South Africa became a channel for wildlife contraband for several reasons: the country's major shipping ports, excellent transportation, the existence of established racketeering rings, and a readily convertible currency.

In an exclusive interview from Pretoria, Major Pieter Lategan, who heads the unit, described how it was established with help from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and a now-defunct British firm, KAS Enterprises, made up largely of former commandos in the elite British Special Air Services. (FWS also has assisted other African nations in combatting wildlife poaching and smuggling.) Lategan singled out FWS Special Agent Carl Mainen, based in Washington, D.C., as especially helpful in developing the wildlife squad.

He said that members of the special unit now closely work with wildlife agencies in neighboring black African countries to root out and prosecute smugglers and poachers who are the source of supply. South African police have conducted operations in Zambia, Mozambique, and Botswana, he added, with the support and cooperation of their governments. The political changes that have occurred in South Africa have made this possible, according to Lategan.

The police wildlife unit consists of 10 men. However, it can draw on personnel and resources from other units within the police force, such as squads that investigate narcotics, diamond and gold smuggling, and stock theft. Lategan said that the sophistication of the smuggling rings is such that cracking them requires police expertise in intelligence and other investigative techniques.

"We have found that if someone smuggles drugs, gold, or diamonds, that person may be involved in smuggling wildlife and firearms as well," Lategan said. "The routes used to move the contraband are the same."

The police major said that his unit was well on its way to developing a sophisticated data bank on wildlife racketeers in Africa and would be happy to cooperate with other African nations by sharing information and resources. "If other African countries need us, they should just put in a call and we'll be there."

— E. Ricciuti

izing that throughout the case, customs officials purposely did not interfere with his comings and goings.

Later, in Las Vegas, Lukman used his own funds to pay Smith \$1,000 for the rug, eventually selling it to Moulton for the same amount.

On August 25, Moulton received a gift from Africa, a buffalo-hide briefcase, accompanied by this note:

Dear Rick [Moulton used the name Rick Moore throughout the case]:

Just a small token of our appreciation for your help in this last "deal" and we hope this is the start of a long and happy (and also profitable) relationship and we look forward to the next "deal."

Regards,
John, Marius & Pat

Several days later, Moulton received a telephone call from Lukman, who reported that he was in El Salvador and had been in Nicaragua. Lukman had been in touch with Meiring, who told him that he had gone to the Namibian-Angolan border area and examined some rhino horns that were in a pit. He estimated the hole may have contained as many as 100 horns in all. They were in the possession of bushmen led by an uncle of Meiring's tracker. The uncle wanted \$15,000 per horn.

When Lukman returned to Connecticut, he met with Moulton. Moulton later testified, "I told him [Lukman] my clients were interested in purchasing 25 kilograms (approximately eight horns)."

Lukman decided to go for broke and try to buy several horns to sell to Moulton's presumed clients. He raised \$52,000 from his girlfriend, Mary Ann McAllister, and two Connecticut men, Kenneth R. Hussey and Joseph F. Reilly. An employee of a Connecticut bank, McAllister wired the money to a Swiss bank account in the name of "Dennis" in Johannesburg, who supposedly operated a gold refinery. Meiring, said Lukman, would pick up the money from Dennis and then purchase the horns.

Meanwhile, the agents had received another AK-47, this one in a box marked "wood carvings."

In mid-October, Lukman flew to Namibia to collect the rhino horns. According to Moulton, Lukman telephoned him from Africa and claimed that he had eight horns. However, Lukman added, because things were so "hot" due to border warfare, the horns were still in a pit "across the river" in Angola. He said that he and Meiring would try to recover the horns within a couple of days, and that he anticipated returning to the United States with them by month's end.

On Halloween, Moulton received another telephone call from Lukman. This time Lukman said he had managed to obtain only one double horn and was ready to smuggle it home. □

The trap was set and ready to be sprung. On the night of November 2, Moulton met Mary Ann McAllister at a Bradley Airport arrival gate. Lukman had called her from JFK and told her he had passed through customs and was heading for Bradley.

"So that's it," McAllister said. "I don't think there's any more problem at this point." She couldn't have been more wrong. Agents had been tailing Lukman from the moment he arrived at JFK.

Lukman's arrival at Bradley was something of a media event. Not only were agents videotaping him and listening via a microphone secreted on Moulton, but a CBS television crew was cranking away for the program "48 Hours." The network had found out about the case while doing a story on rhino poaching in Africa and had made a deal not to break the story if a crew could be in on the arrest.

Their footsteps echoing in the darkness, Moulton, Lukman, and McAllister walked through the airport parking lot to where McAllister had left her car. The journey seemed to take forever. Moulton, lugging the cardboard box containing the horn and some heavy sculptures for concealment, was tired. McAllister had forgotten where her car was. The agent knew because he spotted the surveillance van nearby, but he couldn't say so. Breathing hard, he patiently carried the box.

Eventually, they found the car and McAllister opened the trunk. Moulton set down the box; and as Lukman opened it, Moulton gave a sign, then turned and slowly walked away.

Two vehicles pulled up, one on either side of McAllister's car. Men moved in the darkness.

"Federal agents," they informed Lukman as they surrounded him. "You are under arrest. Put your hands behind your back..."

After the arrest, agents raided Lukman's apartment. It was filled with African curios and mementos: pictures of African soldiers in battle dress, an autographed photo of UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi, a photo of Lukman with Ian Smith, Smith's election posters, a UNITA flag, and a huge wall map of Africa. A machine gun lay in a closet and a bayonet was stuck into a table.

In Lukman's baggage, agents at JFK had found a recording from South Africa. It was a conservation song titled "Run Rhino Run."

POSTSCRIPT: Lukman was sentenced on June 15, 1989. He was fined \$20,000 and sentenced to 27 months in prison. He was given early release after about a year. McAllister received a \$250 fine and a year's probation; Beveridge was fined \$250, Sher, \$100, and Hussey and Reilly \$2,500 each. Isaac Z. Saada, the man who bought the leopard mount that triggered the entire investigation, was fined \$10,000 and given three years' probation.

On April 20, 1989, the ATF received a telephone call from Lukman's attorney, Richard Brown. He had just received a package from Namibia. "Come and get it," the attorney said. When ATF agents opened the package they found 16 AK-47 magazines and two live Soviet F-1 fragmentation grenades. □