CHAPTER 1

The Delivery Man

One evening in April 2001, Jean-Pierre Bemba, a Congolese warlord leading a rebel army of guerrillas and gun-toting teenagers, discovered that he had a problem. Camped with his ragtag troops on a remote mountaintop in the northeastern corner of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC; formerly Zaire) with a magnificent view of Lake Albert, Bemba realized he was low on beer.

The rotund Bemba was hardly cut out for the role of austere revolutionary. Not one to give up the comforts of home to live off the land with his deprived gunmen, the articulate, fastidiously dressed warlord traveled with his own generators, chemical toilets, and hard tents, complete with cots. He was not about to waste a lovely night of revelry in the bush because of a simple oversight of logistics.

Fortunately, Bemba's traveling companion had a solution. Viktor Bout, who was tagging along with the warlord as part of an arms delivery into his remote stronghold, was equipped not only with his usual stores of weapons and ammunition, but also with the means to scour for beer. As part of the full-service package he provided to Bemba's war machine, Bout had rented the rebel leader two aging

Soviet-built Mi-24 helicopters. Bemba and his retinue normally used the gunships to avoid the brutal marches that his troops were forced to make across hills covered with scrub brush and hellish clouds of torturing mosquitoes and small, biting flies. But on this night, Bout's helicopters proved uniquely fortuitous.

Moving swiftly with the authority of a seasoned commando, Bout gathered his crew and, accompanied by a heavily armed escort of twenty of Bemba's men, choppered across Lake Albert into Uganda. There, they occupied a small Ugandan town for about an hour, ordering residents in the town's market square to find all the available beer. When the townspeople had rounded up a few cases—Bout paid a little money for them—he scrambled back into the copter with his occupation force and flew off. Fortified with enough drink to last the night, the revelers sprawled across a secured hilltop as lights twinkled from the fishing boats on the lake below.[1]

Bemba could afford Bout's services because Bemba controlled access to something Bout very much wanted: a rich diamond field that netted the rebel leader $1 million to $3 million a month in sales. These "blood diamonds"—illicit gems that were mined in rebel-held territory and shipped abroad despite international embargoes against their sales—were mostly moved illegally through the neighboring Central African Republic, where both Bemba and Bout had friends and protectors in high places.[2]

When Bout finally bedded down, he slept, as he often did, with some of his crew near one of the helicopters. The aircraft was primed to make an emergency exit in case something went wrong. Bout's willingness to go the extra length for Bemba, despite the risks, made his client happy and kept the good times rolling. But Bout always took care to stay a step ahead, even from his clients.

Bout's ability to supply his customers with whatever they needed under almost any circumstances—while always keeping his options open—has come to define the Russian entrepreneur and his remarkable career. Unlike his rivals in the underground arms trade, Bout has not been content to live from deal to deal. He is a quintessential big-picture man who understands that organizations, not

deals, are the underpinnings of meteoric business success. While most of his Russian countrymen struggled with the strange new complexities of international capitalism—the USSR's mortal ideological anathema for nearly three quarters of a century—Bout quickly built a flexible, expanding corporate organization that fused the functional remnants of the archaic Soviet system with the West's fluid, ambition-driven business culture. He built an operation that ranged across continents and hemispheres, carefully scattering planes, handpicked employees, corporate entities, and hidden wealth, creating a formidable empire capable of operating at a moment's notice in dozens of cities across the world.

Not even thirty years old when he first drew the attention of intelligence officials in the mid-1990s, Bout, now forty, remains the preeminent figure atop the world's multibillion-dollar contraband weapons trade, an underground commerce that is outpaced in illicit profits only by global narcotics sales.[3] Bout's corporate earnings have reached easily into the hundreds of millions, and his own personal net worth was conservatively estimated at $5 million in 1998—well before he consolidated his firm's multimillion-dollar take from the Taliban and his organization's post–September 11 supply flights for the United States in Iraq. In Afghanistan alone, U.S. Treasury officials and Western intelligence reports claim, Bout's operation reaped more than $50 million for deals with the extremist mullahs. And hundreds of flights into Iraq for the U.S. military and private contractors may have netted his operations as much as $60 million.[4]

