A Private Island, Downloads From God, and the ‘Couples Ruse’: Inside the Dangerous World of Tim Ballard’s Operation Underground Railroad

Tim Marchman November 16, 2023, 2:01pm

On a sunny day in late October two years ago, a man twice her size drove his knee into Alison’s face, destroying her orbital bone and knocking her eye out of alignment. As she lay on the ground, bleeding and vomiting and urinating and having it explained to her that there was no bone supporting her eye anymore, she heard Tim Ballard say, “Well, we can’t call an ambulance.”

It was the third day of a selection being held by Operation Underground Railroad, the anti-sex trafficking group Ballard founded in 2012 after, he has claimed, being told to do so by God. OUR had invited about 60 people who had previously worked for it as operators on what it portrayed to the public as undercover paramilitary missions abroad aimed at rescuing women and children from sexual slavery. These people had paid their own way for training, which largely involved sitting through slideshows on topics such as how to get information from someone without them knowing you’re doing so. The draw was clear: OUR leaders responsible for distinct geographical regions would be choosing members for their teams from among the participants.

Videos by VICE

Alison, who had worked one mission on Ballard’s ops team in the Caribbean, was hoping to be recruited to the Thailand team. She had heard that it had

operating protocols and arrangements with the government, and it was often held up as OUR's most functional and effective region. Just as important, to her, was that Ballard had nothing to do with it.

VICE News is referring to Alison, 42, by a pseudonym due to her concerns about her safety; she stood out among the class of operators, which included some former military, some former law enforcement, and a lot of people from church. She was a licensed clinical social worker specializing in the treatment of people with extreme childhood trauma, including sex trafficking. She had served six years in the Marines; had specialized tactical training related to work with a government agency; and had volunteered as part of an anti-hijacking team in South Africa. She was also one of only four women among the operators, and the only one with any relevant background. The others, she would later say, were "beautiful, beautiful, sweet, clueless young women."

That day, they were training in hand-to-hand combat in the CrossFit gym under OUR's offices outside Salt Lake City. The training was of questionable utility given the nature of OUR's undercover operations, which mainly consisted, as far as Alison had seen, of sitting around in bars and strip clubs hinting that you were looking for a wilder scene. But she intended to set an example. She was worried for the other women, and about what the men would make of the female operators. It was important to her to not just be a pretty face.

Tim Ballard at the OUR CrossFit gym, as seen in a 2020 Facebook video.

In the exercise, teams of two were placed at the four corners of a large mat, at the center of which were dummy knives; the point was for each person to pass their teammates's guard and reach the knives. Alison remembers thinking that she, or someone, was going to get hurt as everyone dived toward the knives, and that there should have been headgear. But she didn't consider opting out.

"I can't be the one to say, 'No, I'm not going to do this,'" she says now. "What's that going to look like?"

A video of what happened shows two young men grappling on the corner of the mat opposite Alison. One pushes the other off the mat; then both turn and dive toward the knives. As they jostle, one dives past the other, his knee catching Alison, who was spread out on the mat, flush in the side of the head. She instantly goes limp as the other man, scrambling for the knife, catches her again.

Alison doesn't remember being knocked unconscious, or any pain. She remembers whiplash and a crunching sound as the bones around her left eye shattered. She was on all fours, vomiting uncontrollably, bleeding, and unable to see.

Two of her fellow operators from Ballard's team, with whom she'd spent two surreal weeks earlier that year, helped her off the mat. They were tending to her when, she said, Ballard announced that they couldn't call an ambulance. One of them was a woman who will be referred to in this story as Kailyn, who believed that having a sexual relationship with Ballard was necessary to save children and because it was God's will. (Ballard has denied he ever acted improperly with any of the operators he worked with.) The other was Matt Cooper, OUR's director of security, to whom Ballard had acted as an older brother or father figure for around a decade. He bundled Alison into his truck and took her to the emergency room.

(Kailyn corroborated Alison's version of events, but otherwise declined to comment for this story. Cooper initially hung up when reached on the phone by a reporter identifying himself as being with VICE News; he subsequently asked for questions to be sent to him by email, but did not respond to that email or to a text message detailing the allegations in this story and asking for comment.)

It was an abrupt end to Alison's time with OUR, which began the year before when she volunteered as an educator in her own community. Handpicked by Ballard for his own ops team, Alison spent time with him on a private island, where he claimed to directly communicate with God, before shadowing him as he trawled massage parlors and strip clubs across the British Virgin Islands, despite there being no intelligence to suggest that these activities would help to fulfill OUR's mission of ending child slavery, or even that any trafficking was going on at all. Alison's experience exemplified the critique

outsiders as well as former operators and volunteers have made of OUR under Ballard's leadership, showing it to be an erratic organization led by a man whose decisions put those around him at serious risk for no obvious purpose.

Contact the reporters at tim.marchman@vice.com or anna.merlan@vice.com. For extra security, download the Signal app to a non-work device and text us there at 267-713-9832.

