

In 1980, I proudly joined law enforcement here in Miami, the "Casablanca" of the Western hemisphere during the era of the big, tropical "snowstorm" that blew northward from South America. And the excitement took off from there! For 9 years during the 80's I worked in the Organized Crime Bureau (OCB) as a vice cop. Perhaps not as glamorous as TV portrayed us, I had my share of intrigue, Dom Perignon champagne, fast boats, fancy cars, as well as a few interesting and sometimes shadowy people.

I mingled with two of the Watergate principals (ex-CIA) including E. Howard Hunt who unexpectedly bestowed upon my partner and me a verbal commendation for some of our work. Some might frown on the source, but I have no issues with it. I feel that Hunt truly believed in what he did during his years of shadows and intrigue.

And there were the toppled Latin American dictator, a relocated New York mafia lieutenant and a handful of "triple-O's" (mob hitmen). I surveilled the fearless Meyer Lansky as he took his routine, retirement walks in Bal Harbor - near South Beach... as well as Tampa's Santo Trafficante who was accused, by a number of conspiracy theorists, of co-engineering several Fidel Castro assassination attempts as well as President John Kennedy's.

During an investigation of reputed mobster, Anthony "Tony Jacks" Giacalone, (who the FBI is convinced engineered the disappearance and death of Jimmy Hoffa) I sat in on intelligence-gathering phone conversations with infamous informant, Jimmy "The Weasel" Fratianno. When working that previously-mentioned New York mobster, Joseph Paterno who we arrested for ordering a hit on his female cousin and her son (mob accountant's family), we consulted with Henry Hill, who was later portrayed by Ray Liotta in the film "GoodFellas." Another interesting experience involved my investigation and arrest of Jose Miguel Battle, the reputed "godfather" of Cuban-exile organized crime. Then there were the routine, cigar smoke-veiled meetings over "Cuban coffee" with leaders of Colonel Oliver North's anti-Communist "freedom fighters" aka the Nicaraguan Contra Rebels.

I'm constantly being asked for a war story or two. So... here they are.

World-class "paper man," (counterfeiter) Frank Peroff found his way into my law enforcement life after extorting a famous Aztec (*yes, the Aztecs still exist*) sculptor, Raul Zuniga to murder a New Jersey property developer wintering in South Florida's Turnberry Isles. Of course, the artist wanted no part of that, and I got a call. I investigated this creep under his "assigned" name as Frank ... well... I can't reveal his full name as it was assigned to him by the Witness Protection Program. Yep, another protected bad guy still committing crimes. And then again, Frank was good at what he did... so, why would society expect him to change??

I only learned who Frank really was after a confidential source whispered that little fact into my ear. I later confirmed this when I found out that Peroff, his wife and three teen-aged daughters had social security numbers in sequential order. **What are the odds of that???** I had no officially documented evidence that Frank, my extortionist was, in fact Frank Peroff. Actually, he admitted it... not to mention that he got his Senate Sub-Committee investigator/friend to approach my supervisors to get me off his back. (It didn't work, Frank!) Why a Senate Sub-Committee? Well, back in the 70s Frank single-handedly took down the Montreal mafia hierarchy (Brothers Vic and Pepe Cotroni who were key figures in the French Connection), implicated several U.S. federal law enforcement agencies in corruption, and helped to dismantle the power of Nixon's White House regime by testifying that while he was an informant for the US BNDD (Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs – predecessor to the DEA) he got close to rogue financier, Nixon supporter and international fugitive, Robert Vesco which resulted in Peroff being "set up" by the feds - to be killed by the Cotroni's - on orders from the White House and US Attorney General, John N. Mitchell. A sort of anti-hero protagonist... I suppose. Witness Protection officials were obligated to neither confirm nor deny Frank's participation in the Program. Well... that was the "official" US Marshall's response to my inquiry.