Bout and his associates became masters at outsourcing their arms profits. So careful with his investments that he retained finance experts and even a Swiss bank administrator, Bout stands accused by the Belgian government of illegally laundering more than $32.5 million in arms profits through shell holding companies between 1994 and 1996.[5] Often he took his payments in diamonds and other commodities stripped from the land in areas controlled by his warlord and tyrant clients. Congolese rebels offered coltan, a mineral ore used to make cell phones and computers. Ahmad Shah Massoud, the late Northern Alliance leader and Afghan defense minister, reportedly paid in emeralds. Charles Taylor in Liberia paid in diamonds, and to ensure that the payments were accurate, Bout

hired a gemologist who often flew along on weapons flights to assess the stones.

New wars meant more money for Bout and for his competitors in the arms trade. But unlike his rivals, he also had an unfettered ability to deliver his goods. His private air force—which grew to more than sixty Russian cargo planes and a handful of American models by the late 1990s—made him the top private supplier and transporter of killing implements in a world addicted to his products.

Each year over the past decade some three hundred thousand to five hundred thousand people have died in sputtering, little-understood regional wars that have eroded international stability from the Democratic Republic of the Congo to Colombia.[6] Most were killed with light weapons, from semiautomatic rifles to easily carried machine guns. The most popular and durable of them all is the Kalashnikov assault rifle, known as the AK-47, manufactured across the former Soviet bloc, as well as in China, North Korea, and elsewhere.

Invented in 1947 by Mikhail Kalashnikov, the AK-47, with its distinctive banana-shaped ammunition clip, flooded the Third World because of its simplicity of design and ruggedness. It rapidly became the weapon of choice for liberation movements, terrorists, and guerrilla armies. It is simple enough to be taken apart by a child, and often is in Africa's conflicts. It could take a beating and keep on firing long after most other weapons were inoperable. More than a hundred million of the weapons have been manufactured in the past six decades, nearly ten times as many as its nearest rival, the U.S.-made M-16.[7] Ammunition was another vast, lucrative market because most of the armed groups across Africa and Latin America had little training and no fire discipline. Thousands of rounds could be expended in a brief firefight as gunmen fired wildly into the bush until their supplies were exhausted. Similarly, the Russian antitank rocket-propelled grenade known as the RPG or "Ruchnoy Protivotankovy Granatomyot" has flooded the Third World since its invention in 1961. RPGs were skillfully wielded by mujahideen fighters against Soviet forces in Afghanistan in the 1980s and by Somali street fighters against U.S. Special Forces in the Black Hawk Down battle in Mogadishu in 1993. This constant, profligate use of

Russian-designed weapons and ammunition created a constant demand for resupply.[8]

Bout did not take sides in his business. Any and every combatant was a prospective customer. His planes simultaneously armed warring factions in several different conflicts, aiding the Northern Alliance and the Taliban in Afghanistan, rebel and government troops in Angola, and several sides in the prolonged wars that convulsed the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

"He was friends of everyone," said one longtime associate. "They tolerated this because they had no alternative. No one else would deliver the packages. You never shoot the postman. He has no loyalty. His loyalty is to his balls, his sweet ass, and maybe his wallet."[9]

Bout has often insisted he is simply a businessman, and he has long expressed bitterness about being targeted as an international criminal, complaining he is a marked man because of his high profile as a successful Russian. "I exclusively deal with air transportation," he said in 2002 in one of the few interviews he has granted. "And I have never been involved in the arms trade."

Indeed, Bout's aircraft often carry legitimate freight. His planes flew humanitarian supplies to nations ravaged in late 2004 by the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami. And they have hauled UN relief supplies for refugees fleeing the same African conflicts stoked by the guns he sold. Bout-controlled planes have ferried flowers from South Africa to Belgium and shipped beef and chicken around the African continent. Through much of the 1990s, he owned the franchise to sell Antonov aircraft in Africa, and ran one of the few maintenance facilities and aircraft-painting facilities outside of Russia that serviced Soviet-built planes.

