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John Jairo Velazquez, who boasted of killing more than 300 people, was released on parole after 22 years in prison. Colombia has released one of its most famous killers, John Jairo Velazquez, an accomplice of the famous drug lord Pablo Escobar. The release of Velazquez, known as Popeye, has sharply divided public opinion in the country because of his direct role in the deaths of 300 people and the involvement of thousands of others. Al Jazeera's Alessandro Rampetti reports from Bogota. Source: Al Jazeera Published: 18:35 BST, 10 February 2020 Updated: 21:45 BST, 10 February 2020 He was once the world's worst killer - a ruthless murder machine known as Popeye, who killed thousands of people for notorious drug lord Pablo Escobar. But while few Colombians shed a tear at Jhon Jairo Velazquez, who died in custody last Thursday from cancer, ex-cop Carlos Palau may just shake his head in the news. Recognizes Palau, a former national police commander in Medellin, a violent city that Escobar and his vile associate have turned into their lawless fortress. For a long time I wanted to do it myself to avenge my dead friends. But it's not me: I was a policeman, a family man, not a criminal like him. Referring to 57-year-old Velazquez as Popeye, his innocuously sounding nickname for gangsters, Palau tells DailyMail.com in an exclusive interview: Popeye was a man, there's no doubt he suffered a lot from cancer.' Just sadness for the victims. Because there are still many questions about his crimes that will never be answered.' Druglord Pablo Escobar hitman John Jairo Velazquez, known as Popeye, died in custody Thursday by Carlos Palau, a former national police commander in Medellin who worked on the Block de Besced (Search Block), tells DailyMail.com: I didn't celebrate when I heard the news, but I certainly didn't feel sympathy for Palau spent years hunting Velazquez in the 1990s (pictured) and witnessed dozens of his friends and colleagues getting killed Velasquez' orchestrated hisAs a former member of the elite police unit known as Block de Besced (Search Block), Palau and his colleagues had hellish tasks on knocking down the Medellin Cartel. He lost countless friends at the hands of swaggering Escobar thugs, who killed officers indiscriminately in the streets or kidnapped and tortured them in the dingy cellars of the King of Cocaine ended in 1993 when he was cornered on a roof and shot dead by a search engine. But Velazquez confessed DailyMail.com in a 2017 interview to personally kill 300 people and is accused of organizing 3,000 hits during his work as Escobar's chief sicario (killer). He turned himself in to the authorities before Palau and his men were able to get him out. To whom Disgusted, Velazquez was offered an extraordinary plea deal in which he was charged with only one murder, the 1989 murder of presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galan, in exchange for rattling at his cartel henchmen. He was jailed for just seven years, although the sentence was eventually increased to 23 years and three months when the government bowed to public outrage. Released in 2014, Velazquez soon began trading his shame, bragging about his cartel exploits, berating corrupt politicians and writing memoirs that later turned into a Netflix drama. He has gained more than 1.2 million subscribers on YouTube, but has returned to prison by 2017, when he violated parole by awarding himself to parties with a notorious drug dealer. A year later, he was charged with extortion. Velazquez was awaiting trial last December when he was transferred to a hospital for treatment for oesophageal cancer. 'Popeye' Velazquez (right) killed more than 300 people and ordered the deaths of 3,000 to ensure Pablo Escobar 'left' reigned terror with 152 police officers who ended their year at the National Academy of Colombian Police, Palau only knows of three who survived. Palau cries as he acknowledges the names and photos of his fallen colleagues at a memorial museum in Escobar's former estate of Hacienda Napoles. Escobar and his vile aide Popeye turned Medellin, a violently persecuted city, into their lawless fortress in the 80s and 90s three years ago DailyMail.com interview with notorious Medellin cartel killer Jhon Jairo Velazquez in Colombia. After the killer's death this week from cancer, senior reporter Ben Ashford recalls the day he came face-to-face with Pablo Escobar's deadliest killer: He bragged about killing 300 people and probably killed thousands more as Escobar bombs and bullets shook the world and brought Colombia to its knees. But in the teeming slums of the slope of Medellin, crowds lined the streets to give Jhon Jairo Velazquez the kind of hero welcome usually reserved for a rock star or famous actor. DailyMail.com accompanied the former hitman, best known in many ways for his innocuous-sounding nickname Popeye, when he returned to Escobar's former fortress 13. Rare public foray in 2017 was the first time Velazquez had stepped into a sprawling slum town on the outskirts of Colombia's second city in 25 years. But if the acclaimed mass murderer was worried about the reception he would receive, he didn't have to worry: locals soon poured into the streets, taking pictures and greeting his arrival with chants of 'El Jefe' (boss). 