Citing God's will, Ballard assigned Alison on the fly to deal directly with a suspected trafficker. He took an untrained hairstylist into a meeting with a cartel and then sent her through customs on a commercial flight with a recording of the meeting on her phone; lost track of which operator had which burner phone, leading him to inadvertently send Alison a sexually suggestive text message; and directed Alison to engage in communications with a foreign national that could have the effect of encouraging him to traffic women and girls. In planning and execution, the work was amateurish and dangerous.

Alison witnessed sexual misconduct of the sort that is at the center of recent lawsuits a group of women and one couple filed against Ballard, in which he is accused of sexual assault, grooming, and coercion. (A lawyer for the women went so far as to say Ballard "literally trafficked" her clients—a claim experts have told VICE News is plausible, if what women say about his behavior is true.) She also experienced sexually inappropriate behavior herself. Within minutes of meeting Ballard, he had made clear his intense desire to find out which of his associates she wanted to have sex with. As a participant in what Ballard called the "couples ruse," which he has described at length as a technique meant to protect him from traffickers and from having to touch trafficking victims, Alison says Ballard repeatedly and continuously—and unsuccessfully—pressured her to be intimate with

Cooper.

Alison says that it became clear to her that the OUR hierarchy was fully aware of what Ballard was doing. Her experience shows that, as similarly alleged in court filings, other top members of the organization besides Ballard were themselves participants in the couples ruse, and Alison says that when she discussed Ballard's erratic and dangerous behavior with OUR's current president, he acknowledged that everything she said was true and said that their role was to prevent Ballard from doing too much damage to himself or others. (Through a spokesperson, OUR's current leadership declined to comment for this story.)

In total, Alison's story—which is corroborated by people with direct knowledge of events and by physical and digital evidence including OUR planning documents—depicts an organization focused on allowing its celebrity founder, who had become completely detached from reality, to live the lavish lifestyle of a wealthy sex tourist and sexually manipulate and abuse volunteers under the guise of saving children. This focus was so intense that it overrode concerns about the safety and welfare of the very operators at the center of OUR's fundraising. The organization raked in a quarter of a billion dollars in donations over a decade by depicting volunteers like Alison as the thin line protecting thousands of women and children from sexual slavery; Alison, meanwhile, was left with what are likely to be lasting eye problems and a sense of severe disquiet about what she'd witnessed.

"A lot of these people are gonna go down with the ship," Alison says now—people she says are well-meaning and kind, who have long believed in and worked towards OUR's mission of rescue and recovery. "They just aren't going to be able to take in the information and let go."

Tim Ballard, who left OUR earlier this year after a sexual-misconduct

investigation and is now associated with the Spear Fund, a new anti-trafficking organization, did not respond to a detailed accounting of the allegations made in this story sent to him personally, as well as to his representatives. OUR declined to answer questions about the allegations—which, a spokesperson wrote, "should not be interpreted or reported as a concession from OUR that the information is correct"—aside from noting that Ballard directly participated in few operations in the couple of years before parting ways with the organization.

"OUR is currently working with two individuals who, in consultation with the board, are evaluating wholesale changes to the organization," the spokesperson wrote. "As OUR has stated previously, they have engaged a legal firm specializing in international trafficking policy and law to help review and update their mission operations policies. They also have initiated an additional financial audit of the organization."

The pandemic had been dragging on for half a year when Alison first decided that she wanted to get involved with OUR. Social media was flooded with OUR's urgent depictions of heroic missions to directly free women and children from sexual slavery, and she thought that given her background, she could contribute. What compelled her was the idea of rescue—of preventing people like the trafficking survivors she treated professionally from ever needing such services.

"I'm in this chair, talking to people," she says. "I can't go back in time and save them. I'm seeing these people, frankly, who will never be okay. What if we could rescue somebody, you know? What if I could help rescue someone before they're broken forever?"

For about six months, she volunteered with an OUR group in her region, which is far from OUR's Utah home base, focusing on raising awareness and

training organizations on how to recognize child sex trafficking. She persistently felt, though, that she could be doing more, and talked to her local volunteer coordinator about submitting her résumé to the part of OUR that dealt with overseas rescue operations.

It took a while for anything to happen. The coordinator had no way to put her résumé in front of anyone, or even a means of contact for the operational side of OUR; he referred Alison to the public website. *If it's meant to happen, if it's meant to be, it'll be*, she figured. Her opportunity came when OUR sent an email to volunteers asking for licensed clinical social workers who could be vetted to do crisis response, via telehealth or in person.

An email OUR sent to volunteers in November 2020.

Everything that happened after she responded made sense to her and increased her confidence in OUR. She was, for example, asked to get fingerprinted and to submit to a background check before even doing a

screening interview with a female OUR employee. *They need to know about you*, Alison remembers the woman telling her. And Alison agreed. (When reached for comment, the woman, who asked that her name be withheld, said that Alison was initially interviewed for a therapist role before expressing an interest in operations. The woman added, "I told her that I was not part of operations and that she would need to talk to others in the company that hire for those positions. She enthusiastically asked for her information to be passed on to the team that handled hiring in operations, so I shared her information with the CEO through email and helped arrange a meeting with the CEO. I do not recall what the method was, but could have very well been Zoom. That was the extent of my involvement in the hiring process.")

