

## CHAPTER 1

## The Cops Snare a Rat

The RCMP were excited about the prospect of having an informer with insider knowledge of the Hells Angels in Vancouver. Police had repeatedly publicly stated that the Hells Angels were the number one organized crime target in B.C., and the East End chapter, as a gang, had to date been able to avoid prosecution, earning a reputation for being untouchable.

Once he was released on bail, Plante called a pager number and arranged to meet with the RCMP to discuss the details of his work as an informant. The Mounties, who code-named the operation Project E-Pandora, initially offered Plante \$2,000 a month for any information he could provide about the bikers. The amount was soon increased to \$3,000 a month.

Plante agreed, perhaps underestimating the stress that lay ahead. "I was trying to make up for things I had done," he would later recall when discussing why he agreed to infiltrate the Hells Angels.

Plante was to prove instrumental in aiding police to accomplish what they had largely failed to do to date. In 2004, the Hells Angels had been operating in B.C. for more than 20 years, earning a notorious reputation for drug dealing and the use of violence to enforce control over their territory. The police had little to show the public in terms of successful prosecutions, which undermined public confidence in their ability to enforce the law against the Hells Angels.

An investigation in 2004 by the *Vancouver Sun* found that more than 60 percent of cases against the Hells Angels, including serious charges of drug trafficking, extortion and assault, ended in acquittals or with the Crown dropping the charges—known officially as a stay of proceedings.

A prime example of a glaring failure was the case of the *Western Wind*, a fishing boat loaded with cocaine that had been tracked from Colombia. According to police intelligence, its destination was Vancouver Island. The captain, Philip John Stirling, had offered the cops information about a large-scale cocaine smuggling operation linked to the Nanaimo and East End chapters of the Hells Angels. Stirling wanted \$1 million in reward money as well as witness protection for himself and his family. Police initially agreed to Stirling's requests, then backed off, deciding he wasn't trustworthy.

As the boat headed toward Canadian waters—with Hells Angels members caught on police surveillance waiting on a dock in Nanaimo for its arrival—the Mounties took their decision about Stirling and asked U.S. authorities to intercept the boat before it reached its destination.

Accordingly, on February 21, 2001, the U.S. Coast Guard intercepted the *Western Wind* and arrested the crew. Found hidden in a secret compartment was 2.5 tons of pure cocaine valued at \$250 million. The incredible outcome of the story was that no

one was ever charged because U.S. prosecutors reportedly could not prove the drugs were destined for the United States.

For a time, Stirling fought to have the seized boat returned to him, but he eventually abandoned his efforts, especially after his negotiations with the RCMP became public in U.S. court documents.

Five years later, police would catch Stirling again with another ship, the *MV Baku*, off the coast of Vancouver Island. The ship, which had been tracked from Halifax and through the Panama Canal, was found to have bales of marijuana worth \$6.5 million. But Stirling was lucky again—the Crown dropped all charges just before Christmas 2006 against Stirling and four other men, including two who had been aboard the *Western Wind*. The charges were reportedly dropped because of problems with the search, initially conducted by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans.

Police would later allege that one of those suspected of being involved in the *Western Wind* shipment was long-time Hells Angels member David Francis (Gyrator) Giles, a former Sherbrooke, Quebec Hells Angel before moving to B.C. and joining the East End chapter. Giles was never charged in the *Western Wind* case, however. Police also alleged that the masterminds behind the shipment were members of the Montreal Mafia, with the Hells Angels in B.C. tasked to transport the drugs to Quebec.

Although fingers were later pointed at a senior RCMP officer in B.C. as a prime example of the Mounties' failure to step up to the plate and properly pay the money needed to crack the case, others admitted that the Mountie in charge of the operation suffered from a failure to trust a source.

The case of the *Western Wind* also became a sore point among other police agencies frustrated by the lack of coordination of the

various police forces involved that could have led to a successful prosecution.

Another of the failed cases led to a 2006 wrongful dismissal lawsuit by a former senior anti-biker gang police officer, Allen Dalstrom. According to court documents filed by Dalstrom, the case promised to expose long-standing jealousies, infighting and evidence of a “turf war” between the Vancouver police and the RCMP during an attempted crackdown on the Hells Angels.