'I'm going to put it on Facebook and Instagram. I bet I get loads of likes.' Velasquez made a throat-cutting gesture as he posed for another shot with Liliana Andrea Arguelles, 26, showing off an ominous gangster tattoo the length of his right that read El General de la mafia. I took a picture with Popeye to send to my father. He's very angry. He's Him. want me to pose for a picture with the killer,' said Arguelles, a Florida resident visiting family in Medellin. Sympathy for Escobar and his supposed love of the poor lingers in some of the most disadvantaged Medellin and crime-riddled barrios (areas). It is perhaps not surprising, then, that one of the last remaining members of the inner circle of the slain cocaine king was feted as a living legend. If you offered me \$10 million to kill someone I would refuse from, he assured DailyMail.com then in an exclusive face-to-face interview to coincide with Netflix's new drama about his life. Now I'm a 100 percent celebrity. People here love me not because I'm a hitman, but because I've changed my life. They want to take a picture and shake my hand. One girl told me that it was her fantasy of having sex on Pablo Escobar's grave - but I refused out of respect for El Patron. Deeper in the slums, the city's true feelings for Velazquez - the self-proclaimed man of the world despite spending two decades in prison for murder - became apparent. Two young men, stinking of alcohol, began to scoff from afar, and then came a few feet away from the silver-haired ex-killer, one of whom violently pointed to his face. 'You killed our fathers, you're a murderer. We're going to put a lot of bullets in you, they shouted as passers-by tried to pull them out anxiously. It's the kind of disrespect that would have brought them two tickets to the morgue back in the days when the Escobar Medellin cartel was haunted by these narrow, claustrophobic streets. But now I let him go. These guys are drug addicts or drunks. They are not a threat to me. His words were a chilling reminder that the softly spoken Velazquez is said to have personally killed 300 people and orchestrated 3,000 deaths. The people in the cartel killed 3,000, yes. That was my job. I'm a professional killer. Only a psychopath feels pride or pleasure. I only killed when people paid me or protected my life. I've killed women, I've killed children in car bombs. They were collateral damage. It was a war and innocent people dying in wars. Prison authorities confirmed Thursday a sick gangster - who has never disputed his involvement in hundreds of murders - died at the National Cancer Institute in Bogota. The popularity of Netflix's Narcos show has led to an industry boom in Pablo Escobar Tourism in Medellin, Colombia. Pictured are flowers laid by Escobar's grave. It was a poignant moment for Palau, who was a rookie policeman in the Colombian capital back in November 1990 when a remote-controlled car bomb ripped through a passing police bus. 'I was one of the first officers on the scene because I wanted to find my friends. I got on the bus and saw the first Hanging out of the window,' Palau, 48, recalled. 'In the smoke and chaos I thought this man might still be alive, so I took him. When I pulled him off the bus, I saw that his head was completely blown away. I wanted revenge. I asked for a transfer to Medellin, and five days later I was there.' Then between five and ten officers every day killed Escobar's car bombs and killers, all coordinated by Velazquez, who considered the police enemy combatants in the war. Of the 152 police officers who finished their year at the National Academy of Colombian Police, Palau only knows about the three survivors. 'Some people say that Escobar was a good guy, Robin Hood, who gave people but he was a psycho, a terrorist,' he tells DailyMail.com. 'I couldn't have a girlfriend, I had to cut off my family. There was no thing in life that we could ever take for granted. When I said goodbye to my comrades every night, we said, I hope to see you again. It was more in the hope 'Palau, now a married father-of-two, spent nine years living in Rhode Island after the U.S. granted him political asylum in 2000. Velasquez's most lucrative appointment was the murder of Carlos Mauro Hoyos (left), Colombia's attorney general, for which he was paid \$1 million. that it was leaked to the DEA after its release, Velasquez began touring the company, becoming rivals with touring company Palau. The pair met face-to-face in 2017 and took this photo together DailyMail.com. Palau said: For me personally it wasn't bad as I had the opportunity to look him in the eye. I even shook his hand after being seized by the government, Escobar's estate was turned into a safari theme park. Pictured, what's left of Pablo Escobar's car collection in Hacienda Napoles after they were bombed by the Kal Cartel. After cartel violence subsided he returned to Colombia and founded a travel company, Medellin Paradise Travel, whipping tourists around Escobar's former turf and telling them about the sacrifices of his comrades. In an amazing twist, he soon found himself facing competition from a rival tour operator run by a familiar face. 