

ALABAMA'S
DEER POACHING
Problem



IN 1978, the director of the Alabama Game and Fish Department (AG&F) telephoned the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Law Enforcement's Washington office requesting assistance with a poaching problem. I was Special Agent in Charge (SAC) of the Special Operations unit and the call was passed through to me. The director advised he'd heard of our covert endeavors and expressed hope of receiving assistance with what he said was "a very difficult situation."

He described the problem as involving numerous individuals who individually and collectively were killing deer in Alabama and selling the meat in Florida and Georgia. He said that their enforcement people were not trained in covert activities and asked for any help we might extend them.



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After meeting with him, I assigned special agents Verne Broyles and Bob Standish, two very accomplished and seasoned covert operatives, to work the Alabama problem. These two agents visited Alabama many times during the next couple of years, getting extremely close to those involved in the deer poaching, and often accompanying them on fishing and hunting trips. They became aware of other illegal activities as the investigation progressed.

Eventually, numerous federal agents were sent to Mobile to help serve 36 arrest warrants and several search warrants. I was assigned to assist, and upon my arrival was picked up at the Mobile airport by my supervisor, the present SAC of the Special Operations unit, Rick Leach. As we drove away from the airport he advised me, "You are the last one to arrive. We've already made assignments and drew straws for the individuals to be arrested. I drew for you and you have the short straw."

I asked about the short straw and received the following answer: "There's one arrestee on probation for murder. You get to arrest him. Of course, due to the circumstances, you can have your pick of agents to assist. You may have to kill him as he has vowed never to go back to prison."

Our target was Russell Harris, the 52 year-old operator of a small country store near Brewton, Alabama. His wife was also to be arrested. Harris had been sentenced to prison for killing his brother-in-law several years earlier: just one of many acts illustrating Harris' general character.

The takedown part of the plan involving Harris' arrest was a buy-bust situation, and we needed \$30,000 in hundred dollar bills to make it work. Unable to locate enough bills from local

banks, we supplemented what we had by placing a hundred dollar bill on each side of a packet of eight new one-dollar bills, banding them together to look like a package of \$1000 and placing them in a brown paper sack.

Later, I followed special agents Standish and Leach to a Mormon church near Brewton selected for the buy/bust operation. Concealing my vehicle, I remained in the area for several hours, sizing up the situation and planning our access during the hours of darkness. My group would arrive around 4 a.m. to prepare for the suspects' arrival at 6 a.m. It would be a moonlit night. We would be dropped off about a quarter mile away and walk south into a large field, circling around to the west and approaching a small parking area at the church from the rear.

The road connecting front and rear parking areas along the west side of the church ran between the building and a huge graveyard with many large headstones, while the road connecting the parking areas along the east side had numerous very large and evenly spaced trees along its edge. The kitchen area extended out behind the main building, and its roof was much lower than the rest of the construction. The parking area behind the church was lit by a mercury light atop a large steel pipe.

Satisfied with my planning, I returned to Mobile to meet the officers assigned to assist in the takedown: two USFWS special agents and three Alabama game wardens. I described the suspects and explained plans for their arrests, noting that we might have to kill one of the two men as he was on parole for murder and had vowed he'd never go back to prison. I asked that anyone not wanting to be involved in a potential killing just walk out of the room – no questions would be asked. Everyone stayed and I proceeded with the assignments.



We left at about 2 a.m. for the 90-mile drive to Brewton, accompanied by numerous other officers who were to arrest other suspects in the area. Upon arrival, we left the extra officers in a little roadside park alongside the highway a couple of miles from the church. They were within hearing distance of the scene of our takedown, and would come in quickly if they heard gunshots. Assuming everything went as planned, we would radio them upon the completion of our arrests to disperse to their prior assignments.

Our group was then dropped off alongside the field, where we began our walk to the church. Arriving at the church, we helped the two federal agents get to their assigned places on top of the roof of the kitchen: not having a ladder, this was a problem. Both were armed with sawed-off shotguns and lay completely out of sight on one side of the gable roof, peeping over the top down into the lighted area behind the church. One of the Ala-



bama wardens hid behind a large grave headstone and another behind a large tree, on opposite sides of the rear of the church. The other warden and I hid behind large trees a little further back from the rear of the church.