Two months later, the woman called Alison and asked if she was sitting down. She said she was the executive assistant to Brad Damon, who was then the CEO at OUR and is no longer with the organization. The woman hadn't wanted to email Brad about Alison, because Damon received hundreds of emails every day, she said. While OUR staff had generally been working remotely due to the pandemic, though, she had recently found herself in the same room with him. After she gave him Alison's application and told him he had to look at it, he asked how soon they could get Alison in front of him. The female employee wanted to know if they could talk on Zoom the next day.

Damon, Alison thought, was a very nice man who clearly had no experience in operations. Her impression now is that he was mainly making sure she fit the general profile for volunteer operators. (Damon did not respond to text messages or a phone call from VICE News reporters.)

Four days later, Alison was on a plane and set for a meeting at OUR's headquarters in Draper, Utah, just outside Salt Lake City.

The minute she met him, Alison thought that there was something wrong with Tim Ballard.

It wasn't, when it happened, a meeting she'd expected to have. On the day of her interview, Alison got dressed up and headed to OUR headquarters, about a five-minute walk from the Hampton Inn where they'd put her up. In a bland, cramped office with a fridge full of energy drinks, she met several men, among them Damon, Cooper, and David Jacobs, an OUR volunteer who worked for the Glenn Beck-founded Nazarene Fund, an anti-trafficking group of which Ballard was, at the time, CEO. ("I recall how impressed I was with her," he now says.) The group made small talk for a while before one of them said, "Tim will be here soon, and we'll get started." Alison had had no idea she would be meeting him at all, much less that she was, as the men told her, there to interview for his ops team.

It seemed a bit odd to Alison that Ballard even had an ops team; if not a household name, he was nonetheless the face of the anti-trafficking movement. He'd taken meetings at the White House with Donald Trump and been featured on ESPN's *Sunday Night Football*; *Sound of Freedom*, a movie in which Jim Caviezel played him, had been made and was awaiting distribution. He was presumably too well-known for undercover work, not to mention presumably too busy as the head of OUR. The men, though, took it lightly. Ballard, they explained, wore colored contacts and dyed his hair.

Tim Ballard and Pittsburgh Steelers coach Mike Tomlin on a mission in Haiti, as seen on Sunday Night Football.

Oh, my gosh, okay, Alison thought. *I'm interviewing for Tim's ops team. Wow, that's special*. Soon enough, he walked in—"vibrating," she says, "with personality disorder."

Ballard dashed over to her, Alison remembers, and gave her a big hug. They sat down and he told her about the leadership structure and about his team, which was responsible for the Caribbean and Mexico. He was excited she was there, because he thought she'd be great for his team; what they had to do was see if she was everything she appeared to be on paper. And within 30 minutes after he arrived, he was talking about the "couples ruse."

The so-called couples ruse is central to the lawsuits filed against Ballard and OUR. As he's explained it, it's a way for male operators to keep from having to engage in sex acts with children or trafficked women, by having someone

there to play a jealous wife or girlfriend who "won't let" the operator do so. The women who sued Ballard said in their filings that he'd insist they stay in character even when they were alone with him, leading to sexual manipulation and what they viewed in hindsight as grooming. The women allege they ended up participating in "coerced sexual contact" with Ballard, including being subjected to couples massages and tantric yoga, showering in front of him, frequenting strip clubs, and him dry humping or groping them, all of which he justified as ways to practice their "chemistry" in order to be able to maintain a convincing front with traffickers.

(In recent weeks, Katherine Ballard, Tim's wife, has vigorously defended the couples ruse, and Ballard's public image more generally. In an appearance on conservative talk radio host Rod Arquette's show, she said the allegations were the result of Ballard's work. "When you decide to come out against sex trafficking, people come after you," she told him, adding quickly, "I don't know what to say. I'm not trying to claim it's all orchestrated and some one big person is behind it all." On a joint appearance with her husband on comedian Adam Carolla's podcast, Katherine said she knew he had saved children with "complete faithfulness to me." A press release supposedly jointly issued by the Ballards appeared to suggest that child trafficking cartels could somehow be behind the allegations.)

In their meeting, Ballard presented the ruse solemnly as something absolutely central to the work his team did, justifying it to Alison in much the same way he's since justified it in public. Both she and Jacobs recalled Ballard describing the boundaries such that the male operator would only touch the female one like he would touch his mother. It sounded strange to her, on the grounds that a sex tourist seeking children from traffickers would perhaps be unlikely to bring his girlfriend, but the idea of working as a team did strike her as plausible as a way to gather information and a way to fit in. Many traffickers are women, in part because they tend to be more

comfortable with children and to be able to make children more comfortable with them. It made sense to Alison to have a male and a female operator working in tandem.

"I'm thinking it's a way to have a woman be involved and talk to other women," she says, "like other women traffickers, to be able to infiltrate the whole female side of that world and have that happen in a way that makes sense in a way that's actually safer for the operator.

