



James Bannon slid his .38-caliber “Bodyguard” revolver into a desk drawer and pulls out a Puccini tape cartridge. He clicks the tape into his portable cassette player and punches a button. And the bittersweet arias and *recitativo* of *Madame Butterfly* suddenly flutters like homeless doves into the harsh corridors of Detroit police headquarters. Today he is wearing a doubleknit suit with a delicate maroon motif, a deep rose shirt, a richly textured gray-and-burgundy tie, and maroon shoes with silver buckles; each razor-cut hair is properly in place.

Commander James Bannon, mastermind of a violent police strategem known as STRESS, is a study in enigmatic elegance, stuck in a third-floor office with a stale brown desk of scumbled coffee stains and dirty sweat and walls that are a drab institutional green. At the moment, Bannon is only a Detroit police district inspector; a dozen cops rank above or equal to him in the 5000-member department. But even his superiors have taken to calling him “Commander” in a tone rich with deference. Few seem to doubt that he soon will be their boss, directing a police department that, at a diminutive five-feet-seven, he once was technically too small to join.

The reason is STRESS, or the Felony Prevention Squad as it is euphemistically called—the secret-police unit that

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Bannon hatched in early 1971. STRESS is Detroit’s own version of the White House Plumbers, a troubleshooting team with a crackerjack mentality and supercop authority.

“STRESS officers could be described as combination CIA agents and Green Berets with badges,” *Detroit News* Columnist Allen Phillips wrote last March, presumably in support of STRESS. “They are an elite group. Mostly volunteers, they are highly motivated. Increasingly they run independent investigations on their own hook. But they are invisible. . . . They show up on no charts.”

[“A LITTLE CARRIED AWAY”]

Where they do show up is anywhere their suspicions lead them. It was past 3 a.m. last Dec. 4 when three STRESS officers slammed their rifle butts against the door of a shuttered brick house in a quiet residential patch of northwest Detroit. The Rev. Leroy Cannon sleepily assumed it was a parishioner. “But by the time I got to the bottom of the stairs, I saw my front door was kicked in and three guns were pointing at me,” Rev. Cannon recalled. “One guy grabbed me by the shoulder and threw me against the wall. He looked like a maniac. He said to me, ‘I hope you have a gun, motherfucker, because I’d like to kill you.’”

The STRESS cops were wearing denims, high-top boots

by Howard Kohn

and long hair. They did not have a search warrant. They jammed a gun in his wife's face, Rev. Cannon said, yanked his 17-year-old daughter out of bed, and spreadeagled his 13-year-old-son against the kitchen wall.

Commander Bannon later explained that his undercover agents had been hunting for three gunmen who had wounded four fellow officers earlier that night. A gold Cadillac had been spotted near the scene of the gun battle. The Cannons, who lived nearly a mile from there, had nothing to do with the shooting, but were guilty of having a gold Cadillac parked in their driveway. To the STRESS cops, that was ample justification for the terrifying raid.

Five nights later, Durwood Foshee was asleep upstairs in his rickety frame house when nine scruffy-looking STRESS officers barged into the living room. Foshee, a 57-year-old out-of-work security guard who lived alone, apparently panicked at all the shouting and snatched a 12-gauge shotgun from his closet. Foshee never reached the stairs—STRESS carbines cracked and ripped him apart. His body was found next to his bed in a bloody puddle. His shotgun had not been fired. The STRESS officers lamely told reporters an informer had tipped them off that a gang of fugitives was holed up in the house. Either they or the informer got the wrong address. Foshee had never been in trouble with the law in his life.

"He'd moved to this neighborhood because he thought it'd be safer, especially when his little grand-daughter came to visit," wept a bitter friend. "It hurts so bad to know it was the police who murdered him."

"Okay, sometimes our men get a little carried away," Bannon conceded diffidently, with less gusto than George Allen bawling out his players for roughing the kicker. Yet these were not cases to be dismissed as anomalies. In its first 30 months STRESS conducted an estimated 500 raids without search warrants; more chillingly, STRESS snuffed at least 20 civilians (Exact statistics are not available because almost all STRESS data is classified as "secret"). Among the known fatalities were two 15-year-old boys and off-duty sheriff's deputy. Yet Bannon and other police officials—at least until recently—shrugged at the complaints that flowed in.

"No god-damned bunch of intellectual eunuchs is going to tell professional policemen how to do their job," he scoffed early this year when a coalition of doctors, lawyers and professors asked for federal intervention to stop STRESS. In fact, even the shyest civil libertarians have been outraged by STRESS. Edward Bell, a wealthy Republican and former Circuit Court judge, testily blamed the unit for "creating a state of terror in this city." The Michigan Guardians, a group of black policemen, went as far as asking the U.S. Justice Department to investigate STRESS for violations of federal civil rights laws.

