



WESTSIDE MAJOR CRIME VIOLATORS TASK FORCE TECHNICAL SUPPORT AND COMMUNICATIONS

Michael S. Williams, AKA: “Tron”

INTRODUCTION

The West Los Angeles Major Crime Violators Taskforce (MCV) was a multi-jurisdictional, California Department of Justice funded police task force focused on major crimes in the early 80's leading up to the 1984 Olympics. Team members were from various agency stations with specialized skills and background. Participating agencies included Beverly Hills, Culver City, Los Angeles, Los Angeles County Sheriff, Santa Monica, University of California Police and the Los Angeles County District Attorney.

The Task Force comprised of a surveillance unit and a storefront “sting” operation. The original “Anything and Everything” storefront was located in Culver City with the second, “Deforest Electronics” located in Santa Monica. The final store moved to Beverly Hills. In addition, the storefront operation worked in conjunction with Honolulu Police, Las Vegas Metro police and San Jose Police as well as various corporate security investigators from United Parcel Service, Bank of America, Master Card, American Express and others. MCV surveillance teams operated out of the West Los Angeles Police West Bureau office while the storefront team used an office in the West Hollywood Sheriff's Station.

Various operations involved outside agencies including the Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Postal Inspectors; Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, U.S. Secret Service, U.S. Customs as well as internal agency detectives from Burglary, Forgery, LAPD's Special Investigations Section, Robbery-Homicide and Los Angeles County Sheriff's Special Enforcement Bureau. Southern Pacific Railroad Special Agents provided secured resources for storing extensive amounts of evidence.

A review of the technical aspects of the MCV Task Force capabilities must take into consideration that in the 80's electronic equipment was expensive, bulky, created excessive heat, was power hungry and not conducive to concealing. How such an operation today would be conducted would be significantly more versatile, higher resolution, less power hungry and profoundly lighter, compact and concealable.

The following is a short summary of the equipment and techniques utilized by MCV in all three storefront operations and field operations.

STOREFRONT TECHNICAL OPERATIONS

One of the primary objectives of the storefront sting operation was to capture irrefutable evidence of criminal transactions utilizing video and audio evidence. All three storefront locations were equipped with multiple CCTV black and white cameras built into covert housings disguised as speakers. While the brown speaker grill cloth hid the cameras well, it also restricted the level of available light to the camera. This created challenges for close-up and detailed visuals. To overcome this problem, one camera was a remote controlled pan/tilt mount with a manual zoom lens controlled by a camera operator in another room. While large, it was never discovered even as it sat above the operators head. The camera's variable lens allowed for clear facial identification and viewing of transactions.



Anything and Everything Culver City Storefront

All video and audio was recorded at real time with time and date imbedded. Audio was incorporated from microphones installed at various locations throughout the building. These microphones were controlled with a mixer providing outstanding audio quality. The telephone was also attached to the recording system. The office phone system was equipped with multiple lines and an intercom line to allow back-up officers, other investigators or the operator to contact the sting operator covertly.

While transaction recording could be done automatically, generally an operator controlled the cameras, switching, pan/tilt and zoom functions, as well as, the microphone mixer.

Secondary monitors were placed in the back-up room behind a breakaway wall for officer safety. Back-up officers also served as additional witness of target interactions. This hidden room was adjacent to the primary office for officer safety in the event of a take-down, robbery attempt or other incidents requiring immediate assistance. All transactions were supervised by back-up officers who were at the ready in the event something went wrong. While there were some very close calls, nothing ever happened that required back-up intervention.

The camera operator also functioned as the coordination point with the external surveillance team on the street via radio. Field surveillance units would obtain vehicle descriptions and license plates which would be photographed and relayed to the video operator in the event a plate needed to be run through Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV), future identification and the event log.

The storefronts were heavily alarmed and despite the number of nefarious individuals that came through, coupled with the nature of the neighborhoods, amazingly, they were never burglarized.

SURVEILLANCE COMMUNICATIONS AND AUDIO INTERCEPTION

Mobile and storefront two-way communications were conducted primarily on the LAPD “ROVER” system utilizing “City Wide” and simplex tactical channels. Task Force members were known as “*William Queen*” units and, while not secret, most of the team members and vehicles were unknown by uniformed personnel. A non LAPD licensed low power simplex frequency was also utilized for close proximity communications and moving surveillance coordination. While much to their dismay to the city radio shop, this radio modification was done outside of shop for added operational security.

