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TACOPS

WHEN BREAKING INTO HOMES AND OFFICES TO PLANT BUGGING devices, TacOps agents try to avoid using rear doors.

Since they are rarely used, rear doors could be booby- trapped.

So when TacOps agents needed to plant bugs in a Philadelphia electronics supply company that was a front for an organized crime drug gang's hangout, they decided to walk in through the front door.

Agents decided the best time for entry would be between midnight and two in the morning. After that, trash collectors began their pickups and could see agents breaking in. The only problem was that across the street was a bar with outside seating. Patrons of the bar would spot the FBI team defeating the locks and disarming the alarm system at the front door.

So TacOps agents borrowed a city bus and rode to the electronics supply company. They parked the bus at the front door and pretended that the bus had broken down. As the FBI agent who was driving the bus lifted the hood, agents scrambled out to work on the locks and break in. Onlookers across the street

could not see them behind the bus.

Once the agents were in the target building, the bus drove off. When the agents had finished installing electronic bugs, the bus returned to pick them up. But the bus whizzed past two inebriated customers from the bar who were waiting at a nearby bus stop. When the bus stopped in front of the business, the two angry patrons ran for the bus and jumped in.

Since many of the agents were from different offices, everyone assumed at first that the two men were part of their operation.

“We get a couple blocks away, we start peeling off our equipment,” says FBI agent Louis E. Grever, who was on the TacOps teams for twelve years. “We’ve all got weapons on and radio gear, and these two guys are kind of sitting there going, ‘What the hell?’ They start ringing the bell. *Ding, ding!* They want to get off. *Ding, ding!* Now the bus driver, who was from the local office, was not a very good bus driver. I think he practiced for like twenty minutes driving this bus. He was knocking over garbage cans when he made turns. He yells back, ‘Hey, quit playing with the bell! I’m having a hard enough time driving the bus!’ ”

Other agents on the bus began to realize that the two men ringing to get off were not with the FBI after all. Before each job, all the agents meet each other, and now it seemed clear that

these two were unwitting imposters.

“One of our guys got up, and he just happened to have a shotgun hanging on the strap on his back,” Grever says. “He walks over to them and goes, ‘Do we know you?’ ”

Now, Grever says, “They’re really ringing that bell. *Ding ding ding ding ding!* And we realize these guys are not with us. So we yell up, ‘Hey Phil, stop the bus! We’ve got a couple of riders here!’ ”

The driver turned around, took one look at the patrons, and realized they were not agents. Swearing, he pulled over and opened the doors.

“They get out, and we never hear a word from them,” Grever says. “They had no clue what was going on. They just happened to get on the wrong bus.”

Back in 1992, Grever, who has blue eyes and a reddish buzz cut, had never heard of the Tactical Operations Section. But his supervisor in the Jackson, Mississippi, field office, Billups “Bill” Allen, asked if he would like to join it. At the time, Grever had been in the FBI four years. He was expecting to be transferred to New York or Los Angeles.

About what TacOps does, Allen was cagey. Instead, he put him in touch with Mike McDevitt, a fellow former Marine, who was already on the team.

“How’s your family life?” McDevitt asked him.

Surprised by the question, Grever answered, “Fine.”

“You have any kids?”

“Yes.”

“You mind spending time away from them on the road?”

McDevitt asked.

“No,” Grever said. “Anything for the mission.”

“Good, we already got the book on you,” McDevitt said. “If you are willing, can stand up to the demands, and can beat out the competition, you might have a future here in TacOps.”

When Grever met with the TacOps team on the FBI Academy grounds in Quantico, Virginia, he learned that it conducts supersecret, court- authorized burglaries to implant hidden microphones and video cameras and to snoop into computers and desks in homes, offices, cars, yachts, airplanes, and embassies.

In any given year, TacOps conducts as many as four hundred of what the FBI calls covert entries. Eighty percent are conducted in national security cases relating to terrorism or counterintelligence.

The rest are carried out in criminal cases involving organized crime, white-collar fraud, and political corruption.

As it turned out, Grever had been recruited in part because during college he worked for an engineering company on access control and electronic security. A member of the field office’s

SWAT team, he had once been a police officer. Before recruiting him through Allen, TacOps had checked him out thoroughly.

“Above all, they wanted to find out if I would be able to work as part of a team,” Grever says. “When you spend most of your life with a very close- knit crew like TacOps, they want to make sure you can stand up to the challenges. You may be confined with them for extended periods, locked inside storage containers or on the top of an elevator. You lead a double life and are required to not talk work with family and friends. You do what might best be described as crazy.”

