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RENEGADES BIKER DRUG TRIAL OPENS DEFENSE ATTORNEYS SAY FBI INFORMANT USED DRUGS, WAS PAID \$100,000 BONUS

Published: September 16, 1999

Section: LOCAL, page B1

Source: LYNN WALTZ, STAFF WRITER

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NORFOLK - The chief informant against The **Renegades** Motorcycle Club was under contract with the FBI and was paid \$3,300 a month.

He also was offered a bonus of up to \$100,000 to infiltrate the club and to expose an alleged methamphetamine ring, according to opening statements Wednesday in the federal **trial** of 13 members and associates of the **biker** group. Rob Lowe, who gained the trust of the **Renegades** and membership in the club, used methamphetamine with the **bikers** even though his FBI contract specifically forbade the use of illegal drugs, defense attorneys and prosecutors told the jury.

"He got paid money to use drugs," defense attorney John Hart said.

Of 33 people originally charged with distributing methamphetamine, 13 defendants, including nine members of the local chapter of the **Renegades**, went to **trial** Tuesday. The others pleaded guilty, and many of those agreed to testify. Charges include using the **Renegades'** clubhouse on Seaboard Road in Chesapeake as a center of drug use and distribution.

Lowe, considered an agent of the government, was not charged.

Among those being tried are the **Renegades'** national "enforcer," the motorcycle club's chief disciplinarian, Michael Levenite of Norfolk, and the national "road captain," Clarence McNamara of Virginia Beach. National president, Garry Stephan of Chesapeake, and national secretary-treasurer, John McCormick of Virginia Beach, pleaded guilty earlier this month.

Defense attorneys told the jury Wednesday that Lowe's work amounted to "entrapment" and "enticement" and that most of those on **trial** were - at worst - low-level recreational users of the drug and not major distributors.

Prosecutors said, however, that without the street level distributors - like those on **trial**, they say - the drug conspiracy could not have unloaded 100 kilos of methamphetamine in Virginia and North Carolina in the past five years or shipped \$4 million back to suppliers in California.

"The members of the **Renegades** helped further a conspiracy to distribute hundreds and hundreds of pounds of methamphetamine worth millions and millions," said federal prosecutor Robert J. Seidel Jr. in opening statements. "It's like the Ford Motor Company across the river. They can put out all the trucks they want, but to be prosperous, there has to be an organization to distribute and promote the product."

The leaders of the conspiracy already have pleaded guilty in federal court. They include two local connections - Jeremiah Thunderwalker Saucier and William J. Yates, known as "Gentleman Jim" - who controlled the supply to Hampton Roads. Their California suppliers, Juan Felix and his wife, Anna Gamboa-Felix, also agreed to testify against their smaller distributors.

"This case is backwards. Usually you use the little fish to get the big fish," said defense attorney William J. Holmes. "In this case, we've already got the big fish. They're going after the little fish."

Defense attorneys argued that Lowe had two motives for providing false information to investigators - money and an obsession with law enforcement. Lowe was a "cop wannabe," they said, who actively solicited federal authorities. Lowe wrote numerous letters to federal agencies begging to be a sworn federal agent and trying to sell information on the drug ring, defense attorneys said in opening statements.

"He wanted to grow up and become a DEA or an FBI agent and sit at the prosecution table," said Andrew Protogyrou, lead defense counsel on the case.

Protogyrou also attacked Lowe's use of drugs.

"The contract is clear," Protogyrou said. "He's not to use narcotics. . . He's high on a drug that causes hallucinations."

“You should see the bar tabs from this man and the FBI agent,” Protogyrou continued. “And they are to recall the facts and prove to you beyond a reasonable doubt that these men are guilty?”

R. Wayne Nunnally, another defense attorney in the case, listed Lowe’s expenses, paid by the federal government, which included \$5,000 for a car, \$6,000 for household goods and \$1,200 for prescription medicine.

Lowe was a former member of the Pagans, a rival motorcycle gang, defense attorneys said in opening arguments. He was thrown out of that club and also was a former Norfolk sheriff’s deputy, defense attorneys said.

Seidel said Lowe had to use narcotics to protect himself. “He used drugs 12 to 15 times,” Seidel said. “It was done to get into the club. If you don’t use, you don’t get in.”

Opening statements ended in laughter as Nunnally, the last of the 13 defense attorneys to speak, made reference to Hurricane Floyd.

“There’s a storm brewing outside tonight and there’s a storm brewing in here,” Nunnally told the jury, referring to what he called fabrications by Lowe. He urged the jury to sort truth from fiction and to “let these men go home.”

When Nunnally finished, Judge Henry Coke Morgan Jr. told jurors the courthouse will be closed today and perhaps Friday by the hurricane and adjourned court early.

Description of illustration(s):

ALBA BRAGOLI

Lead counsel Andrew Protogyrou (center) says in opening statements Wednesday that the government’s informant used methamphetamines while infiltrating The **Renegades** Motorcycle Club.

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