Starbucks Vandalism

I-Team Investigates

ABC7 I-Team (KGO-TV, San Francisco), November 2, 2003.

Nov. 2 — Environmental and animal rights activists have been stepping up their campaigns around the Bay Area the past three months and resorting to extreme measures — vandalizing homes and businesses, even bombing two companies that test products on animals. Now the I-Team has the inside story of the crime spree against Starbucks three months ago. San Francisco Police have all but given up on the case, but the I-Team has found the people responsible for the vandalism — a new group of activists called "Hazmat 1203."

People in parts of San Francisco woke up August 5th to find their local Starbucks apparently out of business.

Dave Lopez, newspaper delivery man: "I thought they were actually closed, it looked real realistic. They're not."

It was an elaborate hoax. Eight Starbucks near Union Square and the Financial District had their windows soaped, locks jammed, and "for lease" signs posted, along with an official-looking statement from Starbucks headquarters titled "Case for Corporate Downsizing."

It said, "At our current market level, Starbucks cannot in good conscience guarantee all of our beans meet both rigorous quality standards as well as our commitment to social responsibility. ... We're scaling back, returning to our roots as a small Seattle coffee chain."

Investigators had a few leads — two witnesses and a blurry surveillance tape.

Dan Noyes: "What's the status of the case now?"

Dewayne Tully, SFPD spokesman: "It is still officially open. It's been difficult to come up with leads. There's not that much evidence."

But if investigators looked more closely, the clues are out there. Some graffiti on a Mission District sidewalk, "What is Hazmat 1203?," and a message on an Internet bulletin board. In June, self-described "radical anarchist conspirators" posted an ad on Craig's List for a Web site systems operator. Computer consultant Wayne Calhoon answered the ad, checked out the group's site hazmat1203.net, and turned them down.

Wayne Calhoon: "I was not willing to participate at this point because I did not agree with all of their tactics."

Calhoon forgot about his encounter with Hazmat 1203 until a report on ABC7 jarred his memory.

Calhoon: "Clearly, it took an organized effort to strike so many locations."

Two months before the Starbucks vandalism, Calhoon saw a listing on the Hazmat 1203 Web site for "Operation Act Now." The group's leader, using the code name "Marley Fowat," proposed soaping windows at Starbucks and hanging "out of business" signs.

Calhoon thought about calling the SFPD.

Calhoon: "But, I decided that would be counterproductive and would probably go nowhere. So I called the I-Team."

The I-Team made contact with Marley Fowat through the Hazmat 1203 Web site. Fowat took responsibility for the Starbucks vandalism, and agreed to come to ABC7 with another Hazmat 1203 member for an interview.

Marley Fowat: "We see ourselves at the forefront of a social and emotional revolution. And in a sense, we're throwing gasoline on the fire."

That's where they got the name. "Hazmat 1203" is the hazardous materials sign for gasoline. They're trying to get people to question authority, to question the status quo. In Operation Victory, they pasted phony pro-war posters around Santa Cruz. This one reads, "Korea, you're next. We'll finish the job." At one anti-war demonstration in San Francisco, Hazmat members posed as FBI agents — black suit and tie, white shirt, sunglasses and an earpiece.

Cal: "Saying, 'Yeah, we got a spotter on the rooftop, yeah, you got a line of sight on that one? Roger that.' That's what Hazmat 1203 is all about."

Dan Noyes: "And the point was what, there?"

Cal: "To get people thinking, 'Would the government really do that to you, would you accept that from the government?'"

Their most high-profile operation so far has been the Starbucks vandalism. They provided a tape to the I-Team that shows how they pulled it off.

Seven members of the group met at 10:30 that night in Union Square, and walked with their buckets right by police officers on duty. They met in an alley, where Marley and Cal explained how the soap and poster-paste should be applied and they discussed their targets.

Activist: "I'm a little concerned with hotels across the street and security cameras and stuff like that."

Then they climbed a fire escape to get water from a parking garage, and prepared the soap and poster-paste.

Activist: "Mixing, mixing, mixing."

And off they go to their targets. It takes them just a couple of minutes to soap a store's windows, to hang the "for lease" sign and the phony Starbucks statement and to jam the locks.

Activist: "You're little worker bees."

It's a wonder they didn't get caught, with curious bystanders all around and cars passing by. Especially when Cal scales an ATM and climbs to the roof to hang one sign. Here, he drapes himself across an awning 15 feet off the ground. They took a lot of risks to send a message to Starbuck's customers.

Cal: "What did they think when they learned it was not real, that it was a prank, that it was designed to get them to reevaluate who they were supporting every single morning before they went to work?"

Cal and Marley say Hazmat 1203 will never turn to violence, that they don't condone the tactics of the radical fringe of the animal rights movement, threatening lives, and even bombing companies

Dan Noyes: "Do you condemn those tactics, or do you understand those tactics in some way?"

Fowat: "Our organization is committed to not doing anything that either hurts people or could result in people being hurt."

Their Web site shows ideas for the future: throwing dummies off the Golden Gate Bridge to symbolize the civilians killed in Iraq, or casting hundreds of blinking bottles out to sea with a message from Hazmat 1203.

Cal: "I think definitely, you will hear from Hazmat 1203 in the very near future."

The authorities will be watching. Both the San Francisco Police Department and the FBI are interested in what the I-Team has uncovered. And Hazmat 1203 is taking more steps to avoid being caught. Their Web site is down right now while they upgrade it.

Saved copy of the article as published online by abclocal.go.com/kgo. Seventeen Starbucks stores in San Francisco were vandalized in the middle of the night on Aug. 5, 2003. (ABC7)