Agents Leach and Standish would make the buy bust. The suspects knew and trusted Agent Standish, for he'd worked them covertly and accompanied them on hunting and fishing trips for more than two years. However, earlier they had become alarmed and acted suspicious when Standish insisted on bringing an unknown person to the transfer of the frozen deer meat and other items involved in the transaction. He justified this by pointing out that there were two of them while he was alone, convinced them that he would feel better if he had a trusted friend along, and assured the two men they could trust his companion.

Agents Leach and Standish arrived on time and parked the van they were driv-

The radio was inoperable, so in frustration, I fired two shots into the air. The dogs in the neighborhood began barking.

ing behind the church. They had the sack of money, and everything was in place. We waited for the suspect's arrival. Our takedown signal was simple and everyone had been briefed regarding it. Agent Standish knew the suspects carried long guns inside their vehicles. Once the suspects were far enough from their vehicles, Agent Leach would drop his ball cap on the ground. Upon seeing the hat drop, the agents on the roof would rack shells into the firing chambers of their sawed off shotguns and call out, "Federal agents – freeze!" We hoped the sound of the 12-gauge shotguns being loaded would prevent any aggressive action or violence.

At the appointed time, two pickups arrived and drove slowly toward and around the church. Harris' vehicle stopped alongside the agents' van in the lighted parking area. He sat in his vehicle a moment looking things over. Satisfied, he honked his horn and the second pickup drove in and parked alongside

him. The two suspects exited their vehicles and Agent Standish introduced his partner to them. Then, the two suspects prepared to unload the boxes of frozen deer meat from the rear of the second pickup. Agent Leach followed Harris, who was carrying a box of frozen deer meat to our van. He dropped his hat on the ground, signaling for the takedown to begin. However, the two agents on the kitchen roof failed to see Agent Leach's signal: he was so close to his van that he was out of their sight.

Standish was standing behind the smaller suspect near the rear of their pickups. Upon realizing the signal had been missed, he pulled the suspect against himself and, placing the muzzle of his weapon under his ear, whispered, "Move and I'll kill you." He then called out, "Federal Agents – freeze!"

Leach was standing behind Harris, who was putting a box of venison into the side door of the van, when he heard Standish's order. Realizing he was not in a good position to arrest Harris, he shoved him face down into the open side door of the van. Harris rolled over on his

back, pulling a pistol from inside his bib overalls. Agent Leach lunged into the van door alongside Harris, grabbing each of his arms between the wrist and the elbow and forcing them up alongside Harris' head.

Agent Leach called out, "He's got a gun! He's got a gun!"

Harris was able to wave his hands about while still holding the pistol. As I and the Alabama warden ran to assist, Standish called out, "Help Rick!" Drawing my weapon as I ran, I wondered if I should shoot Harris or if it would be possible to disarm him. I jumped into the open door, landing with my knees in Harris' stomach and knocking all the air out of him. Holstering my weapon, I took Harris' gun away from him and gave it to Leach. I then grabbed the bib of Harris's overalls and, while rolling over backwards to brace my feet on the edge of the van for leverage and straighten my body, jerked Harris completely over myself and out of the van. He landed on his knees, face, and hands in the gravel, cursing me for breaking his

knee and some of his ribs. I was on his back almost as soon as he quit sliding and handcuffed him. Standish had handcuffed the other individual. We then attempted to radio the rest of our officers to advise of our success and disperse them to their prior assignments.

The radio was inoperable, so in frustration, I fired two shots into the air. The dogs in the neighborhood began barking. Within just a short time the other officers came roaring in to assist, departing when they realized the situation was under control.

An inventory of the two pickups revealed 263 pounds of frozen deer meat, 82 plastic one-gallon jugs of White Lightning Whiskey, and numerous large heavy-duty black garbage sacks filled with dried marijuana plants. When Leach questioned Harris about the .22 pistol, Harris advised he'd purchased it the evening before, just in case something went wrong with the delivery. The gun was so corroded and dirty the moveable parts were almost stuck in place: had it been in better condition, Agent Leach might have been shot.

