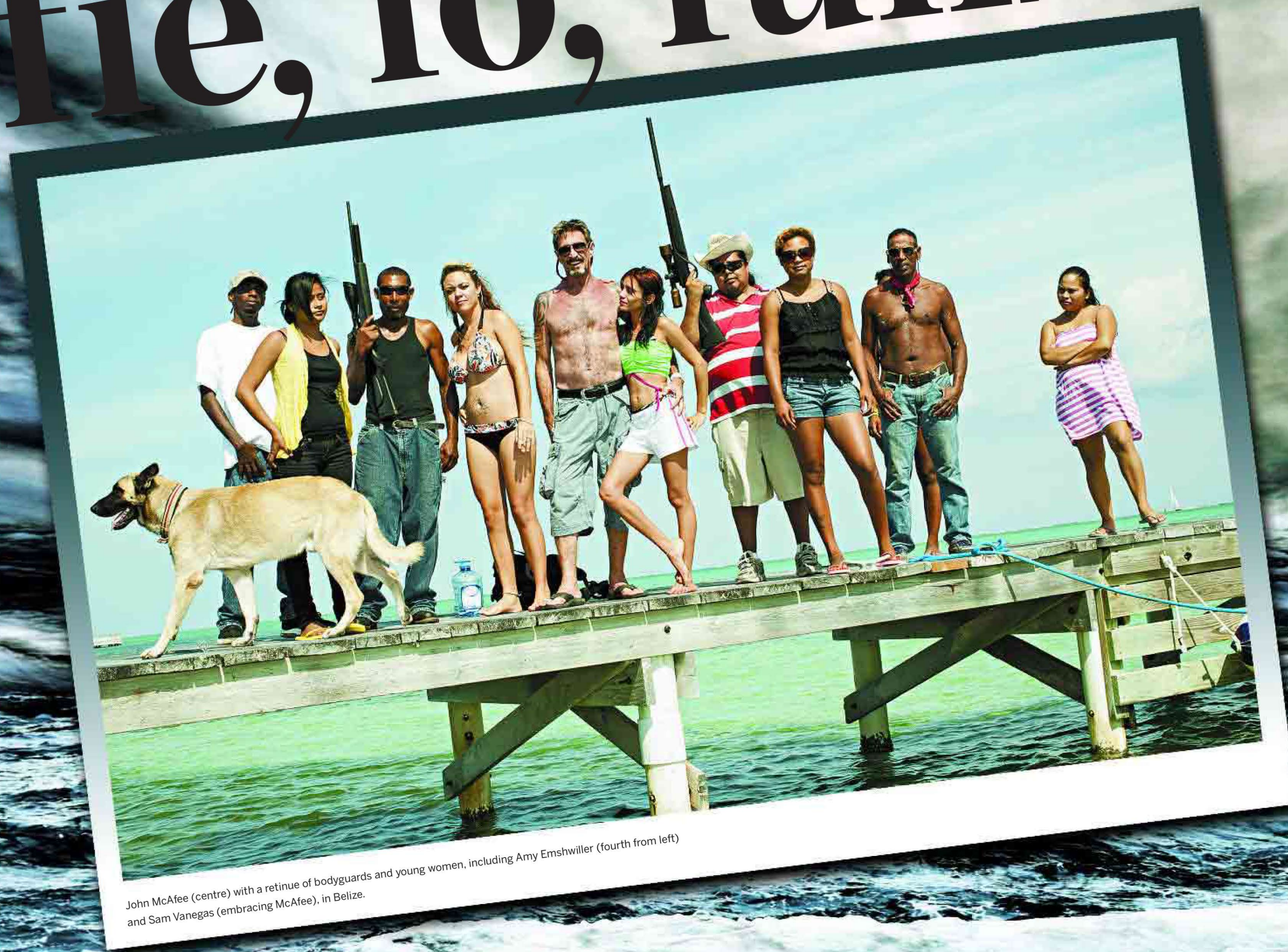


McAfee, fie, fo, fum



John McAfee (centre) with a retinue of bodyguards and young women, including Amy Emshwiller (fourth from left) and Sam Vanegas (embracing McAfee), in Belize.

