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LAW ENFORCEMENT ROLE

# Seattle Police Department's "Decoy Squad"



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Seattle's Decoy Squad

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By

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AMID the noise and jostle of a sidewalk society, a derelict, clutching a bottle-shaped paper bag beneath his rumpled coat, weaves his way along Seattle's Skid Road in the Pioneer Square District. It is the first week of the month, and a tan window envelope, carelessly prominent in his coat pocket, reveals some of the State-provided funds with which he has begun his night on the town. Mumbling to himself, the decrepit old man staggers into the doorway of a boarded-up hotel, and pulling his collar up around his face, curls up in the corner to sleep off his apparent inebriation.

Father down the street, a husky youth, whose faded bluejeans and boots identify him as possibly an off-duty longshoreman or itinerant cowboy, balances himself on a pair of wooden crutches. His bandaged head and abrasion scabs attest to a recent fight of which he was not necessarily the victor. A torn pay envelope, readily accessible for his evening's enjoyment, protrudes from his jacket pocket.

Still another young man walks slowly through the district, mentally recording the details of his surroundings. Glancing into the doorway, he notes the sleeping man and the tempting welfare envelope. The old man

appears to sleep soundly in his convenient doorway, oblivious to his surroundings. The youth hesitates only momentarily, then leans over and takes the envelope from the man's pocket. Upon opening the envelope, he notices it contains only two \$1 bills. As the youth searches through the old man's remaining pockets for more money, two men emerge from the shadows, arrest him, and take him into custody. The derelict is awakened, helped off to a waiting police car, and taken to the police station as a victim.

Only minutes after emerging onto the street, the young man on crutches is approached by a large man who, shouting epithets, knocks him to the ground and snatches his pay envelope, paws brusquely through his clothing for still more money, and threatens to beat him further unless he relinquishes all valuables. Two apparent idlers in the vicinity step from an alleyway and intervene, brace the assailant against the wall, handcuff him, and take him away to jail. The crippled man is helped up and taken along for a statement.

Both the “cripple” and the “derelict,” as well as their two-man backup teams, are police officers and members of the “Decoy Squad” of the Seattle Police Department's Crimes Specific Section.

### The Decoy Squad

The problem involved the robbery, and often beating, of the aged and infirm residents of Seattle's Skid Road by strong-arm assailants and “jack-rollers.” Victims of such crimes, being in genuine fear of retribution, rarely report the incidents or appear in court to testify against their assailant. In order to combat the problem, the widely used “decoy” concept was adopted. Of course, there are many variations of this concept, but to utilize it effectively, an adroitness in the art of disguise is essential. The difficulty is to transform youthful, vigorous policemen in their twenties into aging derelicts.

“The problem [which had faced the crimes specific section] involved the robbery, and often beating, of the aged and infirm residents of Seattle's Skid Road . . . .”

The commander of the crimes specific section, whose teenage son was then attending a dramatic arts class at a local high school, contacted the school dramatics teacher for advice. The teacher enthusiastically conducted a crash course in old-age makeup and provided a few acting

techniques to assist the officers in making their roles convincing. Now, one corner of the commander's desk holds a makeup case containing various lengths and colors of hair for instant beards, mustaches, and sideburns, wax pencils, cement for sticking on false beards, and nose putty to create misshapen bone structure. Gauze bandages and iodine are used for obvious "injuries"; crutches convey "victim" helplessness and therefore attract street muggers. Assorted used clothing was purchased from local nonprofit retail outlet stores, and careful observation of the gait and behavior of the real victims provided the remaining background for the roles the "decoy" officers were to play.

With the commander acting as "makeup man," the decoy squad arrives early for its 7 p.m. to 3 a.m. shift and immediately begins its transformation. The success of the disguises is noted not only in the success of the squad's operation, but in the frequency with which "good Sa-

maritans" counsel potential victims to take care of themselves, to conceal and secure their money, and help them to a safer location.