Remarkably, even though many of the weapons shipments flown by Bout's planes have had lethal and reprehensible consequences, the deliveries were often made legally. He began just as the world economy was entering an era of fast-paced transformation. The laws governing the sales of weapons, designed to deal with country-to-country sales, simply could not keep pace. The result was a vast "gray market" of gunrunning that might violate UN or regional embargoes, but rarely ran afoul of national arms laws. The Bout network's work with the repressive Taliban did not overtly

violate international law—because global arms and trade bans on the militants were enacted too late, and because the world at large remained unaware of his activities until after September 11. Even now, cracks and loopholes in international law often allow the Bout network to continue operating with near-impunity.

Bout was artful in skirting the edge of laws that were clearly unenforceable. Under existing international law, weapons merchants have few obligations—other than moral compunctions—to ensure that their arms supplies go to a legitimate army or state. And though a growing number of countries have enacted toughened statutes covering brokers and even transporters such as Bout, cargo carriers have little legal obligation to view and authenticate what their containers really hold. Customs officials, too, are rarely obliged to check invoices against real cargo. So the shell games continue around the globe, with few brokers held accountable.

"Very few countries have the sort of legal instruments to deal with exactly those middlemen or brokers," said Johan Peleman, a Belgian arms trade expert who investigated Bout's violations of weapons embargoes for several UN panels. "When it comes to making real recommendations and heavy-duty commitments to stop this, most countries don't want this practice of middlemen to end. They don't even want to regulate it."[10]

While often described by casual acquaintances as polite, easygoing, and gifted at picking up languages, Bout did not get by on charm. In business relationships and social situations, he was often fussy in his personal habits, impatient to get to the point, overbearing and aggressive in cultures that prized social niceties and tact. His reputation was built almost entirely on his well-established history of delivering whatever his clients wanted, when they wanted it, and for that, he could be forgiven almost anything else.

He was brash, at times to the point of bullying, and did not brook criticism well. During Bout's hopscotch tour with Bemba of rebel strongholds in the Congolese hills, someone made the mistake of mentioning a verse of the Bible, offering an interpretation that seemed to bother the Russian. In front of a crowd of people, Bout suddenly launched into a loud, extended discourse in fluent French, explaining how the verse should be taken and how foolish

the interpreter was. The startled audience of his impromptu exegesis was stunned into silence. No one dared disagree.

"He is really intelligent and could talk about anything," said Dirk Draulans, a Belgian correspondent for *Knack* magazine who tagged along with Bout and Bemba during their rounds in the Congolese bush. "It was sophisticated small talk, anything from the Bible to free trade zones. However, he is not charming and he does not have humor."

Yet at other times Bout waxed lyrical, conjuring up a bleakly haunting vista as he reminisced about his journeys in Afghanistan. "One of the most beautiful landscapes I ever saw was Afghanistan in spring," Bout rhapsodized. "A third of the country is colored blood red by poppies." Bout also showed a sociologist's fascination with tribal patterns in the regions where his guns stoked bloodshed. "He knew all about the historic and current Hutu and Tutsi migrations in the region," Draulans recalled. "He was a very smart guy. He said he was there as a tourist. That was the big joke. He said maybe some bad things had gone on the airplanes, but you know, he cannot inspect the cargo. But we saw weapons being loaded twice onto VB aircraft."

Like a tourist from hell, Bout incessantly videotaped nearly every meeting, every flight, every village and hamlet where he landed. His videotaping habit got him into trouble once on the same African trip, when he wandered away from a political meeting Bemba was holding and began filming a hospital in a nearby town. After Bout was gone about an hour, a local policeman showed up in Bemba's camp to consult with one of the warlord's bodyguards. The policeman confided that he had just arrested a white man, who had written his name on the paper, for illegally filming at the local hospital. This white man was being held in the town's sweltering, fetid prison, angrily demanding immediate freedom. The officer wanted to know what he should do with the prisoner, then showed a scrap of paper bearing the man's name. It was Bout. Informed in no uncertain terms that his prisoner was an important person and had to be sprung immediately, the policeman, suddenly trembling and sweating, rushed back to the jail to let his VIP inmate out. Time and again Bout's carefully cultivated friendships with Big Men would save him from unpleasantness.