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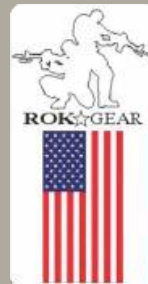
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Standish, Agent Cindy Schroder, an Alabama Warden, and I drove to Harris' store to arrest Mrs. Harris. After we arrived, Standish (whom she knew and trusted) walked inside and advised her that her husband had hurt his bad knee and needed her assistance down at the

sure I'd torn it loose again and broken some of his ribs. When questioned about having been in prison for killing his brother-in-law, he told the following story. He and his wife were separated and he had been seeing her twin sister, who was separated from her husband.

in court and the problems he'd had caused in the community throughout the years, saying "You had every right to kill him and didn't. Now I'll spend a lot of time and effort and money sending him back to prison again. I can't afford your kind of law enforcement. I don't want you

Drawing my weapon as I ran, I wondered if I should shoot Harris or if it would be possible to disarm him. I jumped into the open door, landing with my knees in Harris' stomach and knocking all the air out of him.



church. He said he had a vehicle waiting outside to take her to him. She came outside and as she approached our van, I stepped out, extending my hand as if to shake hands.

She extended her hand and as I took it, I identified myself as a federal agent and arrested her. Pulling her arm behind her back and catching her other arm, I handcuffed her. Agent Schroder took possession of Mrs. Harris. Standish knew guns existed inside the store and had remained inside with Harris' 16-year-old son to prevent him from doing something foolish upon seeing his mother arrested. I advised her that we would be serving a search warrant for weapons inside the store and residence because her husband was a convicted felon. The search produced several long guns, which we seized.

Agent Standish insisted Mrs. Harris telephone a friend and make arrangements for her children to catch the school bus. She would be transported into Mobile for arraignment, but would be brought home in time to meet her children as they returned from school. She also had an approximately 11-year-old daughter.

Later, I rode in the back seat of a warden's patrol vehicle alongside Russell Harris, en route to Mobile for his arraignment. I asked about his bad knee, and he said he'd torn his kneecap loose in a car wreck a few years earlier. He was

During a rendezvous on a remote mountain road, her husband showed up accompanied by his father and another man. The husband struck Harris over the head with a radiator hose filled with lead, knocking him down. Harris had his pocket knife in his hand as he rose from the ground.

Harris stopped his story at this point and asked, "Did you ever do any butchering?"

I answered in the affirmative and he continued, saying, "You know between the fourth and fifth ribs where you quarter an animal. I just stuck him between those two ribs and cut his heart half into. Then I cut his old daddy and I cut the other man and they sent me to prison." He displayed absolutely no remorse, and seemed pleased.

The local news media had been alerted and they were everywhere the next morning: it was a big deal in their community to arrest 36 individuals in one day on numerous felony charges.

While the director of Alabama's wildlife department was expressing his appreciation for the USFWS' covert assistance with the investigation, the district attorney openly challenged me for not having killed Harris. He elaborated on the many times he'd had Harris

working in Alabama again."

Later, the court sentenced Russell Harris to fifteen years for armed assault on a federal agent and five years for violating the *Lacey Act* by transporting illegally taken game meat across state lines. He was 52 years old and had just pulled 20 more in prison.

The following day, when I returned home to Salt Lake City, Utah, I found a message on my answering machine from SAC Rick Leach. Leach's message was, "Nando, as I flew from Alabama back to Washington, D.C., I pondered what we experienced during the takedown. I think I owe you the Big One. Thanks partner. Rick." ❄️

Nando Lee Maudlin spent 20 years with the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish – District Officer to Deputy Chief of Enforcement. He spent 21 years with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, including three years in Washington D.C.

as SAC of Special Operations. His USFWS career involved covert activities in 46 different states and testifying in every Judicial District. Maudli spent one additional year doing covert work for Colorado Game and Fish.

