# Howie Safir's Secret Past

# **Everything You Wanted To Know About** The Commissioner But Were Afraid To Ask

By Douglas Valentine copyright March 2000

ou see him on television at press conferences, standing behind Mayor Rudy Giuliani, looking composed but somewhat uncomfortable in his standard blue suit. And when he approaches the microphones and talks about a particular problem in the NYPD - often some racially charged incident like the Diallo case- he speaks softly, but with an ache of toughness and authority.

So it might be hard to imagine Police Commissioner Howard Safir with long hair and a beard, dressed in bell bottom blue jeans, wearing love beads, and - horror of horrors - buying a thousand hits of acid in Greenwich Village.

Well, it may be hard to believe, but it's true. Of course, it also is true that "Howie," as he was known to his colleagues in the Sixties, was not some drug crazed hippy using his student loan to buy a wholesale stash of Orange Sunshine. At the time, Howie Safir was working undercover as a federal narcotic agent.

#### Howie the Narc

Long before he was a Police Commissioner, Howard Safir was working as a Temporary Patrolman with the New York State Police in Long Island. It was 1965 and he had a wife and a law degree, but no desire to practice law. He did have ambition, however, and he was eager for more excitement in his life, so he applied for a job with the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (FBN), as the DEA was formerly known. Safir was hired and sent to the Treasury Department's Law Enforcement training school, and came out a gun-carrying narcotic agent. He was assigned to Group One in the FBN's New York City office, located at 90 Church Street in downtown Manhattan.

In an interview with this writer, Safir described his job with the FBN as " Exciting, terrifying, weird, and dangerous."

Terrifying and dangerous, indeed. On his first day on the job, Safir was told by his Group Leader to cover a veteran undercover agent, Pete Scrocca. Known as "the blond Italian," Scrocca posed as a cab driver while making undercover heroin buys from pushers on Morris Avenue.

While Safir watched from across the Avenue, Scrocca parked his cab and entered into negotiations with the pusher.



Suddenly, Scrocca came running out from behind his cab,

shouting: "Howie! He's got a gun!"

As the dope dealer stepped out from behind the cab, and aimed his gun at Scrocca's back, Safir drew his own gun and fired once. The bullet stuck the dope dealer in the chest, knocking him to the ground. Safir walked over and, in a state of shock, looked down at the bad guy, who lay bleeding to death on the street. Howie asked his senior partner, "So what do we do now?"

" Put him in the cab," Scrocca calmly replied, then they took the bad guy to the nearest hospital and deposited the body at the Emergency Room entrance.

All of this happened on his first day on the job.

## The Exciting Part of the Job

Safir learned a lot from his senior partner, Pete Scrocca, whom he describes as "fearless," and wise in the ways of the FBN. "Don't talk to anybody about what we're doing," Scrocca told his partner.

"Not even the Group Leader," Howie inquired? "Especially not him!" Scrocca replied.

Indeed, much of the excitement of being an FBN agent revolved around the diverse group of individuals at 90 Church Street. Back in 1966 the office had about 90 agents divided into six groups. There were Irish, Blacks, Jews, Hispanics, Asians, and a few old-timers —Damon Runyan types from the World War II era - - guys who had worked cases on Vito Genovese and Albert Anastasia. The agents came in all sizes, shapes, colors and ethnicities, but the super stars were the undercover agents who did the lion's share of the dangerous work. Everyone worked with the NYPD's Special Investigations Unit, the infamous Princes of the City. It was a few short years before the Serpico corruption scandals, and FBN agents back in those days had their own code of ethics -a code of ethics which made it hard, at times, to tell the cops from the crooks.

With Pete Scrocca as his mentor, Howie Safir quickly learned how to swim with the sharks.

Secret Past continues

#### The Weird Part of the Job

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By far the weirdest part of being a federal narcotic agent was being in Ira "Ike" Feldman's Group One. Safir describes Feldman as " five feet tall, with a fedora, and overcoat that came down to his ankles, and a huge cigar. He talked out of the side of his mouth," Safir recalls, " and claimed to be with the CIA."

In point of fact, FBN agent Ira Feldman was connected with the CIA, which not only made things "weird," it made them downright spooky.