"Bout could not have done what he did without the help of princes, kings, and presidents," said Michael Scheuer, a former CIA counterterrorism analyst who headed Alec station, the agency's in-house unit that tracked Osama bin Laden in the late 1990s. "It would have been impossible without help from the very highest levels."

In Sierra Leone, Bout negotiated weapons deals directly with Sam "Mosquito" Bockarie, a wiry hairdresser-turned-battle-commander notorious for savage combat tactics. Bockarie's nickname derived from his boasts that he would suck the life out of his enemies. Bockarie's violent Revolutionary United Front (RUF) forces were sponsored by another Bout client and friend, Charles Taylor, the president of Liberia. Taylor is one of only two sitting heads of government since World War II to be indicted for crimes against humanity and now awaits trial in The Hague on eleven counts, including mass murder and the enslavement of citizens.[11] Taylor's alleged atrocities were legion, but he earned particular condemnation for forming and training Small Boy Units (SBUs), fierce combat units composed of children who were often sent into battle high on amphetamines and cocaine to bear the brunt of the fighting.

Like Taylor, Bemba of the DRC, who was named one of the country's vice presidents as part of a fragile 2005 peace accord, was another Bout client who now faces charges of human rights abuses at the International Court of Justice in The Hague. He was a player in the decade-long spasms of war in which tens of thousands died and hundreds of thousands were forced to flee their homes.[12]

In Angola, Bout's planes shipped weapons to government forces and to the União Nactional para a Independência Total de Angola (UNITA) rebels under Jonas Savimbi. UNITA had degenerated from a once-respected rebel movement seeking to overthrow a Marxist regime to a violent force that preyed on civilians. A 1999 report by the U.S. Institute of Peace said that UNITA "has plunged Angola back into a recurring nightmare of war and human rights depredations."[13]

Despite his easy entry into the inner circles of dictators and warlords, Bout was socially awkward and contemptuous of many of the African leaders he dealt with. Conspicuous among his clients, a white man in a black continent, he would walk in on presidents and

ministers without waiting to be announced and demand immediate attention, regardless of what his prominent client might be doing. Several complained behind his back of his apparent racism and lack of respect, but few ever dared to confront him to his face.

Bout's entitled sense of ease was aided by the constant presence of a security detail of Russians who had served with the special forces of the GRU, the former Soviet Union's military intelligence apparatus. Heavily armed and well trained, they made sure no one got too close to the boss if Bout did not want to be bothered. The guards generally kept a low profile, though one redheaded security man was conspicuous for the large hunting knife he carried.

Bout appeared at home roughing it in the bush. When Draulans traveled with him, Bout sometimes chose to pitch a small tent and sleep with his bodyguards next to his aircraft, rather than riding into the villas that Bemba commandeered as his headquarters. Bout dealt with few in the rebel command except Bemba himself, and spent most of his time with his bodyguards and pilots. Most days, Bout would set up his satellite telephone and make a morning round of brief calls, alternating in Russian, English, French, and other languages, usually for about an hour. Mostly he barked orders, juggling several calls in several languages simultaneously if his cellular phone was operational. And he always made sure to hang up after no more than a minute or two—a security precaution to avoid tracing.

If his precautions bordered at times on paranoia, Bout seemed to hew to at least one unvarying personal code: entrusted cargo had to be delivered. Bout almost always came through. Ironically, his widespread network of weapons suppliers and clients, stretching from Afghanistan to South Africa, enabled him to embrace the capitalist ethic of customer service foreign to his Communist upbringing.