"That's not what it was."

As Ballard explained it to her, the main idea was that the woman could "cock block," preventing the male operator from any sexual interactions a trafficker might expect and helping to pull the plug when needed. (This is consistent with what one of the women suing him alleges he told her, which is that she would be a "cock blocker." She also alleges that he claimed the scheme was a revelation from God, "because there was no way he could have thought up such a brilliant ruse.") *Maybe that works*, Alison thought. *You say it works. If you say it works, you're the expert.*

Ballard further told her that they had a thing they did on his team, Alison says; he got up close to her and asked, with an intense, focused demeanor, if she thought it was something she could do. "I'm a professional," she said. "And if this is something that needs to be done, this is something I can do."

What she'd need to do, Ballard said, in her recollection, was do the job 24/7. She would need to act as part of a couple at all times, including behind closed doors. (Jacobs does not recall this. "That type of discussion would have never taken place in front of me," he says, "because that behavior would have been completely unnecessary and not justifiable in any way.") Ballard asked her to look around the room and tell him who felt she could most naturally do the couples ruse with. She held his gaze and told him that

because she was a professional, it didn't matter.

He asked the men to leave the room; he had a personal question for her, he said, and didn't want to make her uncomfortable. Being alone in a room with him didn't make her especially comfortable, but she stayed quiet.

At the time, Alison had a drastic undercut. "I don't want to make any judgment," Ballard said in Alison's recollection, "but I see that you have your head shaved. Are you gay?"

She said she was not.

"Are you bi?"

She said that she was.

"Oh, that's excellent," he said.

"He got so excited that I was bisexual," says Alison. "Oh my God, he got so excited."

Ballard explained that his team went into a lot of strip clubs and that she might need to interact with girls as if she wanted to buy them. If she was actually attracted to them, he said, that would help. (VICE News has previously reported on another OUR volunteer who described a superior treating it as a matter of course that operators would find trafficking victims sexually attractive.)

He summoned the men back into the room. The vibe, Alison remembers, was strange, and she felt an urgent need to clarify what had happened when they were alone. "Hey guys," she said, "Tim just asked me if I was bisexual. And I said yes. And he's really happy about it."

("It wasn't an issue with anyone and no judgment was passed at all," says Jacobs.)

Alison spent the rest of that day on the range, shooting and doing combat first-aid drills. This made no sense to her, as undercover operators didn't carry weapons. It was also strange given the general inadvisability of putting a weapon in the hands of someone you don't know. But she figured that it was a test to see if she had the skills she said she did. She then went to a strip club with Cooper, the director of security, to carry out the couples ruse, which involved getting "really physical with each other," she says—she sat on his lap, they whispered in each other's ears and so on. This was ostensibly meant to assess her undercover skills. She was asked, for example, to find out what make of car a random patron's mother drove. (OUR leaders' obsession with strip clubs was a source of bafflement not just to her but to other operators, as well as OUR employees.)

After a few hours, Cooper decided he'd seen enough and, she says, told Ballard that she was great. That was enough for Ballard, who said he wanted her to accompany them to Mexico, on an operation that was slated to begin within 10 days.

"I've had no training, nothing," says Alison. "They've known me for two days. They now want to take me into Mexico on this operation where they're undercover with cartels. In 10 days. I was like, 'That's crazy as hell, but I'm game.'"

The next day, she interviewed with Kevin Kozak, OUR's recently-hired director of international operations over a video call. A veteran of Homeland Security Investigations, the division of ICE for which Ballard worked prior to founding OUR, he reported to Ballard while overseeing him in his capacity as ops team leader, an unusual reporting structure that quickly proved

problematic for OUR.

Alison's interview with Kozak—who by reputation was unimpressed with OUR's recruitment specifically and the way it carried out international operations generally—was exhausting. He ran through each item on her résumé skeptically, demanding she explain every item in it and provide a reference for every job she'd ever had. "I hated it," she says, "but also appreciated it—this feels like he's actually vetting." The following day, she sent him professional references for every single job she'd held.

At the end of the interview, he told her that if they moved forward, they were looking at her going through a month-long undercover training course. (A former OUR employee says that at one time, there was discussion of having every operator undergo this training, not just Alison.)

This is great, Alison thought. *This is legitimate*.

"Tim says he wants to take you to Mexico in 10 days," Alison remembers Kozak saying. "I want you to know, that ain't happening." She would have to go through the training before he would even consider sending her, he said. This frustrated her, as the competitive side of her wanted to go, but she was also encouraged that she'd been told no.

After the interview, Ballard asked her how it went. She told him that she wasn't entirely sure, that it had been grueling, and that she wasn't going to be able to go to Mexico.

"Well, I'm his boss," Alison remembers Ballard saying. "So he doesn't get to say whether or not you get to go to Mexico or not. I sort of let him pretend like he gets to make those decisions, but he doesn't."

Her heart dropped. She brought up the month-long training, but Ballard said,

"You don't need all that."

"And then I was more and more uncomfortable," she says. "It's like, *Okay, I'm not sure that Tim's girls are anything more than a pretty face*."

