

“There’s also the ‘intervention unit’. But those are the guys that smash through a window; we’re the guys that open it”

The smooth operator

The press office of the Federal Police was clear: we could only interview him by phone. He would not give us his real name and photos were out of the question. I’d have to leave my number. “Someone” would call to arrange the interview. “Someone” called, early one morning a few days later, safely hidden behind a private number. His voice came down the line smooth and rich like amber. “I can’t do Tuesday or Wednesday,” wiping my suggestions off the table, “but I can do Thursday at four; in person if you want, at headquarters”. Negotiations had begun. Deep inside the maze of buildings that forms the headquarters of Belgium’s Federal Police force sits a squat two-story block that houses special ops. In a cramped office on the second floor, behind one of three cluttered desks and surrounded by phones and whiteboards with scribbled cryptic codes, sits Vincent, his muscular arms folded confidently behind his head. “Hostage negotiation is part of the ‘observation unit’,” he begins. “There’s also the ‘intervention unit’. But those are the guys that smash through a window; we’re the guys that open it,” he grins. To most, the murky world of hostage negotiators is best embodied by Denzel Washington in the film *The Negotiator*. Vincent too, is limited in what he can reveal. “There aren’t many hostage negotiators in Belgium,” telling me the number, albeit off the record. “But what you see in the film isn’t far from the truth. In a hostage situation, the negotiator always has a ‘buddy’ that hears everything, scribbles down extra questions and helps make sure we don’t miss a thing. Then there’s the back-up team, of course.” How many people make up the team and what they do exactly, he can’t tell me. “This much is sure: negotiators aren’t cowboys that work outside the law. Everything is strictly agreed before we begin.” The things Vincent won’t (or can’t) tell me I manage to find out via other sources. The negotiation process, the techniques or the fact that there are two types of hostage situations: a “soft crisis situation” in which the perpetrator is alone, his relationship to the victim is personal and his state of mind emotional and impulsive, and the “hard situation” with multiple perpetrators whose behaviour is rational and calculated and whose relationship to the hostages is purely functional. Most of the hostage situations Vincent has worked on were ‘soft’ ones. Situations that begin spontaneously and in which the most dangerous phase is the emotional beginning, during which impulsive violence is most likely to occur. “A husband



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that suddenly holds a knife to his wife’s throat, for instance,” Vincent explains. “In such cases active listening skills can solve a lot. In essence, we take on the role of crisis counsellor.” Hard crisis situations are a completely different ballgame. Cases such as the kidnapping of Belgian politician Paul Vanden Boeynants by a criminal gang that demanded 30 million Belgian francs, for instance, “These situations are risky from beginning to end,” explains Vincent. “Here, perpetrators see victims purely as instruments to help them get exactly what they want. They play an ‘all-or-nothing’ game.” “The most important factor in any negotiation, hard or soft, is the credibility of the negotiator,” says Vincent, fixing my gaze steadily. “Being caught telling a lie, no matter how small, can undermine the entire operation. That’s why we never promise something we can’t deliver.” “Ensuring the safety of the victim is our main priority,” he

stresses, and research has indeed shown that negotiations will lead to casualties in only one percent of cases, while hostage situations terminated by physical intervention will result in injury or death in 70 percent of all cases. But not all negotiations end well. “Unpredictable people, someone who has taken drugs for instance, are hardest to deal with. Like the guy we found sitting on a golf course at 5am with two guns to his head. We almost had him convinced to put down the guns, and then he said ‘before I give you the guns, I just want to do one more line (of cocaine or speed)’. That’s when I knew: it’s all over. We ran for him, but we didn’t make it.” Silence spreads through the room to blanket his story. Finally, he shrugs. “We’re not therapists. Once we have defused the situation, we leave.” “It doesn’t always work out. And even if it does... We come back, we debrief and we move on. That’s how we can keep going.” (SC)