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True Spies: Subverting the subversives



London riots lead to the creation of a special squad

How would you handle taking on the identity of a dead child to work under cover?

Could you handle the stress of worrying that any wrong word or reply could expose your true identity or one of your colleagues?

A new BBC documentary, True Spies, reveals how this became everyday life for some Metropolitan Police Special Branch officers, during the height of the left-wing militancy of the late 1960s and 1970s.

They were prepared to give up their own identities, to cross over and live an alternative lifestyle in order to subvert those perceived as subversives.

These guys wore hair down to their shoulders, looked like Jesus Christ incarnate and changed dramatically

Special Branch's interest in Wilf, "hairies" handler actor Ricky Tomlinson, during his time as a trade unionist, has been highly publicised.

But True Spies reveals that the infiltration went much deeper - in some cases to the top table of British trade unions.

Anyone believed to be intent on "overthrowing or undermining parliamentary democracy by political industrial or violent means" was a potential target for the secret state - that is MI5 and Special Branch.

They would be befriended by their spies and offices would be bugged and burgled to give the state the upper hand in the battle of ideologies.

The "hairies"

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For members of an elite squad it meant a complete transformation.

In the wake of the violent anti-Vietnam War demonstrations in Grosvenor Square in 1968, Special Branch set up the Special Demonstration Squad.

They became known as "the hairies".

Long hair and beards - essential accessories for any respectable left wing intellectual - replaced the uniform short-back-and-sides of your average clean-shaved bobby.

Divorced from friends and family for several years, their task was to work their way into organisations.



Infiltration went to the top of some trade unions

The aim was not just infiltration of suspected subversives in the alternative society, but long-term penetration of movements the "Secret State" believed were planning violent demonstrations and worse.

One of the "hairies" tells how he borrowed techniques from Frederick Forsyth's novel *Day of the Jackal* and searched gravestones for the names of young children who would have been a similar age.

The character was then "resurrected" as the adult he would have become.

Ongoing dread

It was then a matter of giving flesh to the bones and learning street names, parks and pubs he would have known and visited, had he lived.

"Sod's law says that you will go into an organisation and someone else will be from that background, that is the great dread that you will be asked the question you won't have the answer to," said one of the spies.

"You sweat on the inside."

One "hairies" handler Wilf said the spies were given new names, addresses, apartments, driving licences and social security numbers.

They were wiped off the earth as far as police identification went

Wilf, "hairies" handler

"They were wiped off the earth as far as police identification went," he said.

"They were true spies."

But "Dan" believed the pre-emptive intelligence he was able to gather from his new "friends" allowed the police "to prevent blood on the streets".

Betrayal

As well as appearance, the spy had to mentally "go native", adopting the ideology and language until he could convincingly argue the case as, for example, a true Marxist revolutionary would.

Post was opened, plans exposed and keys copied in small plasticine blocks and passed to Special Branch and MI5.

One target for "the hairies" was Tariq Ali, editor of The Black Dwarf magazine and member of the Trotskyite International Marxist Group.

He described the sense of betrayal at being told, some 30 years later, that a close colleague had in fact been a spy.

"It is a bit distressing, especially as he must have been liked, he must have made friends," he said.



Names were taken from tombs and identities created

"That is a form of fundamentalism for you, if you are prepared to subordinate everything else to what is your political aim or work aim. And I guess that's what spies are."

But in spy "Dan's" mind, "the hairies" weren't really betraying their comrades. It was their job as Special Branch officers.

"It was a friendship which I valued at the time and I enjoyed, but the objective was to provide a service," he said.

Many relished the adrenaline rush of the job but for some the job did take its strain.

Staying in character at all times, even when your guard is down after a few drinks in the pub, would test the most experienced actor.

True lies

"Dan" said it eventually came to the point where he had to put his real family first and leave the Special Demonstration Squad.

But a cool head under pressure and brazen cheek is

what kept many going.

One "hairy" called Mike infiltrated the anti-apartheid campaign. When it was clear someone had betrayed its plan, he named another member of the group who was subsequently thrown out.



A hairy or just a hippy?

In pursuing their ideal of a democratic society free from the disruption of strikes, demonstrations and untainted by Communism, the secret state sometimes worked outside the law.

But the spies knew that and accepted the price.

Special Branch Officer Tony Robinson, summing up his work, said: "I suppose the whole business of being a Special Branch Officer in many instances is based on lies, on deception or you can't do your job."

The first programme in the new three-part series *True Spies* will be broadcast on BBC Two on Sunday 27 October at 2100 GMT.

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