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TEAM

Members of San Diego's "Regional Auto Theft Task Force" represent every law enforcement agency in San Diego County. The purpose of the RATT team: to go after vehicle thieves in a big way.

With the cooperation of every agency in the county, an investigation that crosses jurisdictional lines can be more easily handled — and be far more effective.

RATT, which started operations in July 1992, began under the leadership of CHP Border Division Lt. Dave Stuflick, I.D. 8366.

by CHP Officer Phil Konstantin, I.D. 11643

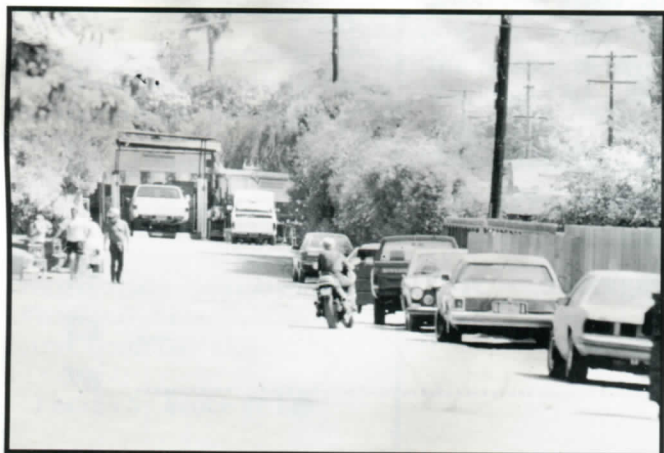
All photos by the RATT team

Daniel Von Helm is a car thief, a burglar, a robber, an arms dealer and a murder suspect. He is also very successful at what he does — or at least he was until he met up with RATT investigators. On May 25, 1993, Von Helm was sentenced to 10 years in prison, fined \$10,000 and ordered to pay \$25,000 into the victims' restitution fund.

But that's the successful ending to the

RATT team's first big prosecution. The story began with a tip from a private citizen.

Von Helm found it very profitable to steal Honda Preludes and Volkswagen Jettas and strip them down to their component parts. He would then list the parts for sale in a local automobile publication. This proved so lucrative that he got into the business of selling entire stolen vehicles.



Daniel Von Helm is photographed as he rides a stolen motorcycle. At right is the handsome motorcycle as it appeared after it was recovered.

Moving rapidly, this criminal entrepreneur began to work with other criminal specialists in Los Angeles who would switch the vehicle identification numbers (VIN) on stolen cars to hide their crimes. Von Helm then quickly sold the VIN-switched cars.

Realizing there was a higher potential for profit in more expensive vehicles, Von Helm expanded his operation to include such upscale vehicles as Porsches and BMWs. He took great pride in his ability to disable even very sophisticated anti-theft devices. Due in part to an earlier legitimate job as an automobile alarm installer, Von Helm took particular delight this past May in stealing luxury cars right off dealers' lots.

Although he was only 21 years old, Von Helm now entered the deadly world of illegal arms sales. Through his expanding connections in the criminal world, he was able to acquire AK47s, MAC-11s and numerous other weapons. Through some of his associates, who are also bound for prison thanks to the RATT team, Von Helm was also attempting to sell grenades and rocket launchers.

With a growing criminal career and a broadening network of associates, Von Helm made his first big mistake: He sold some of his stolen goods to an undercover RATT investigator and then bragged to other undercover officers about his ability to steal cars and commit crimes without getting caught. He was getting cocky—and careless.

He boasted that, with some associates, he even robbed a high-tech electronics security store that specialized in countersurveillance equipment and heavy-duty body armor. His plan was to use the body armor, police scanners and his stolen vehicles to rob armored cars in the Los Angeles and Sacra-



Daniel Von Helm, 21, doesn't look so arrogant here.

mento areas.

This street-wise criminal's concern about law enforcement was so lackadaisical that he usually drove around in a stolen luxury car. His arrogance was amazing. To temporarily store his stolen vehicles, he would commandeer storage facility rooms by boldly cutting off the old locks and putting on his own.

Von Helm tried all kinds of thievery, including armed robbery when he stole \$30,000 from a businessman. The man was en route from his store to the bank with his cash receipts when Von Helm struck in a daring daylight robbery. In another case, Von Helm negotiated the sale of \$200,000 in counterfeit

Body armor (bullet-proof vests) that were stolen by Von Helm look just like regular jackets.



One of Von Helm's stolen luxury cars, worth \$85,000 to \$100,000

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money to undercover Secret Service agents. Although the sale never went through, Von Helm did pass \$10,000 in bogus \$20 bills to RATT investigators. (After his arrest, another \$10,000 in funny money was found in his residence.)

In spite of his I-won't-get-caught attitude, Von Helm did make some efforts to cover his tracks. When he was involved in a caper, he would drive in circles and make sudden U-turns in an attempt to shake off anyone who might be on his tail. But his efforts were to no avail once RATT investigators got the scent. They repeatedly outfoxed him and kept him under careful observation as they built a solid case against him.

Daniel Von Helm's luck finally ran out. More accurately, when the RATT team found the right moment to arrest Von Helm, he was attempting to sell a stolen \$100,000 BMW to an undercover investigator. At the time of his arrest, Von Helm was carrying a loaded .45-caliber handgun. In spite of this, and fortunately for all those involved, Von Helm surrendered peacefully.

So far, RATT investigators have recovered over \$500,000 worth of stolen vehicles, innumerable automobile parts, several weapons and assorted other items as a part of this single investigation. Two of Von Helm's co-defendants were sentenced to eight years in prison. They also face deportation as foreign nationals.

During the trial, Daniel Von Helm's arrogance once again emerged. He and his co-defendants laughed among themselves because the judge was having a hard time reading all of the nearly 50 charges against them. But the judge and the RATT team had the last laugh.

This kind of case involves long, hard hours on surveillance, exacting attention to details, and the ever-present danger of having one's cover blown and, subsequently, facing death at the hands of an armed criminal. The incredible and exemplary work of the RATT team members is one very good example of how cooperation between agencies has paid off for the law-abiding citizens of California.

And the RATT team is still out there!! 