As it worked out, Alison was sent home, with Ballard conceding that she wouldn't join him on the Mexico trip. About a week later, though, she was told that Kozak had been fired, and that a major part of the reason why was that he'd prevented her from going to Mexico. She would, she was told, be a major part of an operation in the Caribbean, but they'd had to get rid of Kozak before they could bring her on. (Kozak declined to comment, citing a non-disclosure agreement he'd signed with OUR.)

About two months later, Damon, the OUR CEO, called Alison. They were doing the Caribbean operation, he said, and she was going to be his girlfriend. This didn't sit well with her; she suspected that Damon had never been on an operation, something she was quickly able to confirm by calling Cooper,

"I was going to say I'm not going to do this," she says. "I don't know what the hell's going on with Brad. He also doesn't know what the hell's going on. And we're supposed to make out in public or something like that? What are we doing?"

The issue was settled soon enough, when Cooper told her that she would in fact be acting as his girlfriend. Soon, they would be off to the British Virgin Islands.

Because the operation took place during the height of the pandemic, members of Ballard's team, on their arrival in the British Virgin Islands, were required to quarantine. They did so on a luxurious private island to which they were welcomed by its owner, Britnie Turner, an entrepreneur, real estate

mogul, and philanthropist with an anti-trafficking organization of her own, Aerial Recovery, which at this time was coming into the orbit of OUR, the biggest and most established group of its kind.

(Turner, her partner Jeremy Locke, and Aerial Recovery did not reply to detailed requests for comment. They have not been accused of wrongdoing in the lawsuits filed against Ballard and OUR.)

According to her online biography, Turner "has had a passion for ending sex trafficking since she was 12 years old," which led to her co-founding Aerial Recovery, along with her now-husband, a veteran named Jeremy Locke. The organization claims to have rescued thousands from disasters and trafficking "by employing the most qualified, trained, and elite military veterans to deploy as Humanitarian Operators." OUR paid the group just under $200,000 in 2021, according to a 2022 tax filing, and is known to have worked in Ukraine with at least one organization led by Ballard, who recently exposed the identity of one of its operatives there by posting a since-deleted video of her defending the couples ruse. (The operative, whom VICE News was able to identify minutes after the video was posted, has not responded to repeated requests for comment.)

Alison had never before seen anything like she saw on this island, which featured what she calls "10-star" accommodations resembling the sort of lavish billionaire's compound seen in films like *Glass Onion*. The group approached the island by boat and was greeted by staff in golf carts, who ferried everyone to their own luxury huts. She was served gourmet vegan meals and waited on hand and foot by a private staff. ("They were all dressed in black.," Alison says. "They all had long blonde hair. It was very fucking creepy.") The island had its own ranch, festooned with rescued zebras that Alison, after all the vegan cooking, found herself eyeing hungrily.

In a photo Alison took, Cooper is seen swimming off the private island.

This was, Alison learned, the style to which Ballard had become accustomed. In his view, it was imperative, while carrying out undercover operations, to be taken for a wealthy sex tourist, and so, she was given to understand, he spent thousands upon thousands of donor dollars on private transportation, upscale hotel rooms, boats, and the like. (Alison, meanwhile, earned $200 per day, an amount that didn't even cover the income lost from participating in the mission. Her operator contract, she noted, was not actually with OUR, but with Deacon, a Nevada LLC and OUR subsidiary.)

OUR apparently did not have to pay for its time on the private island, rates for which are listed, as of publication, as beginning at $25,000 per night. As Alison understood it, Turner and Locke donated it, as part of Aerial Recovery Group partnering with OUR on the undercover operation.

Alison was joined on the island by Ballard and a young Mormon woman who will be referred to here as Kailyn, who was playing Ballard's wife as part of the couples ruse; they had come straight from Mexico, where they had been carrying out an undercover operation with Cooper, who joined them later. Also joining them was a therapist, who accompanied Ballard; Alison was given to understand that as the weight of being a prophet of God, running OUR, and being famous was weighing heavily on him, Ballard was working on his mental health, a choice she appreciated and respected.

(Kailyn, who requested that VICE News refer to her by a pseudonym out of concern for her safety, corroborated the details of Alison's account, but otherwise declined to comment. The therapist did not respond to requests for comment.)

During their first week on the island, Ballard sequestered himself, often alone and sometimes with the therapist, receiving what he called "downloads from God" or engaging in intensive therapy sessions. When he emerged from prayer, he was vague about the details, but continually told the team he was receiving important missives from above. "Powerful information today, guys," he'd say, in Alison's memory. (Ballard has publicly discussed receiving "spiritual downloads.")

All of this left time for Kailyn, Alison, and the therapist to lounge by the pool getting to know one another. Kailyn, it became clear, had no relevant background or experience that would have qualified her for undercover work aside from that she had as a hairdresser, in which role she assisted Ballard in dyeing his hair. It became equally clear that she absolutely believed that her relationship with Ballard was ordained by God, and that the two were on a divine mission that no else one would understand.

