

# FBI Surveillance Team Reveals Tricks Of The Trade : NPR

The FBI has an entire army of people whose sole job is to do surveillance. Whether they are tracking a terrorist suspect or mobster or potential spy, the secret isn't about being a master of disguise. Instead, it is all about blending in.

Turn on any cop show, and the surveillance always seems pretty straightforward. There are always a couple of guys in a van and maybe another two in a car outside some apartment building. But the truth is, real surveillance is much more subtle.

The Special Agent-in-Charge of the Special Operations Division of the FBI in New York is Todd Letcher. He says if his team is doing the job right, you won't even know they are there. "When a target comes out of the bodega with a cup of coffee, they don't see where we are, or they don't see our people," he said. "Our people look so ordinary, they just look over them."

So, for example, that guy with the flat-top haircut who looks like a cop could be one of the people following you. In fact, there are some scenarios in which the FBI wants you to think he's actually following you. But what you probably won't see is the roster of other people who are with him. Those people, the members of the FBI's Special Surveillance Group team, or SSGs, operate just below the radar — and that is where they are most effective.

When I met three SSGs in New York City recently, they would only talk to me under the strictest conditions. I had to promise not only to not use their names, but they didn't even want me to describe them either. They say that might compromise their mission. And their mission is to gather intelligence for the FBI.

Once the ground rules were set, the trio — Tango, Bravo and Poppa, for our purposes — and their supervisor in charge, Charlie Muldoon, agreed to demonstrate how to follow someone in lower Manhattan.

"First of all, you would spread out," Muldoon says, waving his arms around. "You wouldn't stand in a parade behind the guy."

And, he says, you'd have a team dressed for the occasion. SSGs carry entire wardrobes in their cars — a business suit in case they need to go to Wall Street, gym shorts in case surveillance requires them to go for a jog through Central Park.

Muldoon says he has some SSGs who travel with a bicycle in their trunk so that at a moment's notice they could ride through the streets of New York pretending to be a messenger. "They are prepared for anything," he says.

I pick out an unsuspecting Manhattanite and ask Bravo how they would start.

"We usually key on something, whether a bright color she has on or a particular item that might be unique," Bravo says. "We relay that to other team members so they can see her when she comes to the next corner, so they would be able to identify her."

Poppa chimes in. He says the team would set up some sort of "picket surveillance" in the surrounding area.

A picket surveillance would have the team covering all the subway entrances. They would be stationed at various corners. Bravo, who has been doing this for seven years, says the team would radio ahead with information.

SSGs have all kinds of techniques, and they all have catchy names like Picket and Web or Leapfrog. Leapfrog is kind of what it sounds like: SSGs will follow a target up to a certain point, then pass him off to another group up ahead, and then leapfrog to pick up the surveillance farther down the street.

When operating under Leapfrog surveillance, Tango says, they would be telling the people ahead that the target was coming up to them. "They should be telling us the next movement, so you don't have to run and pullback, and run and pullback," she says. "That's kind of obvious, especially if there is a possibility that someone could be watching you from the rear."

That kind of countersurveillance happened all the time during the Cold War. Tango was a member of one of the first

SSG teams. They began as an FBI experiment in New York City in the 1970s. The pilot project was so successful that it went nationwide. Back then, it was all spycraft, like out of the movies.

"Some days it was really like war," Tango recalls. "Push them off the road if you have to, don't let them through the tollbooth. Other days you were right in their shoes practically, making sure they didn't meet the other person they were handling."

Robert Hanssen — the former FBI official who spied for the Soviet Union and Russia against the U.S. for more than 20 years — may be the most famous case the SSGs have handled.

"I think the Hanssen case probably and the movie *Breach* really, for the first time that I can recall, highlighted what the special surveillance group does," Letcher says.

In the movie, a young wannabe FBI agent begins following Hanssen around. He has no idea that Hanssen is a spy. He also has no idea he is in the middle of one of the biggest cases the FBI had ever run.

The SSGs are often in the middle of the FBI's biggest cases. And Tango says that's what has really changed since the Cold War. Now, the surveillance requires more political savvy, more finesse.

"Every day you just get a little piece of the puzzle; you don't have to get the puzzle all in one day," Tango says. "It's like something builds up to a very long story, if you will, like a soap opera more so as opposed to a cut-and-dry short story. ... And you build on it every single day."

And because it is a drip, drip, drip information operation, the SSGs end up learning a lot about the people they are following. Before Charlie Muldoon was supervising the SSGs in New York, he was doing surveillance on mobster John Gotti. He says he could read him like a book.

"You could just tell by his body language whether he was surveillance-conscious," Muldoon says. "You could just tell by his body language and the way people related to him whether he was in the middle of a crisis."

That's an important piece of information if you are working with the FBI trying to avert a future bank robbery, or even terrorist attack.

"John Gotti's tell was that when he used to get mad, he used to talk a lot more with his hands; he used to be very very physical with his hands," Muldoon says.

Once Tango, Bravo and Poppa had finished with the interview, I was determined to keep an eye on them as long as I could. I even followed them for a bit, trying to use what I had learned. Within minutes, I lost them in the crowd.