'Popeye was a crazy guy. He started doing his own tours, Palau recalls. For those willing to take his life into their own hands, Velazquez was charging \$350 a day to tour the haunts where he stabbed Escobar's enemies, with a free T-shirt thrown in in by Reservations dramatically when Netflix aired a television version of his 2015 memoir, Survival of Escobar - Alias JJ. The guy had so many enemies, there was no way that tourists were safe for tourists to walk Medellin next to him,' adds Palau. 'Honestly, I blame the government here. They had to put conditions on him not to speak and do these things when they released him from prison. Prison. Eye. I even shook his hand. It was a man I wanted to kill for so long, but it was like a form of therapy for me, it allowed me to move on and leave the anger behind.' But I'll never forget anything. For those willing to take his life into his own hands, Velazquez has been charging \$350 a day to tour the haunts where he stabbed Escobar's enemies, with a free T-shirt thrown in by Velazquez posing for photos and selfies with a group of children who all know his signature pose showing off his tattoos that read: Mafia General Fans pose with Velazquez, but Palau issued a warning to those who signed up for gangster tours. The guy had so many enemies, there was no way it was safe for tourists to walk Medellin beside him, he said after the cartel violence subsided Palau returned to Colombia and founded a travel company, Medellin Paradise Travel, whisking tourists around Escobar's former turf and telling them about the sacrifices of his comrades. Soon after, Velazquez got into business as a direct competition Popeye may have thought he was a celebrity, but he was a criminal, a terrorist, Palau said. A better world without him Born in Yarumal, 70 miles north of Medellin, Velazquez originally trained as a Marine in the Colombian Navy, but dropped out at 17 to become a bodyguard for one of Escobar's many mistresses. Escobar was tired of the lover but felt the promise of the intrepid young Velazquez, who earned his nickname Popeye because of his protruding chin, which he later fixed with surgery. His first execution was as ordinary as it was brutal. The son of an elderly lady complained to Escobar that she had fallen when she got off the bus, and the driver never helped her. Velazquez declared himself at the scene of the murder, coldly pumping two bullets into the back of the driver's head. Another assignment included the abduction of one of Escobar's girlfriends, Wendy Chavarriaga, and forcing her to have an abortion. Remarkably, the couple became a point, but when Velazquez found out that the woman had leaked information to DEA agents he arranged a romantic date - then she was shot six times as she sat waiting for him in a restaurant. By the time the 5ft 7in gangster rose to the ranks of the Medellin cartel his body count would include politicians, journalists and rival drug traffickers. Innocent civilians caught in the firing line when the bullets began spraying were dismissed as collateral damage. Velasquez's most lucrative assignment was the murder of Carlos Mauro Hoyos, the Colombian attorney general for which he was paid \$1 million. After his release, Velazquez offered only limited remorse for his crimes, likening his murder spree to a general, following orders. Velazquez 13 in 2017 one of Medellin's most famous slums and Escobar's former stronghold, and was greeted as a returning hero and photographed with the children American stag went on a tour where they placed around the grave of Pablo Escobar at the cemetery Jardins Montesacro in 2017 Velazquez said on the website of his tour company: I was remorseful and determined to help build the truth for those who lived in the reality of the Medellin 80s and 90s firsthand insisting on that that the Search Block was as lawless as the cartel, dividing its fellow drillers, cutting off their fingers and throwing them out of helicopters. He also denied involvement in his death in some of Escobar's bloodiest massacres, including the explosion of Avianca Flight 203, which claimed 110 lives, and the explosion at the DAS building in Bogota, which killed 52 people. 'I am remorseful and determined to help build the truth for those who lived in the 1980s and 1990s, he claimed on his website. that make me that I, but do not determine what I will be today and tomorrow. Behind the scenes however, the Colombian authorities suspected Popeye had returned to his murderous old tricks: blackmailing the children of murdered cartel members in the transfer of assets and property he felt entitled to. In 2018, he was charged with extortion and conspiracy, but as the cancer spread from the throat to his lungs, liver and other organs, it became apparent that it was one enemy he could never overcome. The world is better without it, john jairo velasquez wife alexandra

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