One day, Kailyn was struggling with her laptop, complaining that she was

having problems uploading large files. What she was trying to do, Alison learned, was send them to OUR's Utah headquarters. On Ballard's instructions, she had recorded a meeting with purported cartel operatives in Mexico on her phone, which was in her purse. She had then traveled to the British Virgin Islands—going through customs and border control, getting on and off planes, and interacting with military and government officials—with this evidence, which supposedly compromised a cartel-linked trafficker whom a Mexican official had asked Ballard to investigate. This was what she was trying to upload.

"I was so freaked out," says Alison. "I was like, this is majorly fucked up."

During this time, Alison expected that at some point, she would be trained. She had repeatedly been told not to worry when asking questions about how they would carry out their mission, and that there would be plenty of time for training in quarantine. She had in mind that she would learn about the exotic technology OUR used to identify and surveil traffickers, as well as about its policies and procedures. It slowly dawned on her, though, that she wasn't being trained on tech and policies because there were none. She remembers asking Cooper, for instance, what sort of tech they would be using on missions, and being told, somewhat confusingly, that sometimes they used an app, but that she could use whatever app she wanted. "I was like, What?" she says. "You mean to tell me you guys are using your phones and you're just downloading an app?"

There was also a business element to the quarantine period, as Alison remembers it: Turner, Locke, and Ballard were in the midst of solidifying the relationship between OUR and Aerial. Turner was (and is) a multimillionaire, and was often busy in Alison's observation. "She upscales businesses and she's a motivational speaker," Alison says. "She'd talk and play videos and patch into these seminars about being a global businessperson." She

remembers discussions of setting up a command post on the island, where OUR donors could watch operations being carried out in real time. Her impression, she said, was that Ballard's eyes "were full of dollar signs" when he looked at Turner.

Technology wasn't the only thing no one would tell her about. Over the past year, she had been told, Locke had been surveilling the area and gathering information on trafficking operations with which to brief OUR. This briefing, a 70-page target report, was to be the basis of their work. (It was cut down to an express version, at Ballard's request, Alison says.) During their first week on the island, Alison asked if she could review this document; Cooper told her he wasn't sure that she was allowed to see it. Eventually, she was told that Ballard believed reading the report was a waste of time. God, he said, would tell them who their targets were.

What Locke did eventually produce for the team's review was not the sophisticated assessment Alison expected. The presentation contained no specific information about human trafficking or traffickers, or indeed any evidence that would lead anyone to suppose there was any to be operated against. The document was essentially a list of strip clubs and tourist bars, with imagery sourced from Google Maps. Support information was on the order of a list of the numbers and addresses for local police.

Slide from an OUR mission briefing.

In group settings, Ballard occasionally spoke about his thoughts and feelings and how difficult everything was for him; he ruminated on people "who said bad things about him," Alison says, seeming fixated on it. These difficulties were alleviated somewhat when Katherine, his wife, arrived as a surprise.

Alison's assessment of Katherine is blunt: "Being with her is like being with a Stepford wife. I mean, there's just nothing there." Whatever the operational benefits of her being there were, it was quite a place for a married couple to spend time together. (Ballard seemingly avoided Kailyn as much as possible while Katherine was there.) In another context, it would've been idyllic. They sailed boats, paddleboarded, rode jet skis, and followed a carefully regimented schedule. On the day of Katherine's departure, for example, with the exception of one hour of personal time, everything was laid out, from a 7:15 a.m. workout to a 7:00 p.m. dinner under the stars, followed by a bonfire, with guests expected to adhere to the itinerary quite strictly.

One thing was made very clear to Alison: She and Cooper, Ballard said, needed to really start getting to know one another. They needed to get close. They needed to spend time together, and to get used to touching each other. They needed to start practicing.

The centrality of the couples ruse was such that Alison had to sign a "couples ruse contract," she says, a paper document in which she promised not to touch the genitalia or kiss the lips of Cooper, the person she was meant to be pretending to be partners with. The idea of promising not to have sex struck her as not particularly professional. In the intelligence community, she says, "You do any fucking thing you need to do, because the other person is a professional." The contract, she said, "was ridiculous. The whole thing was ridiculous." Nonetheless, she signed it.

A couples ruse contract. This is not the one Alison signed, but one Utah a court filing alleges Cooper and a woman suing OUR signed.

If all of this was inherently uncomfortable for Alison, it was all the more so given Ballard's constant pressure. Walking by them, he would wink, or ask Alison to sit on Cooper's lap, or say, "Why aren't you guys touching each other?" She remembers a "shitty, nasty grin" spreading across his face when

he walked past the two reclining on a couch.

The point, she came to believe, was not just to egg the two on into having sex with each other, but to catch them doing it—to seal Cooper's loyalty and perhaps to give Ballard something to hold over his head. She believes this in part because Ballard repeatedly sneaked up on them, seemingly attempting to catch them in the act. For a couple of nights, for instance, the entire party stayed on a catamaran. Alison and Cooper were, per the doctrine of the couples ruse, staying together in a small bedroom cabin. Three or four times each night, Ballard would burst into the room unannounced, on the pretext of having something to tell them, as late as one o'clock in the morning. They were always fully clothed, Alison added, "but that was just all weird, and inappropriate, and creepy."

