

"the twist"... an ex-narc recalls

The "narcs" are the villains of the drug cult and are generally despised with such intensity that few people stop to consider that they too, have a story. They do-or at least some do, and sometimes the path which leads them into their unlikely trade can be as thorny as that of the drug-users they convict.

In the subculture (or superculture)of drugs and hippies no character is more despised, feared and less understood than the omnipresent "narc" or narcotics agent.

The narc is by definition a shifty person. His job is to listen and deceive, to befriend and betray; to move incognito among users of illegal drugs, compiling information on their activities to hand over to the police. At best it is a thankless job and it attracts a unique breed.

But not all narcs are attracted to the job or take it by choice. More than a few -- usually part-time informers -- end up in the role as a result of subtle coercion applied by the very people whose job is to fight coercion, the law enforcement agents themselves.

The coercion can take forms ranging from couched blackmail threats on family and friends to actual physical beating. The most common, however, and by far the ugliest, is a bribe (the slang term is "twist") whereby law enforcement agents offer convicted persons reduced sentences in exchange for their co-operation in obtaining more convictions.

And it's not necessarily a take-it or leave-it offer. Pressures are oftimes applied to the convicted person; pressures that can make the alternatives to co-operation less desirable than his actual sentence. When the LeDain federal commission of enquiry into the non-medical use of drugs heard hearings in St. John's last weekend they heard private testimony on how the twist works, the types of pressures applied and how it feels to be at the pointed end of the prodder.

Ted Shaw, a young St. John's resident whose former home is San Diego, Calif., was busted for selling marijauna in November, 1964, in Palm Springs. In the four months between conviction and sentencing he worked as an informer for the California Bureau of Narcotics Enforcement and during that period helped gather evidence for about 50 convictions on various violations of the U.S. Narcotics Act.

Shaw briefly outlined his experience at the commission hearing last Saturday as an illustration of the type of tactics used by police in dealing with drug abusers.

In the following account he sketches in the details, including his own fears and failures, as he chronicles events from his arrest in the fall of 1964 to his departure from the state of California the following spring.

By TED SHAW

I was arrested in Palm Springs November 7 (my birthday) 1964 and charged with selling marijauna to a BNE agent. I was convicted of the felony.

I had intended to fight the case but after I had spent three days in jail awaiting bail I found out that my wife and three-month-old child had been stopped on the street and my car confiscated. My wife and child had been left on the street. They (the narcotics agents) came to the jail, handcuffed me and took me for a 90-mile ride into San Diego. During the ride they informed me they were thinking of bringing a conspiracy charge against my wife and added that if she was arrested my child would be turned over to state authorities and if she were convicted my child would be made a ward of the for good. They said they wanted my "co-operation" and I asked what they meant. They said that within the next four months they wanted 50 convictions of drug users in exchange for a sentence of five years probation which meant I would not have to spend time in jail. They also offered me "complete freedom" if I would "In any way you can" get Mario Savio, then leader of the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley. I explained the difficulties which in my opinion they would face in trying to "get" Savio and expressed reluctance to try. But I consented to help them collect evidence outside own home area. They were generally hostile and when we stopped along the way to eat one of them dared me to attempt an escape: "Just run Shaw . . . we don't have to explain where our bullets go."

I agreed to their demand of 50 arrests with the stipulation that I would not testify myself but rather would introduce agents to sellers so they could gather their own evidence. They accepted it. They told me that I had complete immunity from prosecution for possession of any illegal drug while under their jurisdiction. They told me I could not carry a gun but I did anyway. They knew it and overlooked it.

I moved mainly among Mexicans and Negroes and dealt mainly with narcotics and marijauna. Most of the white people I mixed with were white collar people with steady jobs.

I returned to Palm Springs after the agreement and was released from prison on $400 bail (it had been reduced since the deal from the original figure of $3800). In California the cops run everything and the judges just go along with them. I returned to my job as a waiter and dining room captain. My wife and child continued to live with me . . . she knew what was going on. I sometimes held conferences with the two agents in my home and sometimes at motels where they were booked.

After I finished each shift at work and on every day off I met or was picked up by the "front agent" (the guy who actually went into places with me). The other guy, the "back agent" usually stayed in a car in the area and could contact us by radio.

My activities included hanging around bars, gambling establishments and houses. The Palm Springs police were informed of my activities by the BNE and were instructed to co-operate and help.

