

## OPERATION DESERT MIRAGE

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A five month undercover operation was conducted in the city of El Mirage. Officers made narcotic purchases from thirty (30) suspects. These narcotic purchases were made from locations in El Mirage, however, the majority (over twenty), of these buys either occurred at or originated from a particular address in El Mirage. This address, 14305 N. Poppy Street, was a constant problem for the El Mirage Police, with 12.3% of the total calls for service originating from the address. While conducting undercover operations at that address, officers observed persons selling narcotics in the presence of small children. The location was unkept, with gang graffiti in the alley, crack pipes on the ground, and was clearly a hub of illegal activity in the area.

The operation resulted in a search warrant served at 14305 N. Poppy on February 26, 1999 and the issuance of fifteen (15) arrest warrants. The building inspector accompanied officers and condemned the property. The owner of the property was arrested for narcotic violations and is facing civil charges relating to the property.

The property has been vacant since the search warrants and there have been no calls for service at the location. There has been an overall reduction in criminal activity throughout the city. The citizens have been supportive and have been calling the police department with information on drug and gang houses. The operation is ongoing and includes graffiti removal and training for city officers, as well as community input to ensure the problem would not resurface.

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### **CONTACT INFORMATION:**

Lieutenant J.E. McGuffin  
Commander, Arizona Department of Public Safety  
Gang Intelligence Team Enforcement Mission  
P.O. Box 6638  
Phoenix, Az., 85005  
(602) 223-2574 (phone)  
(602) 223-2588 (fax)

Sergeant F.W. Zumbo  
Arizona Department of Public Safety  
Gang Intelligence Team Enforcement Mission  
P.O. Box 6638  
Phoenix, Az. 85005  
(602) 223-2584 (phone)  
(602) 223-2588 (fax)

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The City of El Mirage, Arizona, is a small community (11.2 square miles) located 20 miles northwest of Phoenix. There are approximately 6,000 residents and the ethnic makeup of the community is 85% Hispanic, 10% White, and 5% Black. The El Mirage Police Department has 20 sworn officers, 12 of whom are in the patrol division. In July of 1998, the El Mirage Police Department sent an officer to participate in the Gang Intelligence Team Enforcement Mission (GITEM), which is coordinated by the Arizona Department of Public Safety. GITEM has 93 sworn officers from 48 different agencies state wide. In the past, the unit assigned to work in Maricopa County had worked in and around El Mirage, but didn't have sufficient information as to gang activity in the community. The placement of an El Mirage officer in the unit helped open communication and identified a potential gang and drug problem in the community.

Several areas of concern were brought to the attention of the unit by the officer. Drug activity was rampant in several areas of the city. There was obvious signs of street gang presence, with graffiti present at numerous locations in the city. There were signs of gang rivalry and the gangs were involved in the narcotic sales. As the unit worked in the city, officers noticed that the majority of gang and drug activity would cease. This was due to the criminally active residents seeing officers from the task force working in the community in large numbers, conducting pro-active gang suppression enforcement. Word of the task force's presence spread quickly which caused a significant, however, temporary decline in criminal activity. The results of pro-active patrol were disappointing, with very little activity occurring. The drug and gang problems continued when the task force left town and it was obvious to the unit that something different needed to be done to achieve the desired results.

A discussion was held between the officers and supervisors in the GITEM unit to decide what could be done to combat the problem. The majority of the activity appeared to generate from two locations, one was a residence at 14305 N. Poppy Street and the other was an alley on the south side of the city where drug sales were rampant. These two locations would be the primary focus of any operation that was to be conducted. Task force officers felt that El Mirage was a project that was manageable in scope and there was a very good chance of having a significant impact on the drug and gang activities that affected the quality of life in the community.

While GITEM officers thought they understood the problems in El Mirage, officers decided to coordinate a town meeting to solicit information from the community on what the residents and town officials, including local law enforcement, saw as the problems. In September 1998, GITEM staff met with the El Mirage Police Chief, all supervisors from police department, the mayor, several city council members and community activists. The common problem that was voiced was gang activity and narcotic use and sales.

The address at 14305 N. Poppy Street was, by all input and observation, a major crime problem in the city of El Mirage. A six-month analysis of the calls for service from April 1998 to September 1998, by the police department showed that 14305 N. Poppy Street accounted for 12.3 % of the total calls for service for the entire city of El Mirage.

The property was owned by a subject named Betty Miller, who had the property littered with numerous out buildings that were being used as rentals. The property drew an undesirable element, with drug use and sales occurring, as well as prostitution, loan sharking, and trafficking in stolen property. The owner was involved in all illegal activity and took a "cuf" of the proceeds. The property had been a problem for many years, but the increased drug and gang activity at the location was causing a decline in the quality of life for the neighboring homeowners. The El Mirage Police Department was aware of the problem, however, manpower shortages prevented the dedication of the resources needed to combat the problem. Another problem, was that El Mirage is a small community, where everyone knows each other, making it difficult to investigate the criminal activity without the targets being aware of the investigation.

