

Meet Mark, financial bounty hunter

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Mark van Leewarden: A brush with Japanese organised crime convinced the former Dunedin cop he could make his living chasing the spoils of fraud.

1989, Bangkok. Mark van Leewarden, freshly graduated from Canterbury University's law school, is hunting.

His mark is tipped to soon flee to Sri Lanka, but the former New Zealand detective has cards to play of his own. He's arranged to meet a senior Thai policeman at a bar in Patpong, the capital's infamous red-light district.

"We were at this particular table and all this stuff was going on with the bar girls. He turns up at this meeting, he's in uniform with his pips on his shoulders and he's got about four guys around him all with automatic weapons," van Leewarden recalls, chuckling at the extraordinary support he was offered in return for a \$5000 fee.

"I know this guy that you're after. We can sort him out for you. We will have every cop in Sri Lanka looking for him and put him into custody," the Thai policeman said. "And if you really want, we'll get rid of him."

Van Leewarden was on the trail of Malay national Vannyasingham Sothirasan, the mastermind of a deft inside job that had seen the Swiss Banking Corporation defrauded of US\$20 million (NZ\$24.7m).

The former Dunedin policeman, now middle-aged with a shaven bullet-head and sharp suit, was working for the Melbourne-based firm Nationwide Investigation and Security Group on behalf of the Swiss bank.

Their brief: claw back as much ill-gotten cash as possible.

Dead men don't help with asset recovery, so van Leewarden had to turn down the Thai policeman's offer. They didn't catch Sothirasan then, or at an arranged meeting at the Trade Winds Hotel in Penang, Malaysia. That particular meeting was called off after a tip from the FBI that Sothirasan had also crossed the Japanese organised crime group, Yakuza, and subsequently been tagged with a \$1m assassination contract.

The tip said a bomb was planted where van Leewarden was to meet his mark, prompting the New Zealander's quick exit from Malaysia using only one of many pre-booked flights to confuse possible pursuers.

"He was the target, but it would have been us too," van Leewarden says.

Sothirasan was caught in the end, arrested in a European transit lounge in January 1990 and spirited to Geneva where he was convicted and sentenced to 14 years in prison.

This job, his introduction to chasing ill-gotten gains around the globe, convinced van Leewarden to make a career as a financial bounty hunter.

"That was my first one. I got a bit of a taste for it and learned you could do stuff, internationally," he says from his North Shore office.

Returning to New Zealand he was appointed to the bar of the High Court in 1992 and then set up his firm, Warden Consulting, in 1995. He works mostly for wealthy clients who have lost millions. He wouldn't reveal the size of his cut. In terms of what he recovers for his clients, van Leewarden said it varies.

"It's almost never 100 per cent. If you can get back 10 per cent, that's a good hit." Revenge is also a strong motivator.

It's a niche field with Warden Consulting the only New Zealand practitioner. His clients - who for obvious reasons would prefer to keep their fraud losses out of the limelight - have grown from mostly Australasian to global over the past decade, and he says his competition worldwide numbers only a couple of dozen firms.

It's a business that tends to fly under the radar, with unnamed clients and action taking place in courtrooms and bar rooms, but with 18 years under his belt, van Leewarden reckons its time to put some of his work on the table.

His modest steps towards doing so came during a presentation to the New Zealand Institute of Chartered Accountants' forensic conference this week, where his tales of bomb threats and Dutch hitmen jarred wonderfully with dry and theoretical discussions about money laundering policies.

Wearing two hats - those of lawyer and ex-cop - allows van Leewarden to don either a courtroom wig or battered fedora depending on whether he needs to freeze accounts in civil courts or track down the physical locations of fraudsters and laundered assets.

"To get these jobs done you need to be able to have access to the whole suite of stuff. You need top-line intelligence agents, you need special forces guys, you need straight-out private investigators on the ground. You need forensic accountants.

"You need contacts with federal agents, FBI, CIA. You need to know everybody. A lawyer's not going to be able to do that. He doesn't have those contacts - and he doesn't want to get killed."

Not that van Leewarden wants to get killed either, but he says he knows how to handle that part of the game. He says he's aware of at least "one proper contract" on his life, and that it's an open question if it's still active.

Eating what he kills, and tangling with criminals over tens of millions of dollars, certainly gives him interesting work stories. "It's a risky game, all the way round. That's what makes it exciting," he says. "Instead of hunting animals, it's hunting people."

Alongside the dangers, it is also a job with plenty of international travel. Regular shuttles between Sydney, Geneva, Budapest, New York, Auckland and the Bahamas have given him a certain status with Air New Zealand. "I raced to Gold Elite in about six weeks, and then it became uncomfortable. I'd be on domestic flights, and they'd just come down to the departure lounge and give you stuff," he says.

He says his life can resemble the film *Lost in Translation*, when working in Swiss courts in Geneva during the day and liaising with his Auckland-based investigation team using a hotel phone and fax in the middle of the night.

Van Leewarden proves popular notions of the Swiss banking system as a fortress of secrecy are overblown, with five accounts linked to the infamous Western Gulf Advisory frozen as part of an ongoing case he's working on.

"I've got to be quite careful about this, because people do think it's secret - and the more money put into Switzerland the better it is for me," he says.

Civil action against banks used by fraudsters is the first step in the process, locking accounts until the dispute is resolved. It is followed by criminal complaints. "In Switzerland, because it's an inquisitorial system, provided you put information together properly and put it through the right channels it's superb," he says.

In terms of his past, van Leewarden is cagey about his 1980s exit from the New Zealand police - where he had made detective by the age of 22 and later served as a VIP bodyguard. "I had a few issues with the department," he says.

But what he calls the "brotherhood" of current and serving police has helped open doors around the world. Despite leaving the force, van Leewarden's sense of justice remains.

This occasionally grates when his job requires the cutting of deals with conmen who have run off with his client's cash.

"They don't regard themselves as criminal per se - like someone who'll take a shotgun and rob a bank. They've got a peculiar sort of character that allows them to relieve people of their life savings. When you finally meet them, it's fascinating," he says.

"They're evil-doers, there's no doubt in my mind about that, but if I can get the money back and they're going to walk? Sometimes it can be distasteful, but that's the way it is."

Not that revenge is entirely off the menu, as he says he passes on files to law enforcement officials where he's able. "If they suffer some pain along the way, I'll make sure they do."