Fluent in several Chinese dialects, Feldman had served with Army Intelligence in China in World War II, and later in Korea. In 1955 he joined the FBN in San Francisco, and was immediately conscripted into the CIA's MKULTRA Program, in which unwitting US citizens were lured into a CIA safe house and given LSD, then observed through a two way mirror. By his own account, Feldman, who posed as a pimp, had a few prostitutes working narcotic cases for him, and these ladies of the night would lure unsuspecting Johns into the CIA safe house. The MKULTRA Program also involved CIA assassinations, and Feldman was considered, by his fellow FBN agents, as a very dangerous person who could make people disappear.

After Feldman was reassigned to New York City in 1962, his CIA activities continued out of the safe house on 13th Street. And after he was put in charge of Group One, Feldman opened yet another safe house on East 18th Street.

None of the jaded FBN agents, including the District Supervisor, dared to ask any questions, and Feldman existed in a world of his own. Because of language skills, Feldman's world was centered in Chinatown, and by the time Howie Safir joined Group One, Feldman was known as the unofficial "mayor of Chinatown."

As Safir recalls, "Feldman had an informant named George who ran a bordello in Chinatown. George said two Chinese diplomats were smuggling opium, and he gave Ike a lead to one of the diplomats. So we followed Ike around for a few days, and eventually "we busted one of the diplomats and some of his clients with 20 pounds of smoking opium wrapped in condoms."

Safir pauses for effect. "The diplomat wanted to make a deal, so he told us where there was another stash pad in Jersey. Ike told a few of us to stay with the prisoners, then took the other guys and went to Jersey where they kicked in the door and stole a bunch of drugs and money. That led to a big IRS investigation and eventually ten agents went down."

# Safir Jumps Ship

Too smart to get involved in the rampant corruption that would soon lead to the dismantling of the FBN, Safir "jumped ship" in 1967, and joined the Bureau of Drug Abuse Control (BDAC). Created in 1966, BDAC was designed to go after dealers in pharmaceutical drugs such as LSD, speed, and barbiturates.

At the BDAC office on Varrick Street, Safir became a

long, and started working cases in Greenwich Village. In order to present himself as a successful drug dealer, he even got to drive an impounded Austin Healey. "It was great fun," he recalls.

Howie got to travel too, and one case took him and his informant to Haight Ashbury, where they were planning to set-up some major LSD distributors. A former agent remembers when Safir's informant checked into the BDAC office in San Francisco. As the agent recalls, "We patted the informant down, and found a gun on him. When we told him he'd have to give it up, he said, "But why? Howie lets me carry one!"

# Walking the Line

Although nevertargeted for investigation himself, Howie Safir found himself walking the line. The job was exciting, sure, but "creating a crime" involved taking other types of risks as well — risks with one's integrity — and that was not a feeling he enjoyed. So Safir temporarily quit BDAC and transferred to the Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms, and became the resident ATF agent in Bangor, Maine.

That job lasted all of six months. There was no action (and no chance of advancement) in the wilds of Maine, so Safir took a deep breath and rejoined federal law enforcement. It was 1968 and the FBN had been dismantled as a result of a huge corruption scandal, and had been reformed in the Justice Department as the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs (BNDD).

Safir joined the BNDD in New York and, ironically, was reassigned to Group One. Notably, Ike Feldman had "resigned" and the new, unsympathetic Group Leader wanted Howie to work undercover cases.

"The undercover agents were exploited," Safir explains, "and I just didn't want to go through those hassles all over again. So I cut my hair and shaved my beard. But they made me do it anyway!"

Reflecting on his days as an undercover agent, Safir says with a self-deprecating sigh, "Those first five years were frustrating and chaotic. There was no traction."

# Safir's Career Takes Off

Although his first five years in federal drug law enforcement were unrewarding, the next five years saw Howie rise rapidly through the ranks.

"There was a big expansion at BNDD," he explains, "and lots of opportunity, if you didn't mind taking a transfer. So in June 1970 I took a job at headquarters in Washington, DC, as a staff assistant to Phil Smith, the BNDD's Deputy Director for Enforcement, in charge of Special Projects."