No effort was spared, not even in the roughest conditions and terrain. American officials who saw the first spy satellite photographs of Bout's planes in action were astonished by their setting: crude dirt airfields in East Africa. Most of the runways were pocked and rutted to the extent that they posed impassable hazards for most modern air freighters. But Bout's antique Antonovs, Ilyushins, and Yakovkevs—some of them forty-year-old models—

were durable enough to take the punishment. Maintenance facilities were unheard of in the war zones where Bout's planes flew, so his crews had to be adept at jerry-rigging almost anything. Civil radar coverage on the African continent was severely limited and huge swaths of territory went uncovered, making it virtually impossible to track his old planes as they shuttled into the interior—or hunt them down if they crashed. At least five are known to have crashed or been destroyed by ground fire.[14] Several veteran Russian air executives said the actual toll of crashed Bout-owned and Bout-leased planes is even higher, but hidden by his veiled corporate structure and shifting plane registries. There have also been unconfirmed reports of pilot deaths. "They are real kamikaze. There is no better word for it," said one former Bout partner.[15]

The fuselages of Bout's aircraft were often sheathed in lead, which made them heavier but offered crucial protection against sprayed bullets. In May 1997, Bout's friend and client Mobutu Sese Seko, president of Zaire, was refusing to face the fact that his despotic rule spanning three decades in that country was finally over. As rebel forces advanced, he had retreated from the capital of Kinshasa to the lavish Gbadolite Palace, a few hundred miles to the north.

Finally, Mobutu summoned an aircraft to carry him and a cache of plundered loot into exile in friendly Togo, in West Africa. Bout answered the call, sending an aging Antonov to pick up the cancer-ridden dictator and his entourage. But the plane arrived as rebel troops loyal to Laurent Kabila closed in. Mobutu and his aides hurried aboard as the engines were still running. As the old Antonov lumbered down the runway, Mobutu's remaining bodyguards, realizing they had been left behind as targets for the rebels, fired a hail of bullets as the aircraft slowly rose from the end of the rutted landing strip. Bullets peppered the aircraft but did not puncture the armored fuselage. Mobutu lived long enough to die four months later in gilded exile in Rabat, Morocco.[16] "We were lucky it was a Russian plane," Mobutu's son Nzanga later remarked. "If it had been a Boeing it would have exploded."[17]

Once, according to an aviation associate of Bout's, one of his aged Russian planes, scheduled to fly a load of weapons into Angola from South Africa, faced grounding by authorities for safety viola-

tions. The plane's tires were so worn that metal bands were showing through. But rather than delay the flight by waiting for a rushed shipment of new tires, Bout suggested that his crew coat the worn tires in black paint to make them appear new, hiding the telltale silver wire.

Taking a look, Bout's agreeable pilot announced that since the Russian plane's tires typically had twenty-one rubber layers and only seven had worn through, "there was no problem," recalled the Bout associate. Only the intervention of Bout's nervous client forced the crew to wait for replacement tires before taking off.

"He did the job, so people came back for more, and he kept delivering, no matter what the circumstances, no matter where he was called on," said an intelligence official who tracked Bout. "People know that and respect that."

Bout may have always delivered, but he never left calling cards. For more than a decade, he shied away from publicity, maintaining a rigid silence with a hermit's fanaticism. Only when he felt threatened did he reluctantly surface to explain himself.

His past is "hopelessly mired in obscurity," said Thomas R. Pickering, who was involved in American efforts to track Bout both during Pickering's mid-1990s tenure as U.S. ambassador to Moscow and later as undersecretary of state for political affairs in the last three years of the Clinton administration. "That is clearly how Bout wants to keep it."

Discretion was of the essence in the arms trade. Too much flamboyance could scuttle a delicate arms deal, or mark a delivery man for capture or death. Customers were happiest when foes were unaware of what lay hidden in their arsenals. The need for caution became even more paramount for Bout when he began playing both sides in some of the conflicts he stoked, arming both the UNITA rebels and government forces in Angola, and later, the Afghan government and their mortal enemies the Taliban. Bout justified his silence by hinting of menacing forces at work behind him. "If I told you everything I'd get the red hole right here," he said to one interviewer, pointing to the middle of his forehead.[18]

To stay safe, routes had to be varied, schedules staggered, landing zones constantly altered. At the same time, deliveries always had

to come in on time and weapons loads shipped as advertised. Keeping the customer satisfied kept one's reputation solid. Whatever else his customers felt about Bout, they counted on him to come through.