He may only be part Englishman, but there has been no shortage of people out for the computer programmer's blood since he sold his antivirus software business. He tells **Jenni Marsh** about a life of guns, girls and extreme danger.

An ageing entrepreneur with a penchant for prostitutes; an eccentric multimillionaire tech wizard "ruined" by recession; founder of a new age Central American drug laboratory; and a man wanted for questioning over the murder of a neighbour. John McAfee, Silicon Valley's original bad boy, is all of these things.

For years, the IT genius remained the faceless namesake of McAfee antivirus software, the business he sold in 2004 for US\$100 million and which he has since publicly derided. Then, last year, a murder mystery on the sleepy island of Ambergris Caye, in the Central American nation of Belize, brought him to the world's attention.

The morning after Gregory Faull was found with a bullet in the back of his head, McAfee went on the run, with *Vice* magazine in tow. He skipped Belize and faked a heart attack in Guatemala to get extradited back into the United States, where he's now courting celebrity and making riotous self-parodies on YouTube.

But who is John McAfee? Little is known about his background, he gleefully deals journalists red herrings and his contradictory character makes him maddeningly difficult to judge. When I called him up one recent Sunday evening, he was visiting Austin, Texas, for the first time and was ready to talk about his new tech venture – and the skeletons in his closet.

JOHN MCAFEE WAS BORN in southwest England in 1946 to a British mother and a US serviceman. His parents had met in Bristol and theirs was a wartime love story. After two years, the family moved from Gloucestershire to Salem, Virginia, in the US, where he grew up.

McAfee still holds dual citizenship but says he doesn't feel British. "I just like English tea and Marmite," he says. But there is something very British public school about him; he's well-mannered, charming and deftly inoffensive.

His parents' union was fraught and the family, he tells me, was not well-off. "I certainly did not come from money. My fortune was self-made."

McAfee, who was an only child, has said his father was drunk and abusive. He shot himself dead when McAfee was just 15. His mother passed away 17 years later, meaning neither parent lived to see the family name travel the world.

Still, they must have known he was smart. After graduating with a degree in mathematics from Roanoke College, in Virginia, he was hired by US space agency Nasa to work in New York as a programmer. Two years later, he left for Silicon Valley, and set up a dating service in Santa Clara that used a database to screen members for HIV and Aids, decades before the likes of OkCupid and Match.com were conceived. But it wasn't until he joined American global aerospace and defence giant Lockheed Martin in the mid-1980s that inspiration in step with the times struck.

"It was kind of an accident, like everything in my life," he said at the time. As the computer industry gained pace, fears of "malevolent bugs" were taking hold. In 1986, two brothers in Pakistan coded the first known computer virus aimed at PCs. McAfee infected his machine with the Pakistani Brain virus, which erased files from its host's hard drive. He cracked the virus and began wiping it for others. Before long he wrote Virus Scan.

By 1987, he had formed antivirus firm McAfee Associates and, two years later, he quit Lockheed Martin. Fame was to soon follow.

"It was a lot of hard work, but an extremely proud moment in my life," McAfee says. "Back then, I really loved what I did." But after a scandal over the Michelangelo virus, in which McAfee was accused of scaremongering to boost sales, and a US\$50 million public floatation in 1993, the following year McAfee stepped away from the business.

"The company grew so fast, it was no longer enjoyable," he says. "When you're the CEO of a firm that employs 10,000 people, you can no longer do the things that you love, which is programming. You have to deal with personnel problems and stockholders and board meetings. It's not my cup of tea. Everyone was shocked, of course; the company was expanding so rapidly. But there was no sense in staying. I hired the CEO of IBM to take over and he did a great job."

McAfee was also battling personal demons; after suffering a heart attack in 1993, he stopped taking recreational drugs and became teetotal. His heavy substance abuse dated back to his Nasa days. McAfee was 48 years old. He had been married twice: first to a student he met in college and then to a United Airlines air hostess. He bought a 160-hectare forest in Colorado, built a home on »