I had many conversations with the agents and often asked them why they were especially interested in getting the marijauna users. I was told by one of the agents that they are "more trusting and easier to get" and "I'm not interested in what people use drugs and why, I'm interested in convictions and promotions."

By the end of the third month we had acquired most of the cases -- about 35 for possession or sale of marijauna, one for narcotics and one for a restricted drug (codeine).

At about that time one of the suspects came to me and said in a friendly manner. "I believe you're working for the heat (police). I think I know why and I don't blame you. But where do I stand?" I knew that this guy had been trapped into selling marijauna by the other agents who couldn't get at the real pusher and I felt guilty about the frame. It was the first time I violated the confidence between the two agents and myself and I did it because of my conscience. I told the guy to beat it for Mexico.

In the remaining month before the arrests (all the evidence gathered during the period of investigation was being saved for one big bustat the end) I was approached on a number of occasions by a young girl who asked me to sell her narcotics. I, in turn, asked her to sell me narcotics. Later at a meeting with the agents I discovered that she was also a twist. The agents had told her that she could not keep her kids on the grounds that she was an unfit mother . . . unless she co-operated. And for co-operating she would get to keep the kids as well as enough money to get out of the state.

During the remaining time until I was sentenced on February 23, 1965, I all but ceased making new contacts telling the agents that my co-operation with them was known in the area and it was getting useless and dangerous to continue.

At that point they left Palm Springs to return to San Diego. I remained but put my wife and child on a plane to go live with relatives in Washington, D.C. I feared reprisals. I was threatened by phone and in person during the last two weeks of my stay in Palm Springs.

On February 22 I flew to San Diego to be sentenced for my offence. I was given five years probation and it was recorded that I would have to spend the first year in the San Diego County Jail. I never served it. It was designed to explain my whereabouts for the benefit of the press and people who suspected that I worked for the police.

I was released by the court and moved to Newport Beach where along with a friend I engaged in managing a bar and restaurant. Before leaving San Diego I asked my probation officer if I could join my wife and child in Washington under an interstate probation agreement. I was informed that the procedure would take a few months and while awaiting the decision I continued to manage the restaurant and bar.

On a night approximately one month later I returned to my room in Newport Beach to find a man who identified himself as a state narcotics officer. He wanted to know how I was doing and whether I would help him and asked me to help him shed come light on the extent of drug use in the community.

I didn't commit myself and next day I went to see my probation officer about the incident. He told me I was not in his department and that I had no obligation to work for the agent. Before leaving San Diego this time I visited my mother and found one of the agents I had been working for in Palm Springs there. He was cordial and friendly and asked me to come for a ride and a talk. He said he was pleased with the work done in Palm Springs and that he heard I was planning to leave the state. He then said he needed my help to get a couple of guys. I flatly refused, reiterating the statement of my probation officer. He then replied, "You'll never get out of the state if you take that attitude." I went to work for them again under the same circumstances which culminated with the prosecution of three persons for possession and sales of marijauna.

I soon received written permission to leave the state and at the same time got a telephone call asking me to drop in to the BNE headquarters in San Diego before leaving. I did and in the hallway I was approached by the "back agent.' who lifted me off the floor and repeatedly banged me against the wall, abusing me verbally at the same time. He accused me of "blowing their cases . . . " I got away and left for Maryland and have had no contact with the BNE since.

A lot of people really put me down for doing what I did but my only answer is that I would like to see how they would react in similar circumstances.

Among tactics used or condoned by the agents during the period were sex (female agentswould use sex to get evidence on marijauna users), coercion in the form of empounding property and children, physical violence, threats, and bribes, and planting of drugs on the property of persons suspected of using them.

Marked money was not used but there was considerable misappropriation of taxpayers' money which was provided for buying the stuff. Much more money was actually given than was used by our operation. I saw the money used by the agents for liquor, gambling and other entertainment.

My advice to anyone being offered a deal by police if they have been caught with drugs is don't be threatened, don't listen to threats, listen to your lawyers and, if necessary, take the rap before co-operating.

Aside from the guilt feelings, the result of co-operating is that the police have more confidence in their use of such tactics and will encourage continuation of the twist. It has been estimated that 80 per cent of marijauna convictions are obtained through these methods. To resist their threats is to deprive them of their best means of making other arrests.

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