Working as what he calls a “government- sanctioned burglar,” Grever was on one of seven teams of about ten agents each that travel around the country conducting court- authorized break- ins. He conducted or supervised about a thousand covert entries.

Because of his background, Grever initially became a supervisory agent focusing on defeating alarm systems. He rose to head Tactical Operations, an FBI section with a purposely vague name. In his bio on the FBI website, the section is described only as “a deployment team chartered to provide technical support to national priority programs.” In October 2008, FBI director Robert S. Mueller III named Grever the FBI’s executive assistant director for the Science and Technology Branch.

That put him in charge of the FBI Laboratory, fingerprints and biometrics, and the Operational Technology Division.

Consisting of a thousand people, including contract employees, the Operational Technology Division includes both TacOps and the Engineering Research Facility at Quantico.

There, the FBI makes custom- designed bugging devices, tracking devices, sensors, and surveillance cameras to watch and record the bad guys. It also develops ways to penetrate computers and defeat locks, surveillance cameras, and alarm and access control systems.

On a daily basis, Art Cummings consulted with the fiftyyear-old Grever to discuss innovative ways to intercept the conversations of tough targets and to lay out his priorities in national security cases.

“Before he is going to spend a hundred thousand dollars on a solution, I let him know we have a court order, and I help him prioritize based on our needs,” Cummings says.

Cummings considered TacOps critical to preventing terrorism.

“TacOps collects against terrorists while they are in the planning stages, while they have their guard down, allowing us to see what’s really going on,” Cummings says. “Combined with other collection techniques like the development of sources, scrutiny of other records, and physical surveillance, TacOps is

a critical piece of an integrated collection plan that allows for a deep, multidimensional understanding of the threat.”

If the FBI needs a simple wiretap of a landline phone or cell phone, or an intercept of an email account, Grever’s technicians in the Operational Technology Division deal directly with the provider. Usually, the phone company can install a court- ordered wiretap within minutes by entering the target number in its computers and transmitting the conversation over an encrypted broadband link to any FBI field office. But if a physical entry is required, TacOps takes over.

In interviews with Grever and other agents currently and formerly assigned to TacOps, the FBI revealed for the first time in its history how it conducts covert entries, the bureau’s most secret, most closely guarded technique. Even to members of Congress and administration officials with top- secret clearances, the operation is off- limits.

In some cases, the FBI can eavesdrop on conversations without breaking in, using parabolic microphones or laser beams to pick up sound vibrations off windows. To guard against similar intrusions, Grever’s office on the seventh floor of FBI headquarters faces an inner courtyard so that no one outside can pick up his conversations. Such a remote effort to eavesdrop is referred to as a “standoff” collection. Both that technique

and covert entries to plant bugs and snoop into computers and records are called “close- access attacks.”

The FBI may also recruit a surrogate, who is a party to a conversation or who works in an office or home, to introduce a Trojan— an almost invisible listening device implanted in a lamp, for example, which is switched for the original. Using photos taken through a window or by an agent posing as an exterminator, a health inspector, or a telephone repairman, TacOps will have fashioned an exact replica of the lamp in the targeted office or home.

However, in most cases, a covert entry is required, offering the greatest gain but also posing the greatest risk of being caught and possibly shot by a homeowner, security guard, police officer, or foreign intelligence officer who thinks the agent is a burglar.

In selecting agents for TacOps teams, the FBI looks for men and women who have relevant experience and have worked undercover, since those agents are good at maintaining a façade.

The teams include agents from all ethnic backgrounds to blend into particular neighborhoods.

Of the FBI’s 13,807 agents, about 20 percent are female.

They participate in the full panoply of TacOps activities, including conducting covert entries, serving on perimeter surveillance

teams, and participating in “quick- react contingency teams” that will rush in to bring a dangerous situation under control.

To give agents plausible cover, male and female agents may walk together, holding hands. However, “Contrary to the James Bond movies, our female agents aren’t allowed nor asked to use sex to manipulate or control a subject,” Grever says. “Flirting and a smile at the right time are perfectly fine, but nothing physical.”

In conducting surveillance, agents may use any type of vehicle— a bucket truck, a Rolls- Royce, or a U.S. Postal Service truck.

Agents are assigned to jobs randomly. “You could be on the Robert Hanssen case, you could be on the Aldrich Ames case, you could be on the John Gotti case, you could be on the Umar Abdulmutallab case or the Zacarias Moussaoui case,” Grever says.

Over the years, the FBI has conducted successful covert entries at the Russian and Chinese embassies or their other official diplomatic establishments, as well as at the homes of their diplomats and intelligence officers. Because of the obvious sensitivity, Grever and other current FBI officials would not discuss these operations. In breaking into an embassy, the FBI may try to develop an insider to help with the entry. Once an

entry has taken place, code books or electronic encryption keys used by foreign embassies are the greatest prize.