[DETROIT'S PACIFICATION PROGRAM]

What makes this immense disenchantment so meaningful is that STRESS was initially welcomed by a huge majority of Detroit residents, including most in the impoverished core city. STRESS, the acronym for Stop The Robberies-Enjoy Safe Streets, seemed like an innovative antidote to street crime. To the few skeptics, it seemed relatively harm-

less, more like a stratagem in public relations than in gangsterism. Police 'decoys were going to walk the inner city streets posing as hippies, whores, albies and old ladies to lure street robbers into attacking them. The theory was that muggers would quit their profession once they knew that the drunk hugging his empty muscatel bottle might be a cop in disguise.

Bannon used a media blitz to sell the concept, making his case with front-page headlines and fervent television interviews. STRESS was a real-life scenario conceived to inspire even the most jaded media professional: A police network covertly infiltrating high-crime neighborhoods to catch criminals redhanded. In actuality, the decoy setup was only part of an overall clandestine operation that included extra-legal searches and surveillance on a wide range of "criminal" suspects—among them militant Vietnam veterans and radical auto workers. But the decoy system became the focus for what was known about STRESS. "This is proactive policing. STRESS officers don't wait to be told about a crime; they interdict crime," Bannon explained.

Bannon was speaking to the swelling paranoia and collective desperation of inner city Detroit. In 1970, there were 23,038 robberies, which translated into one of every 65 Detroiters getting ripped off while operating a shop, drinking at a bar or walking home; for adults living in the inner city, the chances were closer to about one in 12. The number of heroin addicts, and their need for cash to buy the addictive powder, was rapidly rising. Many nomadic junkies camped out and shot up behind paneless windows and rotting timbers in 15,000 inner city houses abandoned to the rats and wreckers by a bankrupt HUD program. An array of German Shepherds stood sentry in the yards of those residents who still clung to the inner city turf.

Enter the officers of STRESS. They were 100 of the toughest men on the force (again the precise figure is unavailable), volunteering for the danger and status that went with it. They gathered each evening, just before dusk, in a musty corner of police headquarters, where they huddled over decoy assignments. There was a locker-room smell, and mood, to the room. Raunchy jokes caromed off the walls; so did puffed-up tales from the previous night's adventures. Excitement crackled. A sign on a wall read: "Caution—You are entering a war zone."

This was the camaraderie of wartime. The enemy was waiting out there on the streets. Even the jargon turned militaristic. The "point" was the lead decoy in a one-one-two cotillion; the "backup" followed a few steps behind the "point;" the other two officers (usually ducking in and out of alleys) were the "cover." Each man strapped on two or three guns. The result was predictable—casualties, including three civilians in one week, a shocking *tour de force* in apparent retaliation for the courtroom freeing of a man accused of wounding a STRESS officer.

Then, when STRESS Patrolman Robert Bradford became first in the unit to be killed in action last Dec. 27, his brother officers turned the city upside down looking for a trio of suspects. "They had a standing order of 'Shoot to kill,'" insists Tom Moss, president of the black patrolmen's association. One man did get beaten to death when he tried to run away after being stopped for questioning in the case. By the time the manhunt was over in February, Bradford's killers had become heroes in certain quarters of the city.

Only two weeks later Bradford's old mentor, STRESS Crew Leader Raymond Peterson, became first in the unit to be charged with murder. Peterson's name, even more than Bannon's, had been synonymous with STRESS. For two years he probably had been part of more violence than any individual cop across the nation. He had fired his gun in nine separate shootings in which three civilians were wounded and nine were killed. His bullets had struck at least eight of the nine. Nine times, homicide detectives and assistant prosecutors had investigated Peterson, a large-boned moose-hunting cop with a beard full of gray, hair pulled back from his forehead, and 41 citations in 13 years on the force. The first eight times they cleared him of all criminal culpability.

But then this year, in the early morning darkness of March 9, Peterson shot Robert Hoyt, a 24-year-old assembly line worker at Cadillac. Peterson, off duty at the time, said he fired at Hoyt in self-defense after Hoyt sideswiped him at 60 mph on the Chrysler Freeway and then slashed at him with a knife as the two grappled on the freeway service drive. Hoyt was found with a bullet hole in his chest and with a six-inch knife in his hand. Peterson's coat had a wicked tear in it. And another STRESS officer, riding with Peterson, confirmed his story. (That account, except for details, was essentially the same one he had presented in the eight previous killings: An armed stranger had had the bad luck to try to assault a dead-shot policeman.) "Nobody enjoys taking a human life. It's not something anyone enjoys, whether he's a policeman or a soldier," Peterson told *Detroit Free Press* Reporter Michael Graham. "But with us it's a conditioned reflex. Let's be realistic. . . The average thief is guy who doesn't give a damn. What he wants, he's going to get, no matter who he has to step on or how bad he has to hurt someone. It's better that he attacks us than some 70-year-old guy on a pension."

