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The Watch

A drug informant lied, SWAT pounced, a man died

By **Radley Balko** December 31, 2014

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[Back in July](#), we looked at the case of Jason

Wescott, a Florida man shot and killed by a police SWAT team during a drug raid over an alleged sale of \$200 worth of pot to a police informant. The tragedy was exacerbated by the fact that according to friends and relatives, Wescott had been previously threatened by a man who had broken into his home. When he reported the threat to police they apparently told him, “If anyone breaks into this house, grab your gun and shoot to kill.” Officers from the very same police agency then raided Wescott over some pot. When he grabbed his gun, they killed him.

All that would be appalling in and of itself. But a new report from the Tampa Bay Times shows that it’s actually quite a bit worse. The paper was able to

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obtain the identity of the informant that led to the raid on Westcott's home, Ronnie "Bodie" Coogle.

[And he has a lot to say.](#)

A 50-year-old felon and drug addict, Coogle was the principal Tampa Police Department informer against at least five suspects this year. He conducted nine undercover operations. In their probable-cause affidavits, his handlers called him reliable. Even Tampa's police chief praised his "track record."

Coogle said they were all wrong. He said he repeatedly lied about suspects, stole drugs he bought on the public's dime and conspired to falsify drug deals.

One of those he lied about, he said, was Jason Westcott, a young man with no criminal convictions whom a SWAT team killed during a drug raid that found just \$2 worth of marijuana. Critics from across the country condemned the Police Department's handling of the case as an example of the drug war's lethal excesses.

"They're making statements that are lies, that are absolute untruths, that are based on shady facts," Coogle said of Tampa

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police. “Everything they’re saying is based on the informant. And I was the informant.”

Coogle said he decided to step forward, exposing his identity and risking retribution from drug dealers, because of his remorse over Westcott’s death. “I’ve got morals, and I feel compassion for this guy’s family and for his boyfriend,” he said. “It didn’t have to happen this way.”

Coogle is nobody’s idea of a righteous whistle-blower. The only constant in his story is his own dishonesty; even when he confesses to lying you don’t know if he’s telling the truth.

Much of what he says can be neither proved nor disproved, in large part because of the Police Department’s minimal supervision of his work. But Coogle’s allegations against the cops who paid him, and even his own admissions of double-dealing, aren’t necessarily what’s most disturbing about his account.

Most unsettling of all might be what nobody disputes — that police officers were willing to trust somebody like him in the

first place.

When you're trying to gauge the honesty of statements from a habitually dishonest person, it's helpful to look at motives. Coogle had plenty of motive to lie to police about drug investigations. He got paid for his tips. I'm not sure what motive he'd have to lie here. What he told the paper will almost certainly end his gig as an informant, and, as the except points out, will likely put him in the crosshairs of the people he has reported to the police. Here's how his lies got Jason Wescott killed.

Westcott and Reyes didn't know much about the ingratiating junkie who slept in their neighbors' tool shed. He showed up at their house almost daily last winter, eating their pizza and smoking their pot. As a token of friendship he once gave them a vacuum cleaner he had stolen from Walmart.

"You could tell he wasn't the greatest of people or whatever," Reyes said. "Jason, he kind of befriended everybody, you know what I'm saying? And that's where we went wrong."

One day he asked if they could get him heroin. "I'm like, 'I don't even know what

heroin looks like,” Reyes recalled.

The shed-dweller was Coogle, of course, fresh out of jail and staying with his in-laws. And when he asked for heroin he wasn't asking for himself.

Coogle said his police handlers had urged him to seek heroin from Westcott and Reyes, but Westcott rebuffed him. *We're not involved in any s— like that. We're pot smokers*, Coogle remembered him saying.

But Coogle said he didn't think his bosses would like the truth, so he told them the couple was connected to a heroin supplier in New York. He said he picked the state simply because he knew Westcott was born there.

“It was a bull—- story,” he said.

He then says the police started to lie themselves.

On the night of April 8, Coogle said, he stepped into an unmarked truck waiting for him on Knollwood Street with bad news: Westcott had no pot to sell. But as he started to explain, he said, the detective in the driver's seat glared and cut him off.