Agents on the TacOps teams have what are called deep aliases, meaning that if someone runs a check on their driver's license or social security number, the appropriate agencies would confirm their fictional identity.

“When our operators are home with family, they are simply Special Agent John or Jane Doe, but as soon as they leave the house and particularly when on a job, they become Jim Brown, Hector Garcia, or Andrea Simmons, complete with all the right documents, including alias driver's license, passport, and credit cards, and all the right stories, including fake family, fake job, and fake history— all fully backstopped,” Grever says.

When returning home, undercover agents make sure they are not being followed. If pulled over for a speeding violation, they would not reveal that they are agents.

Arrangements for undercover operations are made by an FBI program code- named Stagehand. If \$2 million in cash is needed as front money, Stagehand provides it. If a yacht or airplane is needed as a prop, Stagehand can provide one that was confiscated in a criminal case.

Stagehand sets up front companies so agents can hand out business cards showing they work there. The companies have

real offices staffed by personnel who actually work for the FBI.

Stagehand also creates front companies so agents can gain access to a target.

“One day we will be Joe’s Plumbing, complete with a white work truck, company label, uniforms, and telephone number,”

Grever says. “If called, FBI personnel will say, ‘Joe’s Plumbing, can I help you?’ Another day it will be Joe’s Survey and Excavation Services, with the same level of backstopping.”

A full wardrobe of about fifty assorted uniforms hangs on racks at the TacOps Support Center. A graphics expert designs custom-made uniforms, fake ID and badges, and wraps with fake signs for trucks. Agents will pose as elevator inspectors, firefighters, or utility workers. Alternatively, they could pose as tourists, wearing shorts and taking snapshots. They could be homeless people wearing tattered clothes. Agents select oversized clothes where they can secrete their tools for breaking in.

And they go in with guns drawn.

“Usually we practice cover stories beforehand,” Grever says.

“If they confront you, and you give them one cover story, and then they confront me, I may give them something different.”

To avoid ethical issues, TacOps agents won’t impersonate a member of the clergy or a journalist. They may pose as telephone repairpeople or FedEx or UPS delivery people. But they

try to avoid posing as an employee of a real company because if they are challenged, “our cover story can quickly break down if someone calls his local FedEx or UPS outlet and asks if we really work there,” Grever says.

If a TacOps agent’s identity is exposed because he or she is called to testify in court about an entry, that agent can no longer serve on the covert entry teams.

The strategy and contingency plans for each break- in are laid out in operations orders. Agents are required to read the court order authorizing the intrusion so they know exactly what they may and may not do.

A successful “job,” as TacOps agents call it, takes weeks of planning— to determine the schedule and habits of occupants, to study the alarms and surveillance systems that need to be defeated, and to plot escape strategies.

Agents from TacOps and from the local field office fall into four groups: a survey group, which scopes out and controls the site; a mechanical group, which picks locks and opens safes and mail; an electronics group, which focuses on computers and BlackBerrys; and a “flaps and seals” group, which concentrates on special techniques the occupants may use to detect intruders. That group is also responsible for “target recovery,” making sure the team leaves behind no sign that agents were there.

For one job, more than a hundred agents may be involved.

“We will send agents in, and they will spend days looking at the target, the patterns of life around it, day and night, weekends and weekdays,” Grever says. “We are interested in people’s sleep habits, and when they will be in a deep sleep cycle when a loud noise will not necessarily wake them up. We will track everything because— I’m not being melodramatic— our lives depend on it.”

Sometimes the FBI offers bogus prizes to get occupants to leave the targeted home.

“We give people opportunities to travel and do exotic things,” Grever says. “ ‘You’ve won the lottery! You’ve won a trip, a free dinner! Congratulations, we picked your business card out of a bucket.’ That wasn’t luck. That was us, trying to present an opportunity.”

To cover up noises or divert attention, the FBI may drive garbage trucks through the streets and bang the garbage cans around. They may start up a wood chipper or use a jackhammer to attack a piece of concrete that has been delivered to the location and dumped on the street. They may use high- pressure water jets to clean the sidewalks, sending passersby scurrying. Agents may enlist local police to park their cruisers with lights flashing nearby. Seeing a police car, passersby will assume that

the person climbing a ladder to enter an apartment or office can't be a burglar.

Agents may remotely freeze the view on closed-circuit television so security guards watching for intruders will not see them enter. During the operation, at least one of the agents does nothing but watch out windows or doors to make sure no one is approaching. TacOps agents refer to the period when they are inside an installation or defeating lock systems as the "exposure time."

