

THIRD DEGREE COMMUNICATIONS, INC.

TRAINING BULLETIN

Undercover Operations

By Gregory D. Lee

The use of undercover (UC) officers is a time-tested investigative technique where disguises and pretexts are used to gain the confidence of known or suspected criminals in order to undermine their illegal activities.

UC officers perform one of the most dangerous assignments in law enforcement. They come face to face with criminals as the crime is occurring. A criminal may not hesitate to rob or even kill a UC officer if he believes the person is also a criminal, such as a competing drug dealer. Suspects reason that their victims will either not report the crime, or their death will not generate much police interest.

UC officers must adequately prepare for every assignment they face. If the UC officer is exposed as a police officer, it could create serious safety problems for him and any confidential informant who introduced the officer to the criminal.

Officers selected for undercover assignments should have the same traits any other detective has, and be willing to accept the inherent dangers associated with this type of work. Officers unable or unwilling to perform undercover assignments should not be forced by their supervisors to perform these assignments.

QUALIFICATIONS FOR UNDERCOVER WORK

An officer selected for an undercover role must possess the necessary sophistication for the assignment. If a UC operation concerns drugs, the officer must have knowledge about drugs

in general, and specifically how they are bought, sold, diluted, transported, smuggled, concealed, and used. They must also speak the trafficker's "language" and know street terminology for different drugs.

He or she must have the appropriate appearance for the role. An officer with a disheveled appearance who is normally assigned to surveillance work may have to become well groomed and tailored if he is playing the role of an investment banker willing to launder a drug dealer's money. On the other hand, a clean-cut officer must alter his appearance if he hopes to convince a drug dealer he is a homeless drug addict. Appearance is equally important as knowledge and skill.

THOROUGHLY DEBRIEF THE INFORMANT

Once selected to perform an undercover assignment, the officer should review the investigative case file as well as the file of the informant involved. The review should focus on the informant's past performance and manageability. If the informant has a history of perjury, or is known for embellishment or exaggeration, a prosecutor should review the facts and decide whether this informant should continue to be used to avoid credibility issues later in court.

UC officers must research the criminal history of the informant, and the degree of his past relationship with the suspect(s). The motivation for the informant to provide information to the police must be determined. In short, the UC officer must know as much as he can about the informant's background so he or she will feel comfortable working with him.

COVER STORY

Cover stories are used to prepare the UC officer and informant in answering questions the suspects may ask so the answers are consistently the same. Some background questions that must

be agreed upon and memorized are: How did the two meet? When did you meet? Where are you from? What previous experience do you have in criminal activity? UC officers are advised not to say they met their informant in jail since contacts within penal institutions can easily confirm this is not true. If an informant has already answered seemingly innocent questions about the background of the UC officer, he must be thoroughly debriefed on exactly what was asked, and what answers he gave before an introduction of the UC officer to the suspect is made.

OTHER PREPARATIONS

Other professional preparations the UC officer must do include acquiring a genuine UC driver license, UC vehicle and registration, UC weapon, credit cards, birth certificate, etc. Genuine UC federal documents such as passports, pilot's license and Social Security Cards can be obtained through a federal law enforcement agency on a case-by-case basis.

It's much better to have these documents and not use them, then not have them and suddenly need them to perform an important UC assignment.

CONCLUSION

There are many things a UC officer must do to prepare for this potentially hazardous assignment, and this bulletin cannot address them all. Officers interested in UC work are encouraged to attend training, engage in role playing exercises, and read as much as they can on the subject before performing their first assignment.

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