

A Joint Ops Caper: ATF & NOPD

By Tom Cramer

Where the Boyz Are



In this joint operation, ATF and NOPD used innovative tactics to bring down a gang that was terrorizing residents of a housing project.

You didn't mess with the Cutt Boyz. They controlled half of the B.W. Cooper Housing Project in New Orleans, as well as the residents who lived there. They

peddled heroin and cocaine; they robbed, assaulted, and murdered — all in broad daylight.

“There was this one guy who got shot 17 times under his car,” said **Special Agent Ray Connor of ATF's New Orleans Field Division**. “Two guys started shooting him, so he got under his car and they kept on shooting him under his car. This happened in late afternoon. I guess it was around dusk. What's worse, there were little kids standing there watching it happen.” “The gang was protecting and maintaining their reputation through violent crime,” said **Special Agent Mike Eberhardt, also of the New Orleans Field Division**. “Murder and attempted murder, kidnapping, armed robbery, everyone was scared to death of these guys.”

As well they should have been. In 2001, close to 30 shootings occurred within “Back of Town” (pronounced *Back-a-Town* by the locals), the five square block area of the projects owned by the Cutt Boyz.

Meeting The Enemy

The New Orleans Police did their best to keep the violence down, but it was a losing battle. “The locals had little, if any, respect for the police, and in many instances had great contempt for them,” Eberhardt explained.

“Everyone had a friend or family member who’d been arrested, and these arrests were often viewed as unfair or unnecessary.

This fostered a distrust of the police. It was a major hurdle we had to overcome during our investigation.”



They don't just check FFL licenses — ATF agents are often in the field, hands-on making arrests.

“There was a separation between the two cultures,” Connor observed. “No one wanted to talk to the police.” And so the mayhem continued. The Cutt Boyz did as they pleased, knowing no one in their neighborhood would dare come forward as a witness against them. Terrified of the gang, distrustful of the police, the residents of Back-a-Town were truly prisoners in their own backyards.

Back in 2001 Connor was a New Orleans cop who was familiar with the culture of Back-a-Town. It wasn't until a few years later he made the decision to join ATF, so it made perfect sense for him to be teamed up with Eberhardt to go after the Cutt Boyz organization.

In November of that year, the team of New Orleans Police Detective Ray Connor and ATF Special Agent Mike Eberhardt got into their silver 2002 Crown Victoria and drove straight into the Cutt Boyz' home turf. Little did they know they'd be spending the next two years of their lives there.

“We made no secret about who we were or why we were there,” Eberhardt said. “We told the residents we were there to help them. And we told the Cutt Boyz we were there to put them in jail.”

But how do you build a case against a criminal organization if none of their victims will talk to you? “We spun our wheels for maybe three months,” Eberhardt said. “We weren't getting anywhere. We were getting stonewalled.”

“We were knocking on doors and trying to talk to people,” Conner said. “But nobody was talking. One lady actually told us: *‘If they see you standing on my porch, I'm gonna die.’*”

“That, right there, told us our approach wasn’t going to work,” said Eberhardt.

But what approach would?

Getting To Know You

The two investigators decided on the total immersion approach. “We needed to win their trust,” Connor explained. “To do that, we needed to become part of the community.”

A plan of attack had at last materialized — Connor and Eberhardt would become a perpetual presence — by simply “hanging out” and doing nothing. They’d eventually come to be seen not as cops, not as intruders, but as “Ray and Mike.” At least that was the idea, but would it work?

“We spent nearly every day in that project,” Eberhardt said. “For months we didn’t ask anyone about anything crime-related. We didn’t ask them any questions. Little by little, they started to trust us. We wanted them to know we were there to help them, and protect them.”

It took many months, but gradually the residents of Back-a-Town began to loosen up, and open up. Their fear began to subside, and their trust in the two investigators began to build.

Slowly but surely, Connor and Eberhardt’s stock was going up. As they casually cruised the streets of Back-a-Town, they began to notice a change. “We’d be driving around, and people would wave at us,” Connor said.

“That’s when we knew we were getting somewhere.”

“After a while, we knew everything that was going on,” said Eberhardt. “We were in the loop. If something happened, people would call us and let us know.”

The New Orleans cop and the ATF special agent had become such permanent fixtures even the Cutt Boyz began to regard them as an inescapable part of the scenery.

“It was a weird situation,” Connor said. As the months rolled by, the duo’s patience and persistence began to pay off. Bit by bit, they were collecting a wealth of information about the Cutt Boyz’ various criminal activities. The residents of Back-a-Town had, at last, begun to talk.

“We spent all of 2002 rounding up witnesses and collecting cold case evidence from previous crimes the New Orleans Police had already worked,” Connor explained. “The police had collected a lot of evidence already,

but they saw all these crimes as separate incidents — a murder here, a kidnapping there. “We saw them as a bigger picture,” he continued. “We saw them as one long crime spree carried out by a criminal organization.”

Take Down Day

As the hot summer of 2003 wore on in New Orleans, Connor and Eberhardt came to the conclusion the endgame was nearing. After nearly 20 months, they'd finally collected the evidence they needed to put the Cutt Boyz out of business.

"In August of 2003 we indicted 11 suspects," Eberhardt said. "We indicted the core group. We got them on a number of Violent Crime in Aid of Racketeering charges."

With major assistance from the New Orleans Police Department, each of the suspects was taken into custody quickly and quietly, without incident. No dramatic take-downs. No flashing lights and sirens. "All of them knew this day was coming,"

Eberhardt observed. "We told them it was coming. They just didn't know what day it would be." Eleven Cutt Boyz are now in federal prison.

"Two of them were facing the death penalty if convicted at trial," said Eberhardt. "These two eventually pleaded guilty to drug conspiracy charges and five separate murders. Both received multiple life sentences."

"Another went to trial and was found guilty of one murder and three attempted murders, including the shooting of his girlfriend in the eye," Connor said. "He was sentenced to two life terms in prison."

Three Cutt Boyz received 25 years each for their participation in various murders and the narcotics conspiracy. Lesser players received sentences of between seven and 20 years. "We were a good team," Eberhardt said of his old partner, Ray Connor. "Ray's laid back; he doesn't get riled up easily. I'm more high-strung. So we kind of played off each other."

Connor agreed. "Mike's very aggressive," he said. "I'm much more diplomatic. Mike's not diplomatic."