While security guards are a problem, "our biggest fear, quite frankly, is innocent third parties such as a neighbor with a key to the premises and a gun," Grever says. Perhaps a suspect is away for the weekend and leaves his key with a neighbor.

"The neighbor may be nosy and sit around the home,"

Grever says. "If he hears something unusual, instead of calling the police, he tries to defend the neighbor's property with a gun. That's when your tennis shoes for running away fast can come in very handy."

If the neighbor calls the police, that is not necessarily considered a bad thing: The FBI scans police dispatches and usually enlists the aid of local police assigned to joint task forces. Instead of a dispatched police car showing up, an officer

in league with the FBI will arrive on the scene and pretend to take a police report. By that time, the agents are long gone.

As a safety precaution, agents bring with them devices that peer under doors. They check for explosives and radiological or biological hazards. In some cases, the purpose of the entry is to determine if suspects are making bombs or developing weapons of mass destruction, as happened during the investigation of anthrax mailings.

Drug dealers will booby-trap their buildings to guard against competitors and thieves. They may rig a lightbulb so that if it's turned on, it will explode and ignite gasoline or dynamite.

Instead of breaking into an office building or government facility at night, agents may stage what they call a "lock-in." They hide inside the office building until occupants have left for the evening, then break into the targeted office. They may hide in a telephone utility closet or on top of an elevator. In one such case involving terrorism, TacOps agents rode up and down on top of an elevator for hours.

"The building finally closed up for the night," Grever recalls.

"Surveillance teams outside and in neighboring high-rises where we had rented space could watch and report movements of the night security staff. When the time was right, we called our elevator to the floor just below our target, using

controls we can operate remotely by plugging into the elevator command- and- control circuits. Using elevator control keys we have, we opened the doors from the inside and went to work on our targeted suite of offices undetected.”

After the work was done, the agents positioned themselves on top of the elevator again and waited for the building to open in the morning.

“After changing back into our business attire, we walked out with the rest of the people who were visiting that building that morning,” Grever says.

In some cases, agents are delivered to a compound inside a sealed shipping carton. In the middle of the night, like soldiers in a Trojan horse, they emerge and break into the target facility. To break into a home, an agent sealed in a refrigerator carton may be delivered to the front door, where the carton shields him from passersby as he works on the locks.

“We typically construct containers that even the most suspicious freight workers or longshoremen couldn’t open without a lot of effort and time,” Grever says. “Even if they did try to open our container, our emergency action team— FBI agents rushing in with raid jackets on— would be there in time to avoid a confrontation.”

To make sure they are not caught, TacOps assigns field office agents or special surveillance teams to follow occupants of homes or offices— called “keyholders”— to watch them to see if they start to return. If they do, agents tailing them radio that they are heading back and estimate the time it will take them to return. Agents working the premises know their own “breakdown time,” how long it will take them to gather their equipment and leave without a trace.

“If the breakdown time is fifteen minutes and the target is five minutes away, we’ll have a plan in place to slow them down,” Grever says.” Since we’re in our own backyard, we can involve the police, fire department, public health and public safety officials, the sanitation department, the U.S. Postal Service.”

Perhaps there is a “sudden traffic jam,” Grever says. Or there could be an “accident in front of them, or police could pull them over. There could be a little local natural disaster— a fire hydrant is turned on and is flooding the street, and they have to go around the back way.” Letting the air out of tires is another stratagem.

During an entry, one agent is in charge of making sure everything is returned to normal. At the beginning of the operation, he photographs the rooms so everything can be put back in place. If a chair or sofa is to be moved, agents first place tape

on the floor to mark where the legs are.

“Trained foreign intelligence officers set traps to warn them of an intrusion by leaving a door ajar a certain degree or arranging magazines a certain way,” Grever notes. The owner of a desk may never open one drawer but sets up an item inside to fall over, tipping him off if an intruder opens the drawer.

Working with the CIA, the FBI interviews defectors to learn tradecraft used by adversaries to detect FBI intrusions. Every other week, Grever meets with his counterparts at the CIA to compare notes on the latest bugging and surveillance devices.

So that nothing is left behind, each tool used during an operation is numbered and marked to identify it with the agent using it. Before leaving, agents take an inventory to make sure they have all their tools. To smooth out marks their shoes may have left on carpets, agents carry a small rake.

“We have a light that we’ll use to see whether or not dust marks have been disturbed,” Grever says. “We carry a supply of dust. We can throw a little bit of additional dust on if needed to make everything look as it was.”