Nevertheless, I found a book written about Frank's pre-Program activities, "Peroff: The Man Who Knew Too Much" 1975 by L.H. Whittemore. It actually helped me to understand what I was up against. While in the Program, he made a good living under the guise of a legitimate entrepreneur starting up corporations before "busting them out" (pocketing assets of investors as well as bank loans to the companies, thus, bankrupting the companies) one after the other. At the time, it was a highly practiced and very lucrative crime for the mafia. For me, the case started out as a routine contract killing/extortion case and developed into a major economic crime "pain in the butt" investigation. I was off the street and confined to my desk while going through boxes of corporate and bank records for quite a while! For the "street player" that I was, it was like being on house arrest! Frank was unquestionably a one-man, crime wave.

There is a curious footnote to this story. I haven't looked into the following allegation thoroughly, but recently, several religiously-inspired Internet investigators claim that televangelist empress, Melissa Scott is ex-porn star Barbie Bridges who claimed to be Frank Peroff's daughter. Although I don't remember all of Frank's daughters by name, only "Bambi" stands out in my memory. And Bambi was the unknowing linchpin in Frank's diabolical plan to kill the New Jersey businessman. It seems that she dated the New Jersey builder's teenaged son. Frank wanted them married and the son's parents - especially the father - out of the way so that Frank could take over the family fortune... and it was a sizeable one! Are Barbie and Bambi one and the same? Go figure! Although I couldn't get a prosecutor to file charges at the time (no independent witness to the murder solicitation and the other transgressions were borderline "civil matters"), I was able to help quite a few conned victims to recover assets from his bankruptcy schemes, and I thwarted the killing of intended murder victims. There was some consolation in that. Like I said, Frank was a world-class sociopath.

While assigned to U.S. Custom's Operation Greenback, and with the control of an effective federal informant, I was the lead investigator of a case against mob associate and reputed Florida gambling czar, Victor Dante. During that investigation, Dante hatched a plan to build casinos on Native American reservations (taking advantage of their tax-immune sovereignty) that would've been financed with cocaine-smuggling profits. Now, Dante and Eddie the informant knew each other from the 50s when they worked as "mules" routinely moving huge amounts of cash from Lansky's casinos in Cuba to Miami. (Remind you of a sub-plot in Godfather II?)

Using two million dollars of US Customs "flash" money packed in two, large, green duffel bags, the informant convinced Dante that he had an additional 10 million dollars (that needed laundering) stashed in the Cayman Islands. Of course, this was a cover story. He was advised by Dante on how to launder that kind of money using several options including putting the money through a church organization, and another involved bogus winnings from a mob-controlled, Las Vegas casino. The most significant plan in my opinion was the "Reservation" scam. The informant would finance the building of the casino, and he would manage it so that profits could be skimmed off the top. Meanwhile he was to get a sizable salary managing the casino for the "Indians," as well as profits (in the form of "cleaned" money) on his financing. That was a very interesting offer for anyone - especially for a "successful smuggler looking to get out of the business!"

In a peculiar way, I must be fair with Dante in this story. During one of his pitch meetings, Dante had a few wealthy and powerful Florida businesspersons in attendance. I had to presume that their investment money was legitimate, as well as their intentions. Again, in fairness to Dante, he beat the rap. It happened that he found out about the informant before we could take the investigation further; and the plan to build the casinos went poof!

You see, Victor retained a lawyer who was a former hot shot prosecutor for Watergate legend, Richard Gerstein aka "One-eyed Dick" and curiously accompanied Victor during many of the contacts with our informant. The lawyer's partner handled the criminal defense of another case that we conducted during the same time period using the same informant and "flash" money - the arrest of a rogue Customs officer and her associate who smuggled cocaine and Pre-

Columbian artifacts from South America. Again, I ask "what are the odds of that???" Interestingly, the Customs officer provided the smuggler with highly confidential patrolling routes of Customs and Coast Guard aircraft and sea vessels. It definitely gave the smuggler a distinctive advantage in the very dangerous cat and mouse game that took place in this country's surrounding waters. That was an edge that Pablo Escobar would've paid millions for.

Perhaps we were being a bit ambitious with our investigations. Nevertheless, the casinos were eventually built... I wonder by whom? Because of this investigation, I was then assigned to work with the FBI and the Justice Department's Organized Crime Task Force for a short time.

Hollywood's fictional psychiatrist, Dr. Hannibal Lecter once remarked, "Remember Clarice, it's our scars that serve to remind us of how real the world is."