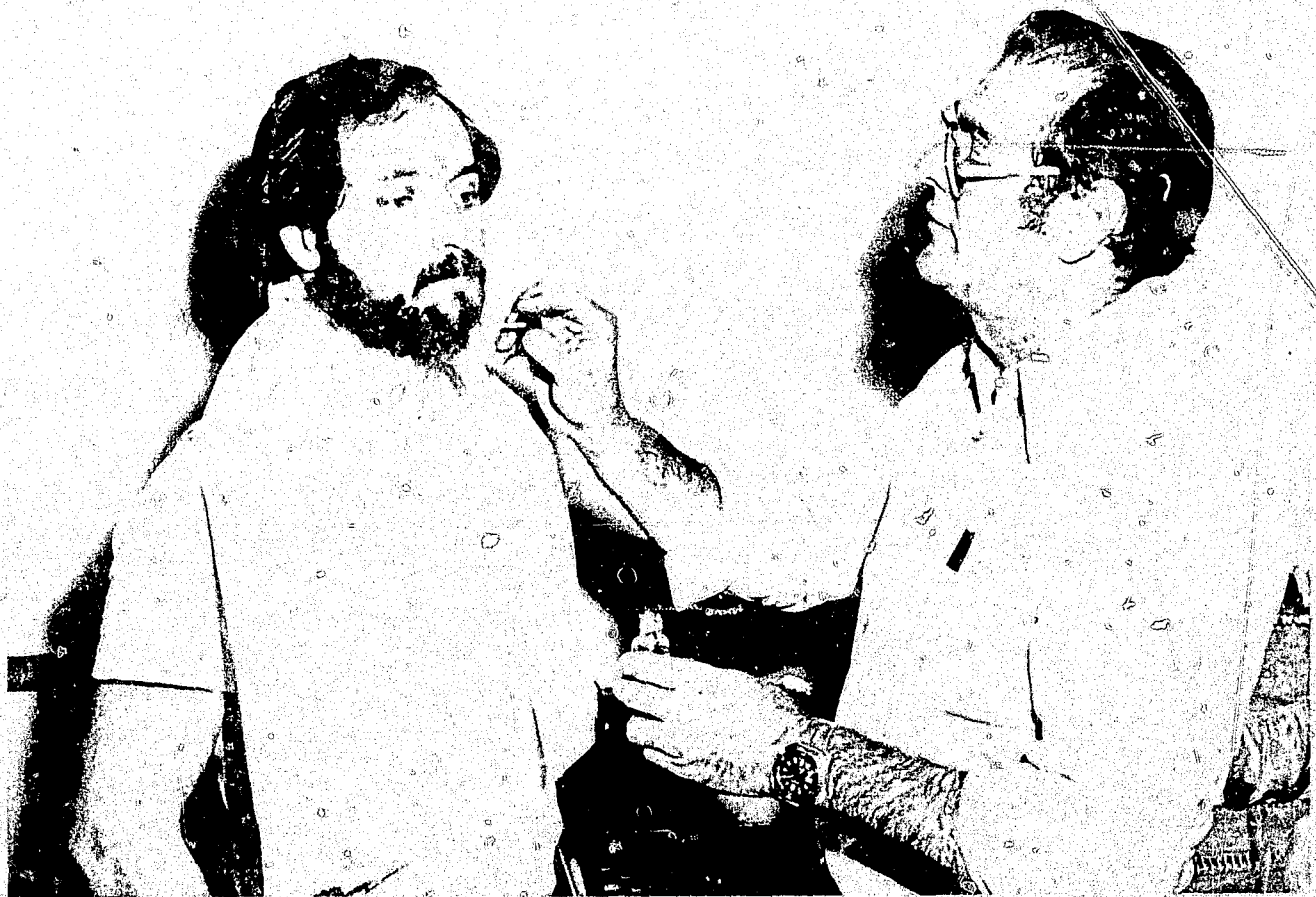
### History of the Crimes Specific Section

In the early 1960's, a small squad was formed as a part of the Patrol Division of the Seattle Police Department to concentrate on certain felony cases. This squad grew to over 40 and was expanded into a tactical unit operating as a backup for various types of patrol activities, including the control of violent street demonstrations.

Later, the parameters of the squad's duties were refined, and the number

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Makeup man, Lt. Larry E. Holder, glues a beard on Officer Leon O. Libby, transforming him into a bum.



of its personnel was reduced to its present complement of 14 officers, 3 sergeants, and 1 lieutenant, commanding.

Today, the crimes specific section is a flexible group, operating primarily during nighttime hours in high-crime areas or in areas where certain types of specialized crimes are occurring. It serves as a backup unit for other divisions within the department, sometimes as a stakeout unit, or sometimes as a safety backup for undercover agents. It is also utilized to saturate an area in which a dangerous fugitive has been observed.

Firearms training is emphasized, and each officer is expected to qualify as an expert on the pistol range and to

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remain in top physical condition. The officer is further trained in the use of various types of special weapons. Safety of the officers is paramount, and all decoys are equipped with underwear-type bulletproof vests.

#### Scope of Responsibilities and Activities

Areas in which the crimes specific section has become proficient utilizing both uniform and plainclothes patrol,

and which comprise the bulk of its activities, are as follows:

Crowd Control (Uniform and Plainclothes)—Utilizing techniques obtained through training, the section controls crowds during and following parades, street festivals, and other public events.

Unusual Operations Procedures—Its duties include undercover, decoy, backup of under-

Noontime traffic in Seattle’s Skid Road.



cover agents, bicycle patrol, and other unusual procedures as exigencies demand.

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Augment Traffic Control Officers and Criminal Investigators—Additional duties include stakeouts, intelligence activities, vice operations, apprehension of dangerous fugitives, prostitution suppression (uniform and plainclothes), and decoy opera-

tions, such as the antijackroller operation.

Responsibility for VIP Protec-

tion—The section performs liaison and planning, as well as providing a trained security team for local and visiting dignitaries upon request. The section has cooperated with Federal protective agencies, including the U.S. Secret Service, U.S. Department of State, and the FBI, in guarding the President and Vice President of the United States, and other federally protected foreign dignitaries and heads of state.

High Crime Area Saturation—It coordinates with the crime analysis unit to evaluate areas wherein a high concentration of criminal activities, such as burglaries, stickups, jackrolling, prostitution, muggings, and car cloutings, are occurring. Each crime situation is examined in an effort to determine the best method of attack, such as saturation by uniformed officers, use of decoys, bicycle patrol, stakeout, or other, perhaps yet untried, techniques.

The work of the section is as flexible as the imagination and enthusiasm of the members and its commander make it.



Chief Robert L. Hanson, Seattle Police Department



A "jackroller" hends over his intended "victim" in an abandoned doorway as a Seattle police officer rehearses with another member of the decoy squad in his role as a derelict.



**END**