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Lions in the Darkness: They Operate in Secrecy
By Frank N. Armenia, NYPD Sergeant, retired

They operate in secrecy in places and conditions that many could not imagine. They are in every city and state across America, and we do not know who they are, or what they do. We only learn their identity when tragedy occurs. They are not terrorists; they are the brave men and women, who work in an undercover narcotics capacity. Police work has always been a hazardous undertaking but the hazard increases exponentially when police officers take on the role of an undercover officer. What can be done to minimize the potential risks?

During the Nixon Administration, the United States declared war on drugs. For over three decades our government spent billions of dollars and incarcerated hundreds of thousands of people. As a result of this initiative the blood of numerous undercover operatives was shed, with little effect. Is it any more difficult today than it was thirty years ago to purchase drugs? Sadly, the answer is "No!" It is a simple matter of the economic law of supply and demand. As long as there is a demand, someone will be willing to create a supply. Please understand that this writer is not advocating the legalization of drugs, but rather a change in ideology. What does that mean? The law enforcement community must recognize that drug use will never be completely eradicated from this country. However, this market can be utilized to target, investigate and dismantle criminal groups and organizations that practice this trade. What drives these people to pursue such endeavors? The answer is greed, money, power and status. Just keep in mind that a drug dealer cannot walk into a local car dealership with three kilos of cocaine and barter for a new, shiny red convertible; he requires money. This nexus affords law enforcement the opportunity to engage, and infiltrate his inner sanctum.

Undercover operations can be an effective means of investigation, if conducted in a safe and efficient manner. Nevertheless, the use of undercover operatives should be the final option in the investigative process after exhausting all other alternatives. When conducting undercover operations, attention must be given to detail. An undercover officer must be provided with the tools required to achieve their goal.

The objective of undercover officers is narrow and specific: their function is to purchase controlled substances or weapons, and gather intelligence and information in the development of a specific case. Prior experience shows that when undercover officers'

roles are expanded beyond their intended objectives, tragedy follows. One such incident occurred in New York City in the early 1990's. An undercover officer, after conducting a confirmatory buy, (confirming that the substance was present prior to the execution of a search warrant), held the door open to a commercial establishment for the back up team, conducting a search warrant entry. The proprietor who thought he was about to become the victim of a robbery, shot and killed the undercover officer.

As a law enforcement instructor, I was astonished at the concerns plaguing officers acting in an undercover capacity. The stories told by some of these officers, frankly, made my stomach turn. The most common complaint was the lack of knowledge and experience possessed by persons directly responsible for the supervision of such potentially hazardous operations. This is unacceptable. It is incumbent upon the people responsible for the supervision, and the well being of their subordinates to attain and to possess the skills and abilities required to supervise and conduct such operations in a safe and efficient manner. I realize that drug organizations and structures vary in many different ways throughout the region however; the way in which they are approached should be universal.

The first and most important priority is the safety of the undercover officer and the field team. How can this doctrine of safety be established? This doctrine can be implemented through the creation of guidelines and procedures, which will ensure a uniformed approach is taken in all subsequent investigations. Experience can not be overstated, but how does one gain experience, in a relatively short time? The answer is *TRAINING*. Proper training is the great equalizer; it enables us to gain new skills, knowledge, and abilities in a relatively short period. The alternative is conducting these operations in the hope that nothing will go wrong. That is the equivalent of gambling. When planning for these types of operations, supervisors must always remain cognizant of the ninth field team member who goes by the name of Murphy. Because I knew that I could not plan for every eventuality, I recognized that the actions taken before and immediately after an incident could mean the difference between life and death. These actions are the result of proper planning and coordination. It is also important to note that all operations are unique, but the warning signs of potential danger are universal. The recognition of these warning signs unfortunately came in many instances as the result of tragedy. This is why it is important to identify and recognize the potential for danger in this endeavor. We can no longer leave matters to chance. There is a proper way of conducting such exercises, to minimize the potential risks involved. It is just a matter of finding the way.

We can never remove all the danger associated with this endeavor, still it is necessary to look at the risk and weigh it against the desired outcome. Supervisors and officers must ask themselves these critical questions: Is it worth the risk to conduct this particular event? Could this goal be achieved by other means? Has this operation been properly planned? We owe it to these brave men and women who take on such assignments to take all possible measures necessary for their safety. These individuals operate in secrecy, protecting all of us from perils of society. May we never come to learn their names.