

Police spy: 'I thought, how would they feel about their son's name being used'

Undercover officers were conflicted about 'jackal run' tactic of using identities of dead children



The officer known as Pete Black said he worried that the parents would be visited by suspicious activists
Photograph: Christopher Thomond for the Guardian

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The undercover police officer who **posed as Pete Black** was preparing for his deployment when he visited the national registry of births, marriages and deaths.

He trawled through the archive in search of a dead child whose identity he could steal. Black recalls the "real moment of discomfort" when his eyes alighted on the records of the appropriate match. It was a boy who had died aged four. Black's son was a similar age. He was left wondering how he would feel if the identity of his child was used without his permission by a covert operative working for the police.

"For me that was a little pang going on," he said. "You have to use people. You end up using a lot of people." Black, whose real identity is known to the Guardian, is one of an estimated 80 undercover police officers believed to have used the identities of dead children while spying on political campaign groups for a secretive unit called **the special demonstration squad** (SDS), which was disbanded in 2008.

The **Metropolitan police** indicated the practice was no longer used, saying it was not "something that would currently be authorised" by the force. It said Operation Herne, a long-running review of the SDS, would now investigate "past arrangements for undercover identities used by SDS officers". The resurrection of dead people's identities was previously considered to be a technique used in the criminal underworld, fictionalised by Frederick Forsyth in his 1971 bestselling novel *The Day of the Jackal*.

In recognition of the book, Black said, he and other police officers described their visit to archives at St Catherine's House in search of an identity as the "jackal run".

"You are looking for someone of a similar age to you who died, starting at age three or four and up to age 14 or 15," Black said. "Surnames always have to be general. You don't want something which is going to stand out too much or be too memorable, like Aardvark. You don't want to draw any unnecessary attention to yourself. Green and Black are good. But you don't want something like Smith. No matter what your first name is, that surname will always sound fake."

Black spent the summer of 1993 combing through the archives and encountered a number of boys named Pete who had died at the correct age

but for one reason or another did not fit. The child he settled on was the ideal match. He had a "totally English" surname and had died overseas in the 1960s while his father was on a foreign posting with the Royal Marines.

Black had wanted to integrate a "violent" streak to his undercover legend. "I actually built into my identity the fact that my father was a trained Royal Marine and he used to beat me up," he said.

Like other SDS officers, Black visited the home of the boy who had died to familiarise himself with the surrounding local landmarks, ensuring he could speak convincingly about his pretend upbringing.

Black has not revealed the name of the boy because he does not want to involve the family concerned. However, the Guardian has corroborated his account.

Undercover police used the identities of real people [to lend credibility to their alter ego](#) and as a layer of protection in case anyone became suspicious. The idea was that if activists ever researched a police spy's background to check out whether they were who they claimed to be, they would come across the birth record of a real child.

Black, who infiltrated a group called [Youth Against Racism in Europe](#), concedes there was a risk that the parents of the child would receive a visit from suspicious protesters. "They will knock on her door and say 'where is your son, I want to hurt him because he is an infiltrator'. And all she will be able to say is 'what are you talking about? My son died.' These are the kind of things you start to imagine. You worry about all the random hurt being dished out to people who don't deserve it, all because of what you are doing."

A second SDS officer, speaking on condition of anonymity, chose an infant killed in a road accident and said he also paused to consider the morality of taking an identity in the knowledge the parent would "still be grief-stricken".

"I thought, what would his family think if their son's name was being used for the greater good, how would they feel about it, and should they be consulted," he said. "There were dilemmas that went through my head." He added: "Your choice of name was of fundamental importance because on that would rest your whole identity, sense of security, confidence and ability to do the job."

He said to bolster the identity, police spies were given fake passports, driving licences and tax codes in the dead child's name. "You are feeling vulnerable right from the first day. All the work you did before you started the job you felt paid off because you felt more comfortable, more confident and stronger within that identity."

He believed the tactic was probably justified "because we had this mission to accomplish and this was the only way of doing it". The operation to monitor political activists was in "the greater good".

Black, on the other hand, was more ambivalent. Each year he celebrated the birthday of the dead child, realising its parents were at that point "thinking about their son and missing him". "I used to get this really odd feeling - I wish I had not done it. It was almost like jumping on the grave."

Jules Carey, a solicitor who represents victims of the undercover policing operations, said: "It would be deeply shocking if inquiries establish that police have been harvesting these children's identities, but I would not be surprised. We already know how callously undercover police have deceived and used women to gain access to information. It is hard to imagine how these spying operations on protesters could be more repugnant by design or implementation."

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