Thinking back, it was supposed to be just another routine deal. Coco supplied the drugs, and I paid him with "buy money." We did this deal a few times before with no problems. In fact, I felt so comfortable about it that I slipped my nickel-plated 9mm beneath the cushion of a nearby sofa before Coco arrived. I also hid my wallet and badge. Perhaps that proved to be a mistake.

Surreptitiously taped to my torso was a tiny transmitter known as a "body bug." On the other end of the listening device were several heavily-armed, well-seasoned vice detectives assigned to the Organized Crime Bureau. A year earlier, a 1983 Reader's Digest article described how we were labeled "Los perros locos" (the mad dogs) by members of the newly-arrived Mariel Cuban gangs (accurately portrayed in Brian DePalma's "Scarface") who demanded as much of our attention as Pablo Escobar's "cocaine cowboys" and the Jamaican posse or two that were established in South Florida by that time.

Coco was somewhat agitated when he arrived at the hooker's house where I waited. As he did before, Coco reached into his leather "fag bag." Instead of pulling out the expected baggie of white powder, Coco drew his Colt .45 pistol, cocked it and pointed it at my face!

He was out of my reach, and I couldn't help but focus on the enormous, dark bore of the gun's barrel. It was a huge, unforgettable, black hole. "*What the hell, Coco*" I demanded. "*That's a big gun . . . hoyo grande*" (big hole). As I had hoped, my partners heard it blaring over the airwaves of the secret bugging device.

But those were the last words transmitted from that room...

The most important thing is that I'm very grateful to be here today. I thank God, and in a bizarre way, I thank Coco. Had he been a Mariel murderer or a cocaine cowboy, the big, black hole would've been my last worldly view as it exploded the life from my body. Surely, Coco was a dangerous drug-dealer, but he lacked that wanton, murderous mentality that many of the newly-arrived criminals of that time possessed. For once, it was refreshing to find a less-crazed psychopath like Coco to deal with.

I knew that Coco wasn't bluffing. You see, Coco was robbed shortly after he and I completed a previous coke deal some days before. He assumed that I set him up.

Sorry, Coco . . . wrong setup.

Neutralizing the situation, I assured Coco that it wasn't me who robbed him. It was then that I noticed a bright glistening from the gun. My focus shifted slightly to the gold-plated handgrips of the pistol as the shine reflected from between

Coco's sweaty fingers gripping the handle of his weapon. Still, I couldn't ignore the one finger on the trigger, and the pistol's cocked hammer.

I later learned that my body bug malfunctioned during the ordeal; and only knowing that I was being held at gunpoint, my backup team elected to saddle up and rush the house where Coco had the upper hand. But, inside the residence, the wait for the cavalry seemed forever so, I instinctively complimented Coco's gun. I pointed out the rococo engraving and gold-plated grips. I eased closer to Coco, and I slowly sidestepped the line of fire while reaching for his weapon, asking him if I could check it out.

Coco seemed befuddled, yet curious. Then, gaining control, I placed my forefinger between the hammer and firing pin and tenderly slipped his forefinger from the trigger telling him that gun accidents ruin friendships. While further gaining Coco's favor, I asked him if the gun was for sale. By now, I had the gun; and Coco seemed to have awakened from his brief trance. He smiled and said, "No . . . not for sale." Well, I couldn't blame him for that! I wouldn't sell it either.

When comparing this dilemma to my subsequent hostage negotiations training many years later, I now realize that I, in fact, was my first "saved" hostage.

Taking control of Coco's pistol and safely de-cocking it, I breathed easier and sensed that somehow we were back on track. There was no reason to sell the investigation short. After all, it wasn't Coco who we were after. It was his nephew, Roberto Carvajal - a major player in South Florida organized crime circles, and former intelligence officer of General Anastasio Somoza's Nicaraguan dictatorship. In fact, Roberto's only legitimate businesses were two of South Florida's hottest disco clubs, including the Chantel Menage, that he secretly owned. Yes, Roberto was the real target. And the investigation was still in its infancy. Rather than identify myself as law enforcement now that I had turned the tables on Coco, I elected to continue to move the deal forward instead. Taking a calculated risk (more like a leap of faith), I returned the gun to Coco, and without further delay we finished our intended business.