An operational plan was conceived which included an undercover operation. It was decided to let the undercover officers attempt to make drug purchases, and have surveillance and uniformed gang officers identify suspects. This was seen as the most effective method to accomplish the goals of the investigation.

It was agreed upon that the State Gang Task Force would conduct the total investigation. El Mirage Chief of Police, Jeffrey Love, would be briefed on the progress, but did not want specific details. The position of the El Mirage Police Department was that they did not want to jeopardize the confidentiality of the investigation.

The gang targeting squad, which is comprised of undercover officers, and the uniformed enforcement squad, were the officers that would conduct the investigation. One officer from each squad was selected to be co-case agents. Undercover officers were able to purchase narcotics from the location on Poppy Street. The officers were able to purchase narcotics, mainly crack cocaine, at other locations in town, but the Poppy address was the most active location for drug sales. Officers were able to gain the confidence of the property owner, Betty Miller, who took a liking to the undercover officers and made sure they were able to purchase the drugs they requested. Investigators were able to recruit an informant, who provided valuable information which verified the observations of the officers.

The property on Poppy Street was unkept, with gang graffiti in the alley and crack pipes on the floors. All of this illegal activity occurred in the presence of numerous small children on the property. The living conditions at the property were deplorable. There were seven rental units and a main house on the property. The rental units were small shack type dwellings, several of which did not have running water. There was a communal bathroom in an outhouse type building. There was exposed wiring in the units and the grounds were littered with dog and cat feces.

The officers continued the investigation for five months, making in excess of twenty narcotic purchases from the Poppy Street address. The operation resulted in officers making purchases from thirty subjects in El Mirage. Officers were able to positively identify fifteen of the subjects, five suspects were partially identified, and the remaining ten suspects were not identified. A grand jury returned indictments, and arrest warrants were obtained for the fifteen positively identified suspects. A search warrant was issued for the house and property at 14305 N. Poppy Street.

On February 26, 1999, the arrest and search warrants were executed. The El Mirage Police Department, as well as the fire department, building inspector, probation officers, and Child Protective Service all participated. The property was deemed to be uninhabitable and was condemned by the building inspector. All fifteen suspects indicted were arrested, including the property owner, Betty Miller.

Following the completion of the warrants, graffiti abatement crews were brought in by the task force to paint over the graffiti in the city. One of the original observations was that the city did not have a program in place to remove graffiti. The task force was able to coordinate the graffiti removal effort and educate the community in how to coordinate this effort in the future.

The results of this project were remarkable. The impact was far reaching. The city had never seen such a large scale police operation. Residents cheered and applauded the officers as they executed the search warrants. Several local Phoenix television stations covered the story live and neighbors expressed their thanks for taking action on the problem in their neighborhood. The response energized the community to fight back against drugs and gangs. The El Mirage Police Department was flooded with calls from citizens wanting to report drug and gang activity.

There were several methods used to evaluate this project. The first were the calls for service to the police department. The property was condemned during the service of the search warrant and no persons were allowed to remain on the property. This eliminated the calls for service. The time frame for the evaluation is two months after the search warrants and there have been no calls to the Poppy address. A second method used to evaluate the project was to converse with members of the El Mirage Police Department and citizens in the community. This was done and there is a perception by the citizens that the city is safer and people feel good about the city and the neighborhoods. The reaction from the police department is that the overall calls for service in the city have decreased and the blatant drug dealing has stopped.

There was a concern about the displacement of crime, however, to this date that has not happened. The reason for this is because the majority of the suspects in the case are still in jail awaiting trial. Officers will continue to monitor the high crime areas of the city with high visibility patrol. The project will continue to target several other locations where drugs were being sold, and will be looking to identify and arrest the small number of remaining suspects that are outstanding. The city is pursuing civil action against Betty Miller to have the buildings at 14305 N. Poppy torn down.

The response plan went exactly as planned. The only problem that was encountered was the inability to positively identify all the suspects that the undercover officers purchased narcotics from. The main targets were easy to identify, but there were several suspects that officers only purchased from one time and never saw again. This was a risk that was taken to preserve the confidentiality of the investigation.

The project was considered to be a total success, closing down a nuisance address and arresting numerous major drug dealers in the city. This problem solving initiative was adopted by a unit within the Arizona State Gang Task Force. Most officers and supervisors in this unit have received training in problem-oriented policing and problem solving. The department that oversees the task force, the Arizona Department of Public Safety, has embraced the philosophy of problem solving and rewards employees who engage in problem solving projects. Previous experience and training guided the supervisors of this project.

This project was completed using the resources of two squads consisting of 14 officers, two sergeants, and one lieutenant. There were 2850 man hours invested in the project and approximately \$1,000 in undercover funds expended. The graffiti removal was conducted by a local Ford dealership at no cost to the city or state. This project was very cost effective and accomplished the intended goals.

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