The Role of the Female in Undercover Operations

By Detective Terri Sherrard

The role of the female in law enforcement has changed significantly over the years. From the early to mid 1900’s until the not so distant past, the only job in law enforcement that a female was considered for, was that of a jail matron. Anna Hart, who held the job of jail matron, was the first female to die in the line of duty in 1916, when an inmate beat her to death. As the role of the female changes, so have the statistics. To date, there have been approximately 145 females killed in the line of duty. Only 9 of these women were killed prior to 1970.

Over the years, females have shown that they can be of significant value in undercover operations. Initially, the only undercover role that a female took part in, was that of the prostitute. The female assumed the role of the prostitute to pick up “johns”. While this is still an operation that is commonly utilized by many departments today, it has been found that females can be very diverse in the world of undercover work.

The criminal element tends to view females in two ways: one, being at home with the kids, and the other as a sexual object. Most of the time they cannot equate female and police officer as one in the same. This makes our job unique at best. On one hand, those that feel a female could never be a cop, simply make the female officer’s job easier. Women officers tend to run into little or no opposition, or suspicion when dealing with these people. The opposite seems true when it comes to vice operations. The “john” is almost always suspicious that the female in this line of work is a police officer. This line of thought has a tendency to make vice operations very hazardous. The “john” has much to lose if he is caught; his family, his job, and in many places he faces public embarrassment.

When the criminal is of the mind set that females are there for sexual pleasure, we need to present ourselves differently. If we have a male partner, it is easy to portray him as our husband or boyfriend. The problem here lies with the fact that criminals tend to be suspicious of men in general. If you are alone, you can always say that you have a boyfriend, you are married, or that you simply are not interested in men. It is extremely important that (when dealing in street level operations) you do not dress provocatively. This may give the suspect the idea that you are available for sex. In narcotics operations, it is not uncommon for prostitutes and other females to exchange sex for drugs, so you must have an excuse available for this. It is also important that you do not portray yourself as a woman working in a sexually oriented business. (i.e. strip clubs, etc.)

There are many “props” and story lines that you can use when doing your job. Some women prefer to have a car seat and baby or children’s items in their cars. It is an easy excuse that you have to pick up your child at the babysitter. You must understand that any profession you choose to portray yourself in, you have the knowledge to answer any questions that a suspect may have about it. It is not advisable to say that you just got out of jail or prison, as most of the suspects that we deal with have done time. The prison numbers that are issued in many states, coincide with time frames so that a suspect may be able to tell when and where you were in prison just by the inmate number you give.

You must also take into consideration that, when dealing with organized crime syndicates, they will very possibly have contacts to be able to check up on your story.
Undercover work can be demanding on both men and women. Women may tend to show some different signs of “crashing” than men do. Some of these indications may be short tempers, mood swings, feelings of “power” or “invincibility”, getting a “rush” from being in dangerous situations, or just having a hard time coming out of role. Those around her may also notice poor hygiene, or even the use of slang or poor grammar. Female officers will often try to keep their feelings inside for fear of her male counterparts thinking that she is weak. It is important that supervisors watch all of their employees for these sometimes subtle hints.

The female officer is an asset to law enforcement and more specifically, undercover roles. She can often get into places where men cannot, and can use a variety of excuses and emotions to get herself and/or her partner out of bad situations. Although all of us realize that we have our limitations, the female officer must be considered very useful in undercover operations.

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