It was the best move Howie ever made. Smith, whom he describes as "the smartest man I ever knew," taught Howie how to be an effective manager. Smith was creative, ruthless, and a risk-taker, and he allowed Safir to manage some of the BNDD's most sensitive operations, including one that involved liaison with the CIA in the Bahamas. Howie also organized the BNDD's air wing, working with the military to

obtain "some moth-eaten" planes that the Pentagon leased to the BNDD "for nothing." He created a documentation office, and began working with agents in the field to develop informants for the organization's most important cases around the world —including the location of "French Connection" heroin labs in Marseilles.

Another Special Projects case involved Chinese heroin, but, as Safir recalls, "the BNDD had no intelligence on the main players, so President Nixon told the CIA to help." Safir became the BNDD's liaison to the CIA on the project, and for a month sifted through CIA informant files at Langley headquarters. As part of the job, Safir also represented the BNDD at the cabinet-level Committee on International Narcotic Control. There Safir worked with G. Gordon Liddy and the CIA, identifying and attacking opium caravans in the Golden Triangle. "All of this was unprecedented," he says with pride.

## The Rocky Road To Success

In 1971, Howie Safir accompanied his boss, Phil Smith, on a trip around the world. The primary mission was to set up an anti-narcotic operation in Thailand, but the mission failed, because, Safir says, "the Thai officials in charge of the program were corrupt, and misused American equipment to run dope for themselves,"

The lack of modern equipment also hindered the operation. "Back in those days," he observes, "Khun Sa sent messages by mule. Now he sends them by fax."

With the failure of his effort in Thailand, the Office of Special Projects was reorganized, and Safir was reassigned as the Assistant Regional Director in Los Angeles. As a New Yorker, and a headquarters man, he was not warmly welcomed in this new job, and he was happy, after two years, when he was reassigned to Special Projects. By then the BNDD had been reformed into the DEA, and the DEA's Chief of Enforcement, William Wanzek, put Safir back in charge of the organization's air wing. The new job brought Safir into Operation Trizo, which involved locating and destroying poppy fields in Mexico.

Unfortunately, as with so many drug enforcement programs, Operation Trizo was an abject failure, with the DEA's amateur air force destroying as many corn fields as poppy fields. And once again Safir's career got mired in the muck, as the Deputy Regional Director in New Orleans. It was an especially unfulfilling position, and after a year he did what few DEA agents would ever dream of doing — he took a job as the DEA's Assistant Director of Field Operations.

The DEA's always unpopular Assistant Director of Field Operations conducted performance evaluations of agents in the field. "The only requirement," another agent notes, "was a heart the size of a mustard seed."

It was a job that left Howie Safir a hardened bureaucrat
— but with very few friends in the organization.

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Safir, however, had proven himself a "company man," and DEA chief Peter Bensinger was grateful. So in 1978 — there being no safe place left to put our hero in his parent organization — Bensinger "detailed" Safir to the US Marshals Service. Howie worked in the Witness Security program, and when his year was up, he elected to remain in the Marshals Service, rather than transfer back to the DEA.

By the end of his very successful career with the Marshals Service, Howie Safir had risen to become its Chief of Operations. He was at the highest pay grade, working closely with the Attorney General and the national press. He became familiar with the most advanced law enforcement technology, formed the Marshall Service's air wing, and reformed relations with his future boss, Assistant US Attorney Rudy Giuliani.

In case you didn't know, Giuliani was an Assistant US Attorney in New York City, working on the "junk squad" with Charlie Rangel, back when Howie Safir was an undercover narcotic agent in the late 1960s. But that's another story.

#### **Police Commissioner Safir**

When Rudy Giuliani stunned the world by getting elected Mayor of New York City, he asked his old friend Howie Safir to become his Fire Commissioner. At the time, Safir was retired from government service and running his own security company in Washington, DC. Eager to get back in the action, Safir jumped at the opportunity and within a year had been appointed Giuliani, Police Commissioner.

Since then Howard Safir has proven himself a capable manager. His years on the street as an undercover narcotic agent taught him the realities of police work at its most basic level. Always a tenacious and ambitious manager, he learned on the inside, through trial and error, what it takes to survive in the world of bureaucrats, politicians, and even spies. As New York City's Police Commissioner, he has demonstrated that toughness over and over again.

Howie Safir also has proven himself a loyal company man, serving Mayor Giuliani with extraordinary devotion and competence.

One wonders how Senator Giuliani might repay his old friend. (He's no longer running for the Senate).

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