

THE TOX LAB

Podcast Transcript

Episode 18: A Soldier, a Smuggler, and a Cocaine Bear: Tales of Meth and Mayhem

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TRANSCRIPT

Hi everyone, welcome back to The Tox Lab. I'm Rebecca.

I'm Rob. This week we thought we'd look at a couple of the strangest overdoses recorded in history.

Rebecca, what's the longest you've ever stayed awake?

I think my answer is probably quite sad. I never really pulled all-nighters at university, so I can't imagine it's much more than about 20 hours.

Twenty hours? You need sleep.

I do.

I've definitely done 24 hours. I'm not sure I've done much more than that. But imagine a whole week while skiing through the wilderness.

That sounds horrendous.

One of the stories we're going to look at this week is the story of Aimo Koivunen, a Finnish soldier from the Second World War. In March 1944, deep in the frozen forests of Lapland, a small group of Finnish soldiers were gliding across the snow. Their skis whispered over the ice as they pushed forward, muscles burning and lungs screaming for air, with Soviet forces closing in behind them.

They had been skiing for hours, maybe days. If they stopped, they would almost certainly die. One of them, Aimo Koivunen, could feel his body shutting down. He was slipping behind his platoon, his vision was blurring, and his legs felt like lead.

He had one choice. He fumbled in his pocket with shaking hands and pulled out a tin of Pervitin, methamphetamine tablets used in wartime to keep soldiers awake for long periods. He was supposed to take one pill, but there was no time to count. He swallowed the lot, and that's when things got weird.

At that point Finland was in the middle of its war with the Soviet Union, and Koivunen was part of a Finnish ski patrol operating deep behind enemy lines. They were ambushed and then forced into a desperate retreat across the snow.

These soldiers had been issued stimulant tablets, and Pervitin was the product in question here. One pill was meant to be enough to keep a soldier going through a whole day and night.

You can imagine the situation: skiing through deep snow, hands numb inside thick gloves or mittens, trying to handle a tin of tablets in a moment of panic. Instead of taking one, he tipped out the whole lot and swallowed them, around 30 pills.

Which can't have ended well.

At first, imagine a huge rush of energy. Suddenly his body feels lighter, his legs don't feel heavy any more, and he feels as though he's flying through the snow. His heart rate goes up, and at first he probably feels fantastic.

Then his heart rate goes up a bit more, and things start to get strange. Hunger, exhaustion, pain, all of that is overridden. He starts hallucinating. He thinks he is being chased by spectres. He sees shapes in the trees that aren't there, hears voices, gets disoriented, and eventually loses his squad entirely.

One minute he is with them, and the next he is alone in the wilderness. He wanders this frozen landscape, starving and hallucinating, and somehow does not die. He survives by eating pine buds and a bird, often described as a Siberian jay, which he caught, killed, and ate raw. He reportedly skied more than 100 kilometres. When Finnish troops finally found him, he was barely recognisable.

He had lost more than 20 kilograms, and bizarrely his heart was still racing at around 200 beats per minute.

That's insane.

It really is. And yet he somehow stayed alive. So why didn't he die?

Let's look at what happens in methamphetamine overdose and how that fits this case. Methamphetamine overdose can cause serious toxicity in several ways. Broadly speaking, it overwhelms the sympathetic nervous system, so you get an extreme fight-or-flight response.

Blood glucose rises, heart rate rises, blood pressure rises, and you get intense peripheral vasoconstriction. In normal circumstances, all of that can cause major toxicity. But in his case, because he was out in the freezing conditions of Lapland, some of those effects may actually have worked in his favour.

Methamphetamine also drives up metabolic activity and body temperature. Hyperthermia is one of the classic problems in stimulant toxicity, but in an extreme cold environment that extra heat production may actually have helped stop him from freezing to death.

Methamphetamine can also cause neurological toxicity, including agitation, paranoia, hallucinations, seizures, and potentially brain injury.

Which probably explains why he was paranoid and seeing things that were not there.

Exactly. Some of the neurological harm associated with stimulant toxicity can be related to hyperthermia and cerebral oedema, and again that extreme cold may have blunted some of those effects.

There are a few other theories as well. His heart rate was still reportedly very high even some time later, and people have suggested that the cold may not only have reduced the risk of hyperthermia but may also have slowed absorption or altered the way the drug hit his system.

Another point is that methamphetamine toxicity often involves polydrug use, with alcohol, benzodiazepines, or other substances involved. In this case, it seems to have been just the stimulant itself rather than a messy multi-drug scenario.

So he really was very lucky.

He was. Koivunen lived until 1989, and his story has become something of a legend. If you can survive a meth-fuelled ski journey through a war zone, you can probably survive most things.

He may be one of the earliest, or at least one of the most memorable, accounts of stimulant overdose in a military setting. And stimulants have certainly been used in military contexts more broadly, including to keep personnel awake for prolonged periods.

He really is worth looking up, if only because the photograph associated with his story makes him look exactly like someone who has had an absolutely dreadful time.

So Rebecca, why don't you tell us your story of stimulant overdose?

This week I'm going to be talking about the story of the cocaine bear, or, as some people affectionately call it, Pablo Escobear.