“He said, ‘No, you got a gram, right?’ ”

Coogle recalled. “You could tell with the body language and the way he was talking that he didn’t want to drive away from there without doing a buy.”

Back at the rally point where other undercover officers had gathered — the parking lot of a Bravo Supermarket on Sligh Avenue — he said he and his handler sat in the parked truck and talked, the detective’s pen poised over a report to which Coogle would eventually sign his name.

“It was almost like he was reading me the Riot Act,” Coogle said. “He’s like, ‘Listen, we’ve got too much manpower out here tonight for us to come up dry.’ And after him saying that in a couple of different ways but saying the same thing, I caught on to what he was saying. And I said, ‘Yeah, I bought the gram.’ ”

Police reports indicate Coogle bought \$20 worth of marijuana from Westcott that night.

Coogle said it was one of two times he swore to buying drugs when a target he approached actually had none to sell. The

second was a falsified \$50 crack-cocaine purchase from the Sulphur Springs suspect, he said.

In both cases, he said, Tampa detectives assured him they weren't doing anything wrong — just guaranteeing the arrests of people they knew were dealers. “Once they determine that there's criminal activity,” he said, “after that nothing else counts.”

Coogle also says that police distorted his story about Wescott's gun, the apparent reason for the decision to use the SWAT team to apprehend him. If you'll remember back to the first post, there's another reason to believe that Coogle is telling the truth, here. [The police also initially claimed](#) that the tip about Westcott's drug dealing came from *neighbors*, not a drug addicted confidential informant. That is, until the Tampa Bay paper interviewed those neighbors and discovered they had said no such thing. The police then “revised” their story. (Incidentally, all of these stories were reported by the Tampa Bay Times' Peter Jamison. He deserves a ton of credit for his tenacity on this story.)

Predictably, the Tampa Police are warning us not to trust the word of a shady drug informant. Well, about *this* anyway. When it comes to what Coogle

originally told police about Wescott's alleged drug operation and gun, they're *still* arguing that he is perfectly reliable. That is, he's trustworthy and reliable (the magic phrase on a search warrant) when what he says benefits the police, but a duplicitous drug addict when what he says calls their actions into question. That's pretty typical in cases when a drug informant blows the whistle on his handlers.

The search on Jason Wescott's home turned up about \$5 worth of pot. For that, he's now dead. The first lesson here is that the police shouldn't be staging violent, volatile raids on nonviolent drug offenders, in part because it's unnecessary, and in part because drug investigations necessarily operate on dirty information. At the very least, that information should be meticulously corroborated before cops go barreling into private homes with guns. In this case, they couldn't even be bothered to do enough investigation to have discovered that the guy they were about to raid had recently been threatened, and had been told by the very same police agency to be prepared to defend himself if someone broke down his door.

The second lesson here is that these tactics and the justifications for them are still absurd and beyond justification. The police will say they need to stage these raids to take suspects by surprise. But that

very surprise is why Jason Wescott is dead. The guy was a pot smoker. By all accounts, he wasn't violent. He was very likely terrified the night he died. The cops are lucky he didn't kill one of them first. I don't think it's particularly speculative to say that if the cops had come to Wescott's home, surrounded the house, knocked on his door, he'd have let them in. It's hard to imagine a guy who had just filed a report with the police deciding to shoot it out with them over \$5 worth of marijuana.

But this is how it's done, now. To stop people from getting high, we employ situational ethics to cut deals with criminals. We break down doors, shoot dogs, and deploy flash grenades. We scream and point guns at whoever is inside, including children. And when it all goes to hell and somebody dies, we shrug and write it off as collateral damage. Because if the cops say this is how you stop people from getting high, who are we to question them?

And so the pile of bodies grows. The cops get cleared. The drug war marches on. [And then it all happens again.](#)

Radley Balko blogs about criminal justice, the drug war and civil liberties for The Washington Post. He is the author of the book "Rise of the Warrior Cop: The Militarization of

America's Police Forces."