When surveillance teams were operating at least one officer would have a specific agency radio on the primary dispatch frequency to ensure officer safety and to intercept local calls that could interfere with surveillance activities or potentially involve the team itself. This was frequently a task for the van operator who was generally holding back from the primary target.

When the new “cell phone” system was introduced in Los Angeles several portable phones were assigned to the MCV but were used primarily for “buy busts” and talking with targets.



The “*Big Kahuna*” Lt. Joe Ares

Nagra SN style reel-to-reel stereo recorders were the audio recording device of choice. The industrial built recorders were rugged but large and difficult to conceal in some applications. Nonetheless, they worked very well and amazingly were never detected during any MCV operation. The audio quality was superior to other recorders used with the exception of the compact Sony micro cassette recorders. With an external microphone, these recorders worked well and were much less detectable.

Noisy audio tapes were processed through a pre-amplifier and equalizer. This was an effective method of removing or at least reducing background noise. Original and modified tapes were then booked into evidence. Interestingly, over time it was learned that one of the most difficult environments to record conversations effectively was restaurants. Clanking plates, utensils and chinaware were very difficult sounds to filter out because of their diversity of audio range. Consequently, restaurants were avoided.

Motorola, Bell and Howell, Tactical RF and Audio Intelligence Devices (AID) transmitters were routinely used for “Body Wires.” The Tactical RF equipment was the most advanced and compact but expensive. The old school Bell and Howell transmitters were more less reliable but had low battery life. By using an advanced receiver and antenna system, the range of the “wires” could be as much as a mile. Signal recording was done in the van or with a portable suitcase equipped with a receiver and antenna. These devices were used primarily when officer safety was an issue or a takedown was going to take place. Tape recorders were preferred due to the limitations and frequent problems associated with low-power radio devices.

In some cases, an advance team would “wire” a location such as a restaurant, hotel room or office for audio surveillance. This technique worked well when time permitted advanced planning and preparation. However, more often than not, any planning was quickly circumvented by targets that ran on their own time schedules. The concept of adhering to any concept of scheduled events was generally incomprehensible.

VEHICLES

Surveillance vehicles were primarily leased from “Rent-A- Dent” as used cars that not only did not look like government vehicles but were in no way traceable to any participating agency. The surveillance van was a California DOJ vehicle that had never been registered and frequently sported out of state plates provided by allied sting operations in Hawaii and Nevada. The cars were rotated out from time to time and had no law enforcement equipment of any kind attached. Officers used portable radios exclusively when driving these cars. In addition, a couple of LAPD “Metro” style vehicles were assigned for use in emergencies, traffic stops when necessary and to “show the flag” during takedowns.

The van was the backbone of field operations. It contained communications equipment, back-up supplies, surveillance cameras and recorders and served as a command post for many operations. A periscope provided external 360 degree viewing with a film or CCTV camera. Various optical lenses allowed for extended viewing options as necessary. Videotaping was done utilizing VHS and ¾ U-Matic tape on several styles of recorders. External monitors in the van provided easy viewing for back-up officers. Most all were also recorded on cassette tape as back-up in the event the video was not useful.

A Checker Taxi Cab from Santa Monica PD served as an excellent surveillance vehicle that doubled up as a “bait car” for “buy busts” and snitch recruitment interaction. One of the most successful locations was a Winchell’s on Santa Monica in West Hollywood. Tools provided by various companies to be used as bait was profoundly successful. Unlike most of the other vehicles it was equipped with a police radio.

From time to time private vehicles would be used on cases involving corporate security operations such as UPS. MCV teams would either hide in the trucks as cover or use them as props during target interactions. Pizza delivery signs were also used effectively.

Vehicles presented problems. Parking tickets were a significant issue and officers were responsible for covering their own fines. On one extended week long operation a back-up car containing surveillance equipment, weapons and evidence collection supplies was towed from the hotel parking lot. The vehicles were so convincing that it was not unusual for MCV members to be stopped by uniformed patrol officers.

AIRCRAFT



Santa Monica PD's Cessna 172 Skyhawk was used extensively for surveillance and support. It was equipped with additional communications and optical surveillance equipment including custom windows for extended viewing. The plane provided aerial support to ground units and extended communications as necessary. With LA's heavy traffic and the nature of close in moving surveillance, this aircraft was

invaluable and perhaps the most important asset to MCV. Working the aircraft assignment was one of the most demanding positions on the team for both the pilot and the observer. The plane is currently on display at Santa Monica Airport's Museum of Flying.