But Hoyt's friends challenged part of Peterson's report. They said Peterson and other STRESS officers had hung out in the same bars as Hoyt and had argued with him over a woman they mutually knew. Then a lab technician routinely examined Hoyt's knife and discovered that microscopic miscellany in Hoyt's pockets did not match cat hairs and other junk embedded in the knife handle. Not believing his own tests, he checked again. They still did not match. Then he picked up Peterson's slacks, fished some cat hairs out of the pockets and slid them under his microscope. This time they matched. The hairs had come from Peterson's pet cat; ergo the knife must have come from Peterson's pocket, not Hoyt's. This time the prosecutor filed charges, adducing that Peterson shot Hoyt and planted the knife in his hand.

Peterson's STRESS buddy, who apparently lied to protect him, was not charged. But the whole episode sent shock waves whipping through STRESS. "Jesus Christ, this could really screw things up," lamented one crew leader. "Ray Peterson is no more guilty of murder than a lot of us." Robert Zack, hired by the Detroit Police Officers Association to defend Peterson, appealed to the judge at his pre-trial hearing: "Trying to separate Raymond Peterson from STRESS would be like trying to separate Martin Luther King from the civil rights movement. Raymond Peterson and STRESS are intricately interwoven."

The irresistible question soon popped up: Were Peterson and his cohorts really innocent of the other eight shootings?

Prosecutor William Cahalan seemed to anticipate the question. At least he confiscated the applicable homicide files and locked them in his office until after Peterson's trial, now set for late this year. Nonetheless, eyewitness accounts and available court records in just four of the eight cases reveal a staggering sum of damaging, if inconclusive, evidence.

Some facts are admittedly circumstantial. For instance, Peterson killed James Henderson on Sept. 9, 1971, four months after the same man escaped from a shootout in which Peterson killed a friend of Henderson. A surviving witness in the Sept. 9 shooting, a motel clerk who fiercely contends that Peterson shot Henderson in cold blood, was accused of mugging Peterson's "point" partner while the clerk was on duty in the motel where he works. An incredulous judge dismissed the charges against him.

In three of the four cases the victims were alleged to have carried knives. Without the homicide files, it's impossible to tell if these knives were inspected for cat hairs and the like. But Jeffrey Patzer, a young ex-policeman who quit the department after watching a gang of white cops beat up two black cops, fueled more speculation when he told *Detroit Free Press* Reporter Judith Frutig that his police instructors had advised him to always carry a knife in case he ever shot an unarmed citizen.

Other facts are less speculative and more garish. In the Clarence Manning case, Peterson testified he was 10 feet away when he fired the fatal bullet on May 29, 1971. But a ballistics report, subpoenaed in a civil suit a year later, shows that Peterson aimed his service revolver at Manning's heart and pulled the trigger from six inches away.

STRESS testimony does not jibe with physical evidence in yet another case, the slayings of Horace Fennick and Howard Moore on July 5, 1971. If the STRESS version is to be believed, then several bullets would have had to twist around buildings at right angles. In addition, two independent witnesses swear that Fennick and Moore were killed from an ambush after they tried to panhandle, not rob, the officers.

So far Prosecutor Cahalan has refused to discuss publicly how his office reached its "justifiable homicide" verdicts in any STRESS case. His two top assistants, James Garber and Dominick Carnovale, suggest privately that they were suspicious all along but didn't bring charges because they couldn't prove enough in court.

Even the most charitable spokesman in the prosecutor's office, however, cannot explain why the police department allowed Peterson and his crew to stay on the job for two years without any reconciliation of the bare facts. Each shooting was scrutinized as a matter of routine, by an in-house police board to determine if the officers had used undue force. Yet Peterson and the other officers were given the green light in all eight cases.

Police officials now say they won't furnish details of their internal inquiries because that might jeopardize Peterson's pending trial. But STRESS critics are not as reluctant to supply their opinions. Ken Cockrel, a radical lawyer who may well become Detroit's first black mayor, proffers a popular view: "It's obvious the police tried to protect their own ass to keep STRESS from being discredited."