After the required number of days in isolation, the undercover mission, or "fishing trip," was set to go. Dubbed "Operation Marcel," it took place over several days in early June on islands near the one Turner owned—planning documents show it as taking place from June 4-6, while Alison recalls it taking place over four days—and had, according to the briefing put together by Locke, no clear or discernible purpose.

According to the document, "high level BVI law enforcement and Government Officials" had expressed concerns about trafficking; to whom is not made clear. Local officials had not, the document stressed in bold type, approved any sort of operation, which meant Ballard's ops team was not working, even in the most informal sense, under color of law. (The document urged extra caution because of the proximity of the operation to the so-called "Caribbean command center"—Turner's private island.) What the ops team was looking into wasn't exactly clear. "Humint and internet intelligence gathering" had yielded "no direct specific neighborhoods, hotels, people, phone numbers, email addresses or online accounts associated with human

trafficking." The best lead the team had, according to the document, came from an online escort guide for business travelers. "There is not any indication of human trafficking," the document stressed.

Slide from an OUR mission briefing. VICE News has redacted the names of businesses listed as "targets of interest."

Ballard had a clear solution: He and Kailyn would gather intelligence by going to spas, strip clubs, and bars, while Alison and Cooper monitored them from outside in a car, using an off-the-shelf app called ATAK to track their location. (A third team, provided by Aerial Recovery, followed in a boat.) "For like six, seven hours, Tim would be in these strip clubs with Kailyn," Alison said. As part of their cover as sex tourists, Ballard and Kailyn would perform the role of a couple; Ballard would from time to time ask patrons and employees where he could find a wilder scene. (One document shows Ballard asking bewildered workers at an upscale spa for "other types of massages, maybe some that are off the menu.") These were, as far as Alison knew, "random bars and strip clubs," not shown by any particular

intelligence-gathering to be linked to trafficking, making the line between performed and actual sex tourism something less than clear and distinct. All of these activities were memorialized in a document called the "DAILY SITREP," which came complete with faux government markings.

Slide from an OUR situation reports. VICE News has redacted the names of businesses and individuals.

The team's best lead came one afternoon when Ballard and Kailyn went to a bar they had been informed was where to go to find "a good place to party." The proprietor told them that he knew a guy who had girls from all over the islands. As Ballard and Kailyn were about to leave, the proprietor told them to wait; five minutes later, a man named Henry—VICE News is referring to him by a pseudonym—pulled up in a Mercedes. He told them he could get whatever they wanted. What Ballard and Kailyn wanted, they said, was an orgy; Henry offered, according to the document, "Venezuelian and Diminican [sic] Republic girls as young as 22."

This didn't strike Alison as especially good reason to think that he was a trafficker, as opposed to a pimp, and even an "operator comment"

apparently written by Ballard was lukewarm at best. ("The fact that Henry is able to provide women during the middle of the day indicates that he has decent control over their schedules, which can be a big indicator of trafficking," read the document.) Nonetheless, Ballard engaged the man for a party, apparently hoping to bust him for trafficking. He assigned Alison and Cooper to rent a house and then "trash it," she said, "to make it look like a party house." In practice this meant messing up the bed, putting some beer in the fridge, spitting toothpaste in the sink, and strewing Doritos around.

Hours before they were set to meet with Henry, Ballard informed Alison that according to a spiritual download he had received, she was meant to be the primary on the operation. That meant that she would interact with Henry, ask him to set up parties with women, and maintain a relationship with him via an OUR-provided burner phone even after she returned to the United States. This was concerning to Alison, because it meant that rather than finding women who had already been trafficked, she could potentially be "creating a market" for trafficking victims.

Numerous experts, as well as people who have worked for or with OUR, have previously raised concerns to VICE News about the possibility that its operations could create demand for trafficking. (OUR has insisted that they do not.) A person who is not trafficking underage girls might, the concern goes, do so when an undercover operator for an anti-trafficking group asks for young girls, enticing them with large amounts of cash.

In preparation for the meeting with Henry, Ballard instructed Alison to look "butch but pretty," as she recalls, and to present herself as a gay businesswoman setting up a sex tourism business in the Caribbean. The idea that Alison was supposed to be both a gay businesswoman and also in a relationship with a man with whom she'd been seen with all over the islands was not, she thought, particularly narratively coherent.

On the day of the party, Henry appeared with a woman who said she was 19, and appeared to Alison to be of age. (Nonetheless, she acknowledges, the woman could have been older or younger than she appeared.) Ballard said he wasn't feeling well and so wouldn't have sex with the girl, but would still pay for the time. He wanted to talk business, he said. Alison told the man about her plan to set up a sex tourism business, adding that they were "looking for a lot of variety," but refused to specifically say they were looking for underage girls. This was June; they agreed they would return in September for a party. In the meantime, Alison was expected to maintain contact with the man from the U.S. using the burner phone—something she wasn't, and isn't, sure would be legal, so far as the purpose of the conversations was to encourage him to traffic women and girls.