Dalstrom had been working for the Organized Crime Agency of B.C. (OCABC), a joint forces agency tasked with targeting organized crime groups, when he was fired by the agency’s commanding officer, David Douglas, in 2004. Concerns were raised about Dalstrom’s alleged mishandling of the multimillion-dollar Hells Angels investigation code-named Project Phoenix. The case involved members of the Hells Angels who were never prosecuted. His superiors were also upset over comments Dalstrom allegedly made to a Montreal journalist, Julian Sher, about a botched case.

In documents filed in court to support his legal action, Dalstrom claimed he had done nothing wrong and the case against the Hells Angels could have been prosecuted, but in fact had been derailed by infighting caused by the RCMP.

“Certain members of the senior management of the RCMP in British Columbia were opposed to the creation of the OCABC from its inception because the OCABC was given the mandate to carry out investigations that had previously been within the mandate of the RCMP,” Dalstrom alleged in his statement of claim. “The RCMP in British Columbia sought to persuade the province to disband the OCABC and return the mandate for investigating organized crime to the RCMP.”

The witness list for his trial included some of the RCMP’s top provincial officers, among them deputy commissioner Gary Bass, then the highest-ranking Mountie in B.C., former deputy



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commissioner Bev Busson and former Vancouver police chief Jamie Graham.

But just as the trial began, it was abruptly adjourned to allow lawyers for both sides to work out a deal, quashing the possibility of potentially explosive testimony about the alleged long-simmering rivalry between the Mounties and Vancouver police. Dalstrom received an out-of-court settlement, reportedly exceeding \$2 million.

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About a month after the *Western Wind* was intercepted—and days after Stirling and his crew were released without charge by the United States—police in B.C. celebrated the first significant prosecution of Hells Angels members in B.C. Two full-patch members of the East End chapter of the Hells Angels, Ronaldo “Ronnie” Lising and Francisco Batista “Chico” Pires, were convicted in 2001 of cocaine trafficking.

The case, known as Project Nova, involved Robert Molsberry, a drug dealer and petty criminal who had been a doorman at a Vancouver strip club, the No. 5 Orange, located at the corner of Main Street and Powell on the edge of the Gastown district—and a block from the Vancouver police station at 312 Main.

Molsberry had initially complained in 1996 to members of the Vancouver police that he feared for his safety because Ronnie Lising, Chico Pires and others were after him over unpaid drug debts. Molsberry agreed to wear a “wire”—a transmitting listening device that allows police to record conversations—and act as a police agent. In return for his cooperation, he was given \$1,000 by Vancouver police to pay off his drug debts and promised a monthly payment throughout the investigation, plus a cash payment at the conclusion of the court proceedings.



The total amount he received was \$25,000. He was also promised entry into the witness protection program when the investigation wrapped up. Based on their agreement with Molsberry, the police successfully applied for a consent wiretap authorization under section 184.2 of the Criminal Code. The wiretap was approved by then-B.C. Supreme Court justice Wally Oppal, who would later become an appeal court judge and the attorney general of B.C.

A group of trusted officers were selected to work on the covert case, which was run out of the offices of the OCABC to try to limit the number of police who knew about the investigation.

Police targeted two strip clubs: the No. 5 Orange and the Marble Arch. Drug transactions took place outside the Hells Angels clubhouse in East Vancouver, in gas stations, restaurants and gyms. The cocaine was referred to in pager messages and over cell phones in code as “lunch,” “dinner” and “beer.”

At trial, Lising and Pires were found to be joint operators of a “wholesale” cocaine business that supplied the No. 5 Orange and Marble Arch strip bars; police recorded 36 deliveries of cocaine to “retail salesmen” in 1996 and 1997. The transactions were worth \$47,000 at the “wholesale” level—a term used by police to describe the sale of larger quantities of drugs destined to be sold later at the “street” level.

With Lising and Pires sentenced to four and a half years in prison, the case was hailed by police as the first significant prosecution against the Hells Angels in B.C. Police cited the case as an example of their ability to protect witnesses who work with police and testify against the Hells Angels, hoping to encourage others to come forward.