Nice.

This story has become more widely known because it was turned into a film, a comedy-horror film released in 2023, but I want to stress that the film is very, very loosely based on the real events.

Our story starts with Andrew Carter Thornton II. He was born on 30 October 1944 in Kentucky and grew up on his parents' stud farm, where they bred racehorses. He attended private school, was involved in polo, and later went to a military academy.

He briefly attended the University of Kentucky for a semester, then dropped out and joined the army, where he trained as a paratrooper with the 82nd Airborne Division. During his service he took part in the US intervention in the Dominican Republic in 1965 and received a Purple Heart.

After leaving the army, he joined the Lexington-Fayette Urban County Police Department in 1968 and earned a degree in law enforcement. He then served on the narcotics squad between 1970 and 1973, and somewhere along the way he seems to have become more interested in smuggling drugs than enforcing the law.

In 1977 he resigned from law enforcement and began practising law in Lexington, Kentucky. About four years later, he was arrested, along with 25 others, over weapons theft from the China Lake Naval Weapons Center and a conspiracy to smuggle around a thousand pounds of marijuana into the United States.

Because of his flying experience from his military background, he was involved as a pilot. During this period he was also linked to a drug-running syndicate known as The Company, which reportedly had hundreds of members, including former police officers, and access to millions of dollars' worth of boats and planes.

That's quite an operation. This wasn't small fry.

Definitely not.

And it gets even more dramatic. After pleading not guilty, he fled California and spent months as a fugitive before being arrested after a major manhunt. When he was caught, he was wearing a bulletproof vest and carrying a pistol.

Then came what would be his final smuggling mission. In September 1985, while running drugs from Colombia into the United States, Thornton and his associate jumped from an autopiloted Cessna 404 after dumping packages of cocaine over Georgia, apparently because the plane was too heavily loaded.

Which feels like something you should probably have factored in earlier.

You would think so.

On that jump, Thornton's parachute failed to open properly and he fell to his death, landing in a driveway in Knoxville, Tennessee. He was carrying about 75 pounds of cocaine valued at roughly \$15 million. He was

also wearing a bulletproof vest, had expensive Italian shoes on, about four and a half thousand dollars in cash, several one-ounce gold Krugerrands, and some weapons.

Very subtle.

Very subtle indeed.

So what does an American black bear have to do with this? Two months later, a 175-pound female black bear was found dead in the Chattahoochee National Forest in Georgia, surrounded by the remaining opened packages of cocaine.

The key point is that the bear died after getting into the dumped cocaine, which is how the "cocaine bear" story entered popular culture.

Unsurprisingly.

Unsurprisingly. But that is not actually the end of the bear's story. The bear was taxidermied and, after passing through a few unusual stops, eventually ended up on display in Kentucky.

So if anyone has been there, I'd quite like to know whether it is worth the trip. Apparently there is a lot of cocaine bear merchandise.

Sounds like a fun day out.

So both of these stories are fairly strange, aren't they? One is a soldier taking around 30 methamphetamine pills while fleeing Soviet forces, and the other is a bear getting into a massive quantity of cocaine in the woods.

One obviously survived. One did not.

I'm not surprised the bear didn't survive.

Not at all.

Are these the strangest overdose stories ever recorded? I don't know. I'm sure there are weirder ones out there.

If anyone knows of particularly strange cases you'd like us to cover, do let us know. And are there other examples of wild animal exposure to recreational drugs? This surely can't be the only one.

It probably isn't. And animal exposure to drugs may well be becoming more common. Between 2009 and 2014, the proportion of calls to the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center related to dogs being exposed to cannabis nearly doubled.

That probably reflects changes in legislation and availability.

Probably. And where drug availability rises, animals are inevitably at greater risk of accidental exposure.

There are also other odd reports. For example, there was a news story about a wild cat captured in Cincinnati that reportedly had cocaine in its system.

The cocaine bear story is interesting because, as you said at the start, it was turned into a film. I haven't seen the movie, but my understanding is that it is nothing like the actual story.

No. The film spends a lot of time on a cocaine-fuelled rampage through the woods, but there is no real evidence that the actual bear did anything like that. In reality, it was found dead near the cocaine.

If it had gone on a rampage and then returned to the stash to die, that would have been a very odd sequence of events.

Exactly.

I do think Aimo's story would make a really good film.

It would. I'd absolutely watch that.

It really would. You've got survival, hallucinations, war, extreme weather, and then somehow a happy ending, which is pretty rare in stories like this.

That is true.

So I think we have a couple of takeaway lessons, even if they are fairly obvious.

Don't take 30 meth pills and go skiing.

And don't leave your cocaine where a bear can find it.

Sound advice all round.

I think we're going to wrap it up there. I hope you've enjoyed listening this week.

Do give us a like and a follow on social media, or get in touch with other stories you would like us to cover. You can find us on Instagram at [@the_tox_lab](#).

Feel free to comment on any of our posts or send us a direct message with suggestions. For those of you who don't use social media, you can also email us at thetoxlab@gmail.com.

We'd love to hear from you, as always, with feedback, suggestions, or ideas for future episodes.

Hope you all have an amazing week, and we'll see you next time. Bye.