

Black Liberation Army Robbery Gang Impersonating Police Detectives and Robbing Drug Dealers

By the late summer of 1970, New York City was under siege. Violent crime was climbing at an unprecedented rate, narcotics trafficking had become deeply entrenched in many neighborhoods, and heavily armed criminal gangs were growing increasingly bold. Among the most dangerous were members and associates of the Black Liberation Army, who financed their activities through violent robberies, often by posing as New York City police detectives. Their targets were drug dealers carrying large amounts of cash and narcotics—victims who were unlikely to report being robbed.

Harlem had become one of the city's most volatile battlegrounds. Every tour carried the potential for sudden violence, and every suspicious encounter could escalate into a gunfight without warning. Undercover detectives working anti-crime details understood that they were hunting predators who were just as willing to hunt them.

On Monday evening, September 7, 1970, the Labor Day weekend was coming to an end. My partner and I were assigned to the Taxi Truck Surveillance Unit and were patrolling within the confines of the 28th Precinct in an unmarked vehicle. Although assigned to the unit, we were also conducting anti-crime surveillance in Harlem because of the extraordinary number of armed robberies, shootings, and violent crimes plaguing the neighborhood.

It was a hot, humid night. The oppressive heat lingered long after sunset, driving residents onto the sidewalks, stoops, and street corners in search of relief. Large groups of mostly young men gathered throughout the neighborhood while the streets pulsed with tension. Harlem was a community under enormous pressure, where narcotics, crime, and distrust of authority created an atmosphere in which the slightest spark could ignite into violence. It was precisely the kind of night experienced detectives learned never to underestimate.

For experienced detectives, nights like this demanded absolute vigilance. Nothing was routine. Every occupied vehicle, every hurried pedestrian, every whispered conversation on a corner demanded attention. Criminals often used the crowds as cover, disappearing in seconds after committing violent crimes.

As we slowly cruised northbound through the precinct, both of us silently scanned the sidewalks and intersections for anything that appeared out of place. Years of street experience had taught us that armed robbery crews frequently conducted their

own surveillance before striking. They looked for isolated victims, escape routes, and opportunities. We, in turn, were looking for them.

Neither of us realized that within minutes we would encounter one of the most dangerous robbery crews operating in Harlem—a heavily armed gang masquerading as police detectives that had been terrorizing narcotics traffickers throughout the city. The confrontation that followed would unfold in a matter of seconds and could easily have ended in tragedy.

At approximately 11:00 p.m., while I was driving along West 117th Street, my partner and I suddenly heard frantic shouts of, "Police! Police!" coming from a group of people gathered in front of 48 West 117th Street.

As I approached, I observed a Chevrolet pulling away from the curb at a high rate of speed. Several excited bystanders ran toward our unmarked car and shouted that two armed men, identifying themselves as police officers, had just robbed two individuals inside the hallway of the building.

There was no time to lose.

I immediately accelerated and began pursuing the Chevrolet. The suspects turned north onto Lenox Avenue, driving recklessly in an obvious attempt to escape. I stayed close behind with our lights and sirens blasting as they sped through Harlem before making a hard right turn onto 125th Street toward Fifth Avenue.

I closed the distance and forced the fleeing vehicle against the curb on the sidewalk, leaving the occupants with nowhere to go.

The moment both cars stopped, my partner and I jumped from our vehicle with our service revolvers drawn and ordered the occupants to surrender. The driver slowly stepped from the car with his hands raised.

The passenger had other ideas.

He suddenly burst from the passenger side with a revolver already in his hand. Before either of us could react further, he pointed the weapon directly at us and pulled the trigger.

Click.

The revolver misfired or jammed.

In that split second, we rushed him before he could clear the malfunction or fire again. After a brief struggle, we overpowered him and wrestled away a loaded .32-caliber revolver.

He had come within a fraction of a second of murdering two New York City detectives. Only the malfunction of his weapon prevented him from firing. Because the street was crowded with civilians, we had withheld our own fire. Had the revolver discharged as intended, we would have had no alternative but to respond with deadly force.

The third suspect, seated in the rear of the Chevrolet, also resisted arrest. After another struggle, we disarmed him of a loaded .38-caliber revolver. A search also revealed that he was carrying a New York City Department of Correction shield that had not been reported stolen.

The driver was searched and found to be unarmed.

As we struggled to secure all three prisoners and recover the weapons, a hostile crowd rapidly formed around us. People shouted obscenities and insults, and several individuals threatened to take the prisoners away from us.

The situation deteriorated by the second.

Directly across the street stood El Cuba Libre, a bar frequented by members of extremist Black Muslim and Black Panther organizations. As word of the arrests spread, more people poured into the street. Within moments, my partner and I found ourselves badly outnumbered, standing in the middle of 125th Street with three armed robbery suspects in custody and an increasingly hostile crowd pressing in from every direction.

The crowd that had surrounded us included revolutionary anti-police militants, many of whom were believed to be armed and dangerous. Patrol officers assigned to the area had previously been cautioned to approach that location carefully and to request backup before taking police action there. Recognizing how rapidly the situation was deteriorating, we transmitted a Signal 10-13—an emergency call for immediate police assistance. Within minutes, responding units from the 28th, 25th and 32nd Precincts arrived in force, dispersed the hostile crowd, and secured the scene.

The three prisoners were transported to the 28th Precinct. The driver, Ernest M., age 23, was identified as the owner of the 1953 Chevrolet. Bobby P., age 22, was identified as the gunman who had pointed a loaded .32-caliber revolver at us and attempted to fire. Charles T., age 22, was the rear-seat passenger who was disarmed of a loaded .38-caliber revolver and found carrying a New York City Department of Correction shield that had not been reported stolen.

Subsequent examination by the Ballistics Squad determined that Bobby P.'s revolver had failed to fire because the firing pin had not struck the cartridge primer. That mechanical failure almost certainly saved our lives. Investigators also learned that

Bobby P. and Charles T. had been posing as narcotics detectives, using firearms to rob suspected drug dealers of cash and narcotics. All three defendants had prior arrests for robbery and assault and were on parole at the time of their arrest.

Ironically, the two robbery victims refused to cooperate or press charges, undoubtedly fearing prosecution for their own narcotics activities. Nevertheless, on September 21, 1970, a grand jury indicted Bobby P. and Charles T. for Reckless Endangerment in the First Degree, Criminal Possession of Dangerous Weapons, and Criminal Possession of Stolen Property involving the Department of Correction shield.

Looking back, what stands out most is how quickly routine patrol can become a life-or-death encounter. In a matter of minutes, we went from conducting anti-crime surveillance to pursuing armed robbery suspects, facing a gun pointed directly at us, and then standing alone against an increasingly hostile mob. The fact that no innocent civilians, no police officers, and not even the suspects were killed that night was the result of training, teamwork, restraint, and, in one critical instant, the failure of a firing pin to strike a primer.

For our actions that evening, my partner and I received a Department Commendation recognizing our courage, sound judgment, restraint, and disregard for grave personal danger while performing our duties under extraordinarily hazardous circumstances. It remains one of the most memorable and sobering incidents of my career with the New York City Police Department.