

Prologue – The Raid

It's doubtful that any other provincial capital in the western world can be as quiet as Victoria at 6:00 a.m. on a Sunday morning between Christmas and New Year's Eve. Normally, the respectable citizenry and misinformed tourists would all be snug in their beds, safe from the cold winds and drizzly black skies that generally prevail at this darkest time of the year. This particular Sunday was different, however, in a lot of ways. For one thing, it had been clear overnight and unusually mild, with the temperature hovering well above the freezing point. The warm night had uncharacteristically resulted in a few hardy souls wandering aimlessly down Douglas Street in the vicinity of closed bars and open, but barren, coffee shops, wanting one last holiday season drink and not quite finding the courage to sober up with a stiff jolt of caffeine. Finally, this Sunday was different because an event was to take place that would change the city and the province forever.

Douglas Street runs through the commercial centre of the city. Not that there is much commerce, but a few banks and credit unions have optimistically built five- or six-story office buildings, appealing for tenants on their middle floors and striving for an impression of size and stability. Many of the offices on these floors are leased by financial specialists, such as investment councillors, stock brokers, insurance agents and the like, all eager to assist the large and often naïve senior community to part with its pensions and savings. The rest of the street embraces a confused collection of travel offices, newspaper stands, hotels and family restaurants. A few small struggling department stores still exist, but most of the larger ones have long since moved to the malls in the city's suburbs.

Generally the tourists don't spend much time on this street, preferring the imported baubles to be found closer to the harbour in the shops on Government and Wharf streets to the east of Douglas. Even at the best of times the main users of Douglas Street are suburbanites attempting to sort out screwed up financial statements, commuters waiting for late-running buses, or the night crowd, crossing the street on their way to the restaurants, prostitutes and nightclubs to the east, or the movie houses to the west. The whole downtown area has the desperate air of an aging lady of the night doing her best to maintain an attractive appearance, but starting to show a few too many warts and blemishes.

In an attempt to gain as little attention as possible, the combined RCMP/City of Victoria special police unit had chosen to drive down Douglas on a date and at a time when virtually no one would notice. With no apartments or houses along the street, there usually wouldn't even be any early morning dog-walkers to become curious as to why a convoy of vans and police cruisers would be making their way through the heart of the city at this ungodly hour.

The raid on the legislature had been planned for weeks. As early as two years before the RCMP had become alarmed about the increased drug activity in Victoria, its connection to organized crime and motorcycle gangs and its brutal effects on the vice trade in the province's capital. Only recently, however, had potential links to officials in government been established and evidence had even surfaced that perhaps vote buying, influence peddling and contract rigging were tied to local drug dealing. The Mounties had quickly determined that the scope of suspected illegal conduct was much too complex for them to handle alone and they had enlisted the assistance of other law enforcement agencies, including the Victoria and Saanich Police Forces, to map out and conduct a counter-offensive. The resulting combined investigating team included members of the RCMP's commercial crime, drug and organized crime units, as well as their counterparts from the City of Victoria.

Tireless hours of planning and intelligence gathering had led to the formation of the special unit. Maximum security was required at all stages, as connections to not only the Provincial, but even the Federal Government, were strongly suspected. Other than the Attorney General, the senior justice officer in the province, no cabinet ministers, or even the Premier, could be informed of the raid. Likewise, no information could be provided by the RCMP to federal government officials. Discretion was even required to obtain search warrants for the many private and government offices where links to possible illegal activity had been established, and aside from the Speaker, who was consulted to ensure that Parliamentary privilege was not being violated by the raid, no legislative personnel were informed.

As the convoy crept through the early morning darkness of late December, street lights shone accusingly down on their ominous, black vehicles, resisting their attempts to remain discreet and inconspicuous. The convoy ploughed persistently on, leaving behind the few hapless street wanderers, who stared balefully, but with little curiosity, at the passing parade.

At the bottom of Douglas they turned right and made their way between the Provincial Museum and the Empress Hotel. Except for the lead vehicle, the procession turned left on Government and then right into the driveway between the Legislature and the Annex, stopping behind the East Block entrance. Meanwhile, the special unit commander, Sergeant Tom O'Brien, and his driver proceeded across Government Street and up to the entrance of the main building.

On a clear, sunny day, the Legislature, often ostentatiously referred to as the Parliament Buildings and colloquially as "the Ledge", is a beautiful building. If one looks down from the upper commercial offices along Government Street, the Legislature sits in front of the shimmering waters of the Juan de Fuca Straights, with the Olympic Mountains soaring picture perfect behind them, providing a majestic and striking backdrop. At night, with all its lights ablaze, profiling its stately and symmetrical domes, the Legislature is also a spectacular sight, standing upright against the darkened sky. The reflection of the lights and building are transposed onto the sailboats and docks of the inner harbour, creating a poster card view that has been captured by photographers from all parts of the world. Even here from the entrance, with its wide spacious front lawn glistening under the glow of its silhouette lighting, the building looked down benevolently, as if welcoming this invading force.