Bout kept his origins a blur, sparing not a single anecdote from his childhood or recollection of his brief Soviet military career. The first photos passed discreetly to the press were grainy Russian passport snapshots, supposedly taken when Bout was still in his twenties. They showed an unsmiling, prematurely middle-aged man with all traces of youth already extinguished. "It is sort of like Jesus," said one U.S. official. "He suddenly appears on the scene miraculously, as a full-blown character."

The first candid images of Bout emerged in late 2001, taken clandestinely by a Belgian photographer, Wim Van Cappellen, who joined Dirk Draulans on his journeys with Bout in the African bush in 2001. Van Cappellen carefully circumvented Bout's strict photo ban by surreptitiously capturing the Russian in the corner of his picture frames as he snapped with a wide-angle lens. The photos showed Bout in his element, supervising the off-loading of weapons from one of his battered cargo planes, surrounded by blank-faced rebel soldiers. He was dressed, as he almost always was, in a light polo shirt, khaki pants, with a baseball cap and sunglasses. It was the publication of the photographs, rather than Draulans' account of Bout's weapons movements, that prompted a furious call from the Russian to Bemba, bitterly complaining that he had been betrayed. Finally, in 2003, frustrated by mounting press coverage about his work for the Taliban and African warlords, the publicity-averse Bout consented to formal portraits for a *New York Times Magazine* feature. The photographs showed a pensive, aloof figure who could have walked on as a bourgeoisie villain in a Sergei Eisenstein film in the 1920s—preening in a severely tailored suit, staring defiantly at the camera.

By appearance, Bout imposed by girth and stolidity. With his fleshy face, drooping brush mustache, and suspicious, flint-eyed stare, he radiated torpid sullenness. He dressed to the nines when necessary, but formal wear only straitjacketed his barrel chest and ample gut and exposed his massive hands. Bout was more relaxed in the bush, with his freshly laundered, nearly identical sets of polo

shirts and khakis, affecting the casual look of Internet-age Western entrepreneurs unconcerned about boardroom haberdashery.

Bout's leaden appearance, intimates said, masked a resourceful intellect; a winning and persuasive demeanor when necessary; and a cunning, radarlike insight that allowed him to quickly size up any client, rival, or pursuer. In person, Bout was opaque, rarely confiding much, even to those who had dealt with him for years. Acquaintances who admired Bout for his deal-making acumen still left business meetings grasping for insights.

"How do you describe Bout? He was a man with a big belly and a big mustache," said one associate. "He was very friendly. He was quiet, he didn't say a lot. He loved to hunt, to be outdoors. He is hard to describe. He was very smart. He had a real gift for languages. He was always everyone's friend."

Bout was often helpful to others in the aviation industry. "If you needed a plane, he would swap routes and things with you," said Gary Busch, an arms transporter who worked around Bout for several years in Africa. "He was competitive, but also very cooperative. I have never heard anyone say anything bad about Viktor on a personal level. He was a nice guy." Sanjivan Ruprah, a Kenyan who worked with Bout in Liberia and the DRC and later tried to broker a multimillion-dollar deal for the U.S. government to use Bout's services in arming anti-Taliban forces in Afghanistan, said that his erstwhile partner "was always on the move and seemed to be very much in demand in the region. . . . He had a jovial, intelligent and shrewd personality."[19]

Bout could be winningly generous, as Vladislav Ketov, a globe-trotting Russian cyclist, discovered when he was stranded in the Persian Gulf emirate of Sharjah during a trip around the world. Bout paid for Ketov's ticket home to Russia, and over the next five years, sent him $50,000 to cover expenses for the cyclist's journeys and altruistic projects. Eager to respond in kind, Ketov offered to paste the logo of Bout's main air cargo company, Air Cess, on his bicycle. The publicity-averse Bout declined the offer, telling Ketov: "My company doesn't need much advertising."[20]

But others described Bout as a hot-tempered control freak who lashed out at his employees. Resentful business rivals and former partners told of a tough, skillful adversary who betrayed at will and

discarded old allies without a second thought. "If he had a hobby, it was money," recalled one of Bout's first business partners, Alexander Zakharovich Sidorenko, an aviation executive and decorated former Soviet paratrooper known for daredevil parachute feats. "He was ready to con and stiff even his best friends for a profit. I still don't understand it. It was as if he was walking on the edge of the knife all the time."[21]