During the subsequent, squad room debriefing, my partners described how as they were charging towards the house, Coco and I were spotted emerging through the front door smiling and chatting like a couple of old buddies. They quickly changed courses, jumped behind trees or dived into bushes with their assault rifles and shotguns. That must have been a sight! Luckily, Coco and I failed to see it.

The investigation continued for several months, and ended when I delivered a truckload of purportedly stolen Dom Perignon champagne (on loan from Customs) to the Chantel Menage during a final reverse sting.

After the trial process (which included my career's lengthiest.. ten hour.. deposition), Roberto escaped conviction. Coco did not. Roberto refused to finance his Tio Coco's defense because Coco unwittingly brought my partner and me into the organization. The hooker, who as an informant introduced us, had to disappear for her own safety only to resurface later as a minor character during the Miami River Cops debacle. And, after 40 years, it occurs to me during this writing that it was probably the C.I. who set Coco up for the robbery. Nevertheless, months after the trial process, Roberto was found in his Kendall home, machine-gunned to death along with the riddled body of his once gorgeous, 25-year old girlfriend. Those homicides have yet to be solved. Needless to say, both Coco and I had alibis. Coco was in jail, and I was home with my family. We were where we were meant to be.

My list of likely suspects is as follows. I know that Roberto was brokering a big coke deal between Medellin and members of the New York mafia. A big problem arose and Roberto lost the shipment. Now.. the killers could've been sent down by the New York mob. My partner in that case said that they were Israeli mobsters from New York, but Roberto's lawyer (my friend) had other ideas.. so he said. I believe that the hitters were more likely "cocaine cowboys"

because of the weapons used. Triple-O's are not as messy with their hits. The cowboys, on the other hand, were. Ask "Tony Montana." In fact, it wasn't a secret that Roberto had an ongoing problem with Griselda Blanco the "Godmother of the Cocaine Cowboys." Prior to Roberto's demise, she had the Chantel Menage bombed. But, there is another curious possibility.

Roberto might have been finally dealt with by a hit team from Communist-ruled Nicaragua. After all, it was a Sandinista commando team - that was trained and fully backed by Fidel Castro - who caught up with Roberto's old boss, Gen. Anastasio Somoza while exiled in Paraguay. Led by infamous, international terrorist, Enrique Gorriaran Merlo aka "Ramon," the hit team was dispatched to kill Somoza during "Operación Reptile." They were armed with fully automatic weapons (although they blew up the former dictator with an RPG rocket). Needless to say, anti-Communists in the hemisphere weren't happy about that! Without a figurehead to rally the Nicaraguan Contra Rebels to victory after Reagan's much desired presidency, it became more difficult to get Nicaragua back on our side.

The generally shared feeling in our shadowy circles was that Somoza would've been more difficult to assassinate had he been in the United States. But, Jimmy Carter refused to welcome Somoza after the overthrow, and Somoza was forced to take refuge in Paraguay. Would've been a different story if the revolution took place during Reagan's watch only a year or two later. Either way... paybacks are a bitch! By the way, Somoza's final resting place is a cemetery on Miami's Calle Ocho - the area where I first arrested the C.I. (confidential informant) who introduced me to Coco and led me to Roberto. Small world...

ON THE OTHER HAND, there were the great characters of interest. On separate occasions, I was assigned as a bodyguard to Prime Ministers of two Caribbean countries as well as for Cardinal Cassaroli - formerly Pope John Paul's second in command - during one of their occasional Miami visits.

There were the lengthy strategy meetings with State Attorney, Janet Reno (before her appointment as US Attorney General) and my boss, Commander Art Nehrbass during our wars with local corruption, the "Marielito crime wave" and the "cocaine cowboys," as well as an intervention that stopped a hit on the mob accountant's family mentioned earlier. Their deaths were ordered in Miami Beach by Mafia lieutenant, Joe Paterno of the powerful Gambino crime family then under John Gotti by this time. The hit was set to go down in New York. You see, the widow of the recently deceased accountant was left with \$100,000 cash to help provide for her handicapped, teenage son. Not knowing what to do with so much cash, she consulted with her cousin, Joe the "big Mafioso." He convinced her to give him the money for safekeeping. Later, she started bugging Paterno for her money. He, of course, had other ideas. So much for family values and the so-called honor we saw in the Godfather movies. The widow had no idea that Paterno was having her and her son whacked. Luckily, OCB learned about it from a wiretap during an investigation of unrelated crimes at the same time that we were investigating city hall corruption within two Dade County cities tied in with Alberto San Pedro "The Great Corruptor of Hialeah." Paterno subsequently died while awaiting trial on that and a few other charges. Oops!