“It sends a message: We’re here for your protection if you want to work with the police. It sends a message to other people in this group,” the late sergeant Larry Butler of the Outlaw



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Motorcycle Gang Unit told the *Vancouver Sun* at the time. Another lead investigator in the case, inspector Andy Richards, then with the OCABC, said of the Lising–Pires convictions: “It’s a clear indication that law enforcement can effectively target the Hells Angels. The system can work.”

As a footnote to the case, there was an act of intimidation against one of the federal Crowns, Ernie Froess, whose life was threatened by aspiring Hells Angel John Virgil Punko, then 34, at the Pacific Centre food court in downtown Vancouver, two blocks from the courthouse. Punko was later convicted of uttering threats, which obviously impressed his Hells Angels colleagues, who eventually made him a full-patch member of the East End chapter. He would go on to have many dealings with the newest police infiltrator, Michael Plante.

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Michael Plante grew up in Burnaby, a suburb of Vancouver, and attended Cariboo Hill High School. After completing grade 12, he took university courses at nearby Douglas College. To make money, he entered competitive weightlifting and body building: at one time, he was about 250 pounds and could bench-press 400 pounds. Initial background checks by police found that Plante had only been in minor trouble with the law; once he had got into an argument at a local gym and ended up charged with assault.

He first worked as a bouncer at the North Burnaby Inn’s bar, which at one time was managed by Hells Angels member Bob Green, who is now a Nomad. Plante then moved to Alberta for a year, working as a bouncer in a bar in Medicine Hat. On his return to B.C., Plante got a job at Costco for five years, loading trucks and living a straight life. During that time, Plante claimed he didn’t associate with the Hells Angels because he didn’t work in a bar.

But he eventually did obtain a job as a bouncer. He had met many Hells Angels over the years, working as a bouncer at Coconuts nightclub in Burnaby and the Dell Hotel in Surrey, a hotel frequented by bikers where Angels would stash cocaine in the ceiling of one of the hotel rooms upstairs. Plante recalled being asked one night to sit in that hotel room to make sure nothing happened to the hidden cache of drugs, until someone came to collect it. He did this a couple of times a month for a year for the bikers.

Eventually, another aspiring Hells Angel, Randy Potts, got him a job at the Marble Arch strip club in downtown Vancouver, another biker bar. When the Marble Arch closed, then-Hells Angels member Louie Robinson got Plante a job as a bouncer at the Cecil Hotel strip club, where he worked weekends, 15 hours a day, making about \$10 an hour.

At the time, Robinson ran an agency that booked strippers into bars and nightclubs in Vancouver and across British Columbia. The Cecil was known as a bar where Hells Angels and other gang members would socialize over beer with friends and business associates.

“It was very gang friendly,” Plante said of the Cecil in those days. “Not just to biker groups, but all gangs.”

While working at the Cecil, his long-time buddy Potts began using Plante as a middleman in drug deals, getting him to pick up drugs and deliver them, or to pick up the cash and bring it to Potts. At the time, Potts had applied to become a Hells Angel and had reached hangaround status, meaning he could wear a leather vest with an insignia on the front indicating he was in a Hells Angels “program.”

In 2003, Potts was beaten up by somebody who then stole his vest. He returned to the East End clubhouse with a black eye and informed Louie Robinson, who was at the time a senior member,

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of the incident.\* Plante recalled hearing Potts being slapped by Robinson and Potts falling to the floor. Potts was told to “get rid of” the thief, named Audey Hanson, who had beaten him up, so Potts and Plante went to stake out his Surrey home; the stakeout continued over a two-month period.

Potts eventually gave Plante two guns—an Uzi sub-machine gun and a .38 handgun—and dropped him off at Hanson’s house with orders to kill him. Plante recalled he purposefully jammed the Uzi and pointed it at Hanson when he came out of the house. Wearing a balaclava, Plante fired the .38 three times in the air to scare the man, who ran inside the house.

Plante told Potts the Uzi had jammed. “He didn’t believe me,” Plante recalled. Potts later gave the guns to another friend, who did shoot Hanson, who fortunately survived the murder attempt.

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\* Robinson is no longer a member of the Hells Angels.