As he arrived at the wide arched doorways of the main entrance and into the foyer, Sergeant O'Brien was met by a sleepy and very surprised Legislative Police Constable, Jack Lawson.

"The top of the morning to you, Constable. I'm Sergeant O'Brien and I and a few fellow officers are here to take a gander at a couple of the offices in this fine building. Here is a warrant authorizing our right to search the premises. We shouldn't take up more than about six or seven hours of your time."

"But I don't have any knowledge of this," Lawson sputtered. "I'll have to check with my superiors to see if this is okay."

"That won't be necessary, Constable. This warrant makes it okay and we'll just keep it as quiet as we can for as long as we can, shall we? No point in getting the reporters and tourists all excited any sooner than we need to."

From the foyer, O'Brien and the Constable walked left to the East Block where Tom directed Lawson to unlock the breezeway doors, permitting the task force direct access to the block.

"Alright men, you know the drill," O'Brien shouted. "Harrigan, I want you and your group to go straight up to the second floor, secure it and proceed directly to the minister's office. Because he's responsible for Crown Corporations, the files in his office are bound to contain lots of information relating to the privatization scandal. Remember, the warrant lets us search the entire

office, including the inner office, and while his aide is our main target, we need to go through the whole suite with a fine toothcomb. Meanwhile, the rest of us will head down to the other office and go through the same routine there. Remember, we need to haul everything away with us, so make sure you are properly armed.”

Dressed in their black, nondescript coveralls and armed with flattened file-folder boxes, the special unit headed up the stairs and down the corridors, looking more like an army of bureaucratized ninja warriors than a group of her Majesty’s finest. As he moved into Minister Peregrine’s suite, O’Brien directed his group to the filing cabinets, desks and computers of both the inner and outer offices. A cursory search of the files was made first, then a careful placement of all selected materials into the file boxes, followed by a thorough sealing and labelling to indicate the contents and sequencing of each box.

“I always knew I would end up with a desk job if I stayed with the City of Victoria long enough”, jaded traffic section Sergeant George Wright quipped to his work partner, Mountie Bill Evans.

“Think of it as a favour to the taxpayers, George,” Evans countered. “We could have had the government mail us all this stuff, but instead we provide free pick-up and delivery, thus saving tons of packing and courier costs. Not only that, if you get tired of police work you will be qualified for both provincial government employment and moving company jobs.”

“By the time I pack all these boxes out of here I will likely be more qualified for disability allowance.”

“Don’t be too disappointed lads,” said O’Brien. “If you weren’t lazing around this cold empty office, you would probably be at home, forced to fix your kids’ broken Christmas presents or watch some boring American college football game.”

By nine o’clock the local media had gotten wind of the raid and were soon clamouring around the site, taking pictures and attempting to interview anyone wearing black coveralls or looking even slightly officious.

“Come on Sergeant O’Brien,” pleaded the CBC’s legislative reporter Phil Brown. “There must be something you can tell us.”

“I can say this much, Phil. What are you guys doing here, standing around in the cold? I thought you all had nice cozy offices in the basement where you could be keeping warm and writing stories about the Premier’s holidays. As for the boys and I, we heard there was a late Boxing Day sale here and we thought we would arrive real early to take advantage of the specials. Judging by the boxes of stuff we’re leaving with, we’ve done exceptionally well, don’t you think?”

While O’Brien was speaking to the media, some of the officers from the special unit were packing boxes out of the East Block and loading them into the waiting vans.

“Okay, so what’s in the boxes and where are you taking them, Sergeant O’Brien?” asked Canadian Universal Media reporter, Helen McIver. “You can’t just storm the Legislature, fill up a couple of vans with boxes of files, or whatever you’ve taken, and leave us wondering what the hell is going on.”

“In due time, Helen, in due time. Right now that is exactly what I am going to do. Just the same, I am sure one of our fine spin doctors from the Divisional Office will have a word or two for you later in the week.”

With that, the members of the special unit climbed back into their vehicles, and under glaring sunshine and along streets now busy with church goers and sightseers, made their way quickly back up Douglas Street and away from downtown Victoria. Their vans were loaded with 37

boxes of electronic and paper files. Under a separate warrant, members of the unit had also quietly removed from the government computer server the electronic equivalent of 97 compact discs. Over the course of the day, other search warrants were executed by the special unit and visits were made to the home of one of the minister's aide's and to the homes or offices of a number of executive members of the federal governing party.