I cherish the long conversations with a retired FBI agent - a septuagenarian who continued to work, until he died, with pari-mutuel security. I listened for hours while he recalled his career as a fed, helping to end the violent careers of "Pretty Boy" Floyd and John Dillinger.

Speaking of FBI, my boss Art Nehrbass retired from the Feds in the early 80s to head the Organized Crime Bureau in Miami. During his tenure with the FBI (the "FeeBees") Art was the SAC -- heading Operation MIPORN (pronounced "my porn"), a successful federal pornography investigation of the 70s. Working with Art during MIPORN was Special Agent Gordon McNeil, who I met through Art and a few other co-workers in the Bureau. If Gordy's name is familiar to you, it's because he was one of the survivors of the infamous FBI shootout in Sunniland (South Miami), a deadly gun battle against William Matix and Michael Platt. The final score in that ordeal: 2 agents dead... both suspects dead and five

agents critically wounded. It took a while for Gordy to heal as he was hit with enemy fire from Matix's assault rifle. This was dramatized by the subsequent film, "In The Line of Duty: The FBI Murders" starring David Soul, Michael Gross and Ronny Cox. Cox played Special Agent Ben Grogan who, with his family were fellow church parishioners with my family and me. The tragedy prompted the FBI to change its "takedown" procedures and choice of duty weapons. My friend, Retired Sgt David Rivers was the lead Homicide investigator in that case, and he continues to lecture internationally about what law enforcement has learned as a result of that horrific shootout.

Art retired from the OCB and wrote a book, "Dead Heat." I'm told it inspired the movie, "Heat" starring Al Pacino and Robert DeNiro. Art said that the book was based on his experiences in law enforcement. Needless to say, his buddy Gordy's experience in Sunniland might have inspired Art to include the cold-blooded, fast-trigger characteristics of the criminals in his story.

Very important was my mentor, the late, Honorable Edward Cowart (a former Miami policeman), who, as a judge, sentenced the infamous serial killer, Ted Bundy to death here in Miami. One night, I learned a very important lesson from Judge Cowart. While sitting in the judge's kitchen sipping coffee, I mentioned how Bundy must have been "one crazy killer." The Southern judge peered at me over the rim of his glasses, and retorted in a stern manner, "Son, if that boy was sick like you say, I would have sentenced him to the hospital for proper treatment. No... He was a sociopath, and I sent him to the electric chair. You're a big city detective. Learn the difference, son... learn the difference!"

Indeed, I learned.

Interestingly, I nurtured friendships with Miami Vice cast members leading to creative writing ventures that paid off later. While moonlighting, I wrote scripts for a South Florida TV production company. That led to producing and directing one of the company's TV shows. Subsequent issues dampened my desire to further a TV career as a producer. Nevertheless, I continued to moonlight by writing articles for several publications including Variety Magazine. I dabbled with broadcasting - hosting several radio shows and a local TV show.

In Law Enforcement, after a five-year assignment in Robbery where I met the worst of sociopaths and the most emotionally touching of victims, I finished up my career while with the Department's Environmental Investigations Unit working with a federal environmental crimes task force. I retired a several years ago leaving my son in Law Enforcement to help protect our good citizens. My two daughters are in the medical care field - one as a nurse and the other as a physical therapist pursuing a doctor's degree in alternative medicines. She also volunteers with handicap children. I'm very proud of my children! My daughters are committed to helping the elderly and handicapped youths, while my son has bravely stood up against (showdown-style) some very dangerous criminals and survived! Maybe he's a chip off the ol' block?

Currently married to a great woman, we have a cumulative 5 kids and 11 grandkids and 3 great grandchildren!