

HOOKERS, LINES & DRINKERS

Max Daly and Steve Sampson, authors of new book *Narcomania*, reveal the true story of the war on Britain's drugs gangs

Undercover cop 'Peter' had the nickname Donnie Brasco in the drug squad, after the real-life covert FBI agent Joe Pistone, who infiltrated the New York Mafia in the 1970s, and was later the subject of a Hollywood film. 'Peter' was tasked with blending into Britain's violent drug trade in deep cover as a dealer, patiently working his way up the chain until he was able to get to those pulling the strings.

One of his missions involved infiltrating an outfit headed up by Tyrell, the precocious son of a notorious Jamaican gangster in a major northern city. Despite his youth, Tyrell controlled most of the area's crack and heroin trade, and was selling about £1.8million of the drugs each year. With a growing reputation for extreme violence and an arsenal of weapons, he became the No.1 target for the organised-crime unit. But informers and surveillance came to nothing, so Peter was dispatched to take him out of the game.

He set himself up as a heroin user and sub-dealer who bought in bulk, claiming he sold the drugs on to dealers in a nearby town.

"Tyrell was paranoid," Peter tells us. "Even his runners wore ski masks. His gang bought pay-as-you-go mobile phones and changed the number, the SIM and the handsets every two weeks. He was a very streetwise, entrepreneurial young man who controlled people a lot older than him through fear and violence. He was ferocious."

In one particularly grim episode, a gofer in Tyrell's gang was caught stealing drug cash. He was stripped and locked in a room with two baited pit-bulls. His badly mauled but still-alive body was dumped in the middle of the high street as a warning to others thinking of ripping off the gang. Later, Peter heard that Tyrell was lying low after shooting a rival dealer while he waited in his car at traffic lights.

About 12 months into the operation, Peter found the chink in Tyrell's armour he was seeking - Tyrell was a modern-day Goldfinger, with an uncontrollable weakness for gold. Peter started using jewellery instead of cash in return for his regular packages of heroin. Tyrell heard about this and took a personal interest, inspecting the goods and picking out his favourites. When Peter failed to turn up with the gold one day, a frustrated Tyrell called him. The evidence gathered from secret footage and phone recordings were used to secure a lengthy prison sentence for the gangster.

Peter was never far from getting rumbled himself. He was once bundled into the boot of a car, driven to waste ground and stripped naked because drug dealers were sure they would find a tape recorder. Another time he was

Amber - a Beyonce lookalike who was selling drugs on the streets of a middle-class market town at the age of 12 - to smooth operator Kareem, who delivered cocaine to City slickers as they partied with call girls in five-star Mayfair hotels. As a species, they appear to be cleverer than the average citizen. They set up shop and are dismantled by the police in conveyor-belt fashion. As soon as one outfit is shut down, another appears. It's a cat-and-mouse game played out daily on the streets.

For every police success, those managing the dealers merely tweak their tactics. When the cops target black suspects, gang ringleaders send out white dealers, and when that ploy is rumbled, they switch to Asian dealers. When convictions based on DNA evidence rocket, dealers order their sellers to wear gloves. Gang

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seconds from having his throat cut in a back alley by a rival dealer who wanted his stash. A passing dog walker saved his life.

The risks faced by undercover officers, and the millions spent to tackle Britain's £8billion drug trade are indicative of the fact that it is one of the police's top priorities. But since organised criminals moved into the drug trade after being forced out of the armed-robbery game in the 1980s, the police have been playing catch-up. In 1994, for example, two undercover cops set up a fake £10,000 drug deal in order to hoodwink Birmingham Yardie gang members. Their cover was blown because the bag of money they handed over had been stuffed with bundles of banknotes, stamped with the words 'Property of West Midlands Police'. The undercover officers were promptly shot in the legs for their trouble.

'Glen', a drug squad officer working in the Home Counties, tells us that the fight to rid local streets of drug dealers was seriously limited by dwindling resources. "We're discouraged by our bosses from arresting someone towards the end of the day because of the overtime factor. And dealers are often aware of that."

Dealers come in all shapes and sizes, from

members attend court hearings for a free briefing on the latest police tactics.

By the early 2000s, it was clear that chasing the drugs was just not working. Instead, police opted to chase the money and have even resorted to putting up posters, featuring a man wearing a suit, dark glasses and decked out in gold jewellery, with the message: 'Too much bling? Give us a ring', asking for the public to be on the lookout for flashy drug dealers.

But it's a losing battle. 'Marco', a seasoned importer and one of the new generation of Mr Middles, tells us the measure of a successful criminal is time served outside prison. "In the old days it was all being known, about having a public reputation, but these days it's about staying off the police radar, blending in," he says. "But the days of the Mr Big are over."



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Narcomania: How Britain Got Hooked On Drugs is out now

BRITAIN'S DRUG CAPITALS

BRISTOL KETAMINE

The hallucinogenic anaesthetic drug grew in popularity via the free party movement in rural parts of Avon and Somerset in the 1990s, and then moved into Bristol's clubbing and post-party scene.

ABERDEEN CRACK

In the mid-'90s, a group of prostitutes from Wolverhampton ventured up north to take advantage of the booming sex trade. They stayed and their pimps followed, introducing cut-price crack to the city's heroin addicts.

LIVERPOOL EVERYTHING!

One of three major distribution hubs, alongside London and Birmingham, due to its close connections to crime gangs in Glasgow, Amsterdam and Colombia. Contains no-go areas where teenage drugs gangs make money with virtual impunity.

COCKFIELD, CO DURHAM MEPHEDRONE

Teenagers tired of trying to get hold of decent cocaine and ecstasy from dealers, who rarely bothered to travel to rural areas, cottoned on to the fact that you could buy cheap, reliable highs with little risk of arrest.