"We've got no permission from the U.S. government to do this," she says. "I'm on U.S. soil acting as an undercover agent."

To make things stranger, Ballard also began texting her on the burner phone. "How are you?? Ready for Mexico," he wrote in a message reviewed by VICE News, adding an emoji of a face with hearts for eyes.

There were two problems. One was that she wasn't going to Mexico; the other is that she had reason to believe, from familiarity with messages he'd sent to Kailyn, that this was a prelude to explicit sexual messages, which she preempted by writing "?????? This is Alison...I was not asked to come to Mexico!"

Ballard apologized. "Sorry!" he wrote. "I thought this was Lisa's phone. Trying to 'dirty' it up for cover." ("Lisa" was Kailyn's undercover alias; "'dirty' it up" was a reference to Ballard's practice of sending explicit sexual messages to female operators with whom he was carrying out the couples ruse, which he claimed was necessary to protect them in case traffickers

demanded to read their text messages to see if they were in fact intimate.)

The burner phone she was using, it turned out, was one that Kailyn already used for a previous operation in Mexico; no one had even bothered to change the sim card. What concerned Alison was the way this suggested a worryingly poor level of operational security—not only couldn't OUR keep track of which operative kept which phone, she'd been provided with a potentially compromised one.

"These things are digitally trackable," Alison says. "If the cartels were on to them and watching, they would know precisely where this fucking phone was if they wanted to."

This wasn't the only way in which the use of this phone potentially compromised Alison. At Ballard's request, she kept up an ongoing conversation with Henry, the suspected trafficker, after her return to the U.S. As part of that, he sent a video to the phone, meant to be a taste of what kind of party he could throw, depicting naked women dancing. All appeared to be adults. Alison responded politely, but then, she says, "It hits me like a ton of bricks." The video, she realized, could easily have depicted child sexual exploitation, something that would have been positively illegal for her to have or view. It was also perfectly possible that he would send her something like that in the future.

"I know damn well at this point that we don't have any permission," she said. "I know absolutely that if I'm sent child sexual abuse material I'm in big fucking trouble."

Alison called Jeremy Locke, who was then OUR's regional director for the Caribbean. "What's the standard operating procedure if I'm sent child sexual abuse material if I'm on U.S. soil?" she asked him.

Locke's response, Alison says, was to tell her to call OUR right away "and then turn the phone off and send it in."

Alison turned the phone off and put it away. She then "expressed some unwillingness" to keep doing this to OUR, she says; when an OUR representative sent her an envelope asking her to return the phone in it, she did not.

"I don't want them to wipe this phone," she says. "If I send it back, they're just going to wipe the phone and give it to some other dipshit operator, like me."

Soon after she got home from the Caribbean, Alison called Matt Osborne, telling him they needed to talk. In her memory, she told him that Ballard was "crazy as hell and dangerous," and that she didn't believe due diligence was being conducted before operations, "putting operators at tremendous risk." She related some of what had happened in the Caribbean, such as the downloads from God taking the place of actual planning and her concerns over evidence handling.

"You could tell he knew everything I was saying already," Alison said. He told her, in Alison's memory, that Ballard would fire people who were critical of him, and that the best they could do was try to keep him from doing too much harm to himself or others.

A couple of weeks later, Ballard called her, furious. "Did you betray me?" he asked. She learned there had been a leadership meeting to express concerns to Ballard, and that he had responded, again, by threatening to fire people.

Alison told him that she had "absolutely" expressed concerns about his leadership style, that she thought he needed help, and offered to connect

him with resources to help with “stress,” as she put it tactfully. (Ballard declined.)

“I thought that was it,” Alison said, assuming she’d be immediately fired. Instead, a few weeks later, she got an invitation to the training where she would, in the end, be severely injured. In the hospital, she also learned she was positive for COVID, which she says she got at the training. Given the state of the COVID crisis, and the fact that the surgery was technically “elective,” she had to delay getting surgery for her facial injuries for eight full weeks. The medical bills in Utah totaled $26,000, because it was out of network. OUR quietly paid those bills in full, suggesting, to Alison, that they felt responsible for her injuries.

As Alison’s face healed—“beautifully,” she says, with a hint of wry pride—she began reflecting on her time with OUR, the disastrous trail of good intentions and bad decisions that led her to end up face down on a dirty mat in a gym in Utah. Unbelievably, she tried one more time to stay involved with OUR, mulling over an invitation to go to Thailand to check out their operations there, still wondering if they’d be better—more professional, more meaningful—than what she’d witnessed under Ballard.

In February of 2022, she flew to Thailand. What she found, she said, was “better”—no apparent sexual impropriety, a relationship with the Thai government—but once there, she learned, she says, that OUR wanted a full-time staffer there, for the same $200 a day pay rate. “It wasn’t a living wage,” she says. Once she returned home, her relationship with the group faded along with her lingering bruises. In the hospital and over the long weeks and months of recovery that followed, Ballard never once called or visited her.