After severing relations with Bout in 1994, another former partner, Sergei Mankhayev, said he "watched him grow richer and richer, and it is quite obvious how he did it. I am not sure he has ever done a fair, honest and legal contract in his life. Deception was his strongest point, beginning with the authorities and ending with his partners and even friends. He would cheat on you at the first opportunity."[22]

Bout clearly enjoyed the spoils of his aviation empire, acquiring Mercedeses and Range Rovers and building a far-flung real estate portfolio that included high-priced apartments in Moscow and St. Petersburg and gated estates on the Belgian coast, in Johannesburg, and in a secluded enclave in Sharjah.[23] Even in Monrovia, the hapless Liberian city that had the sad distinction of being the only capital in the world devoid of lights, water, and garbage service, Bout was granted the use of a plush villa near the Hotel Africa with a private generator and water supply.

His pilots alternately praised and despised him. For new hires and freelancers, wages were decent: $5,000 to $10,000 a month. But they hardly made up for planes that one air executive described as "flying coffins." Bout rented apartments in Africa for the crews during their extended stays, or negotiated to make sure they could stay in safe compounds. He kept an entire floor of the Meridien Hotel in Kigali, Rwanda, available year-round for himself and his crews. "He would take good care of his pilots," insisted Vladimir Sharpatov, a star aviator who flew for Bout through the late 1990s. "Once, after we delivered 34 tons of Afghan money [printed by the Russian government] to Kabul, he even invited the whole crew to a Russian restaurant in Sharjah. I remember him as a considerate and kind person and I cannot say anything bad about him."[24]

Bout also had grudging admirers within Sharjah's cutthroat expatriate community of Russian air entrepreneurs, pilots, crew-

men, and mechanics. "Viktor was very professional and he had a very professional staff, too," said former partner Igor Abdayev, general manager of Jet Line, Inc., which operated in concert with Bout's network. "But he sometimes tended to get carried away in his business operations. He got involved in those bad contracts in Africa and that in the end ruined his business reputation."[25]

Though willing to banter when necessary with his clients, Bout often seemed to be uncomfortable in large social settings. He had a dark, fatalistic sense of humor, veined with an ominous strain of menace. Draulans recalled how Bout "told the story of how a Belgian guy named Olivier Piret, one of his financial people, had come to visit him in South Africa. He came with his fiancée. On their way to Bout's house they were robbed. The thief threatened to cut off the girl's finger to get off the diamond ring. Viktor thought that was funny as hell. He laughed and laughed." Bout, Draulans sensed, was "vulgar, low-class and always overwhelming in conversation."

In the few interviews he has given over the years, Bout carefully sidestepped penetrating questions about his own activities. He complained perpetually of being targeted by enemies because he is Russian. When asked about his career in the arms trade, Bout usually responded with the well-rehearsed evasion that he was only in the air transport business and had no obligation to know what his cargo was.

"When a client orders a certain kind of transport and pays the lease per hour, what is transported and how it is transported is regulated not by the owner of the transport but by that organization or person who undertakes to organize the transportation," Bout said in a 2002 interview after he was named by the international police organization Interpol in a "red notice" warrant requesting his immediate arrest. "You see, it looks as if an airplane can take off by itself and fly somewhere. But what about somebody's decision to load it? A plane isn't parked in an open field. There are authorities, there are customs, security controls."[26]

Viktor's older brother, Sergei Bout, who has long worked at Bout's side as a detail man, sounding board, and the one person he trusts without hesitation, put it more succinctly during a terse exchange the same year: "Imagine a taxi driver who is supposed to

give a lift to a customer who asks him to take him to a certain location. But suddenly this taxi driver asks the customer what is in your suitcase. It is not my bloody business what my customer has in his trunk. I am a taxi driver, I am a carrier. I don't know what I carry. Maybe I carry a nuclear bomb. No one is informing me about it."[27]