

RAIDERS OF

THE LOST

CITY

A DAY IN THE LIFE

Reckon you've got a high-stress job? Try joining the Flying Squad. Our writer went on a drug bust with the 10111 cops – and returned with a new-found respect for these underappreciated law enforcers

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS JAZZ KUSCHKE

THE LAST TIME I CRAPPED myself this badly was behind a fig tree on the remote Mozambican side of the Kruger National Park. To clarify, not because I'd ingested something dodgy, but because of the two rhinos having a mud bath not 50m away. Now, just as I did then, I choke down the terror and

hide behind my guide – the guy with the gun. Today, that's Inspector Pieter Pharo from the Western Cape Flying Squad. We're in Atlantis, the Cape West Coast's notoriously gang-rotten community, on a drug-raiding operation run jointly between Pharo's Mowbray-based Flying Squad, the Cape metro cops, dog unit and the local community police.

I'm armed, too – with my camera. That, and the fact that I'm the lone member of the party not in uniform, makes me stand out louder than a tourist wearing red in the bush. It's the kind of shit that can get you killed, but when you're hunting drugs and illegal firearms, you're never really out of the heat anyway.

On information from a tip-off and armed with a search warrant, we're at the door of a suspected drug den. It's around 9.30am, not an uncivilised hour of the morning to be house calling, but then this team has been on shift since 6am. The Western Cape Flying Squad has three squads that each work six shifts in five-day cycles. Eight-hour shifts run from 6am to 2pm, 2pm to 10pm and 10pm to 6am. A double-shift day would be a 6am to 2pm and then a 10pm to 6am. The make-up of teams, and the individual partnerships within them, seldom change. And with good reason. You've got to know exactly how a guy is going to react in every situation.

The shift starts with a parade during which orders are given and operations planned. Operations, like the one we're on, are arranged around information gathered and processed by Inspector Pharo and his

female partner Sergeant Carelse, who fulfil an admin and management role in the Flying Squad – jobs they can only do with vast street experience. They've kindly agreed to head back into the field today to babysit me through an operation.

The house in Atlantis seems in good shape from the outside. A neat vibracrete wall has a much newer paint job than the peelers further down the street. There's no lawn, but a few green trees line the yard and the garage appears to have an automated door. This is what drug money buys you on the West Coast. No big, black Range Rovers or gin-clear infinity pools here. But then, compared to the glorified shack with the rusty wire fence and dusty yard next door, this is Sandton bling.

Pharo and I are lined up behind two Flying Squad members. The one at the door – dressed in his multipocketed, bullet-proof combat vest, complete with nine-mill (holstered at an easy-to-draw angle and clipped to an elastic cord so it can't fall), knocks on the door as the rest of the crew surround the house.

There's no answer, so he knocks again in more of a side-fisted bang this time.

A crowd is gathering on the street. Housewives hang out of their kitchen windows and pause under their washing lines. Some don't seem overly perturbed – they've seen it all before – while others aren't at all charmed that we're here.

"Fokken los ons fokken uit!" one of them shouts, an infant dangling from her hip. "Wat dehell soek julle bliksems alweer hier?"

I question the wisdom of being last in line. I'm back at the mud pit in Mozambique: we're watching the mother and calf in the mud hoping they won't pick up our scent, all the while checking over our shoulders for the bull to come crashing out of the bush.

More muffled sounds are audible from inside the house, but there's still no answer or any attempt to open the door. The cop bangs on the door again, louder, harder and with more purpose, identifying himself as a policeman and threatening to break it down if they don't cooperate.

Nothing.

The door offers less resistance than a reed fence in a rhino charge – knee, shoulder and all 110-odd keys of the officer crash into the dark passage beyond. I've heard human rights activists moan, but being here and being part of it, I understand that sometimes there's just no other option. Every minute we're not inside gives them more time to flush the drugs and bail out the back door.

I follow inside, sticking close behind Pharo, whose service pistol is drawn. From his and the other officer's calculated movements, I sense training and experience have taken over. Pharo keeps looking back to check on me.

Inside, the dingy, claustrophobic living room is totally in contrast to the suburban exterior of the house. I lift my camera above Pharo's head and shoot with an outstretched arm, like paparazzi on the red carpet.

My eyes adjust to the dim light. The place smells of damp, two-day-old laundry. A bed with a faded foam mattress seems lost in the far corner, there's a couch (covered with what looks like an old curtain) and two plastic chairs facing – of all things – a Samsung flat-screen TV. There's no ceiling, and sunlight stabs through holes in the roof tiles.

Inspector Pharo taps me on the shoulder and points to the back door. I nod and follow.

Five men are being questioned and searched by the officers. I guess them to be between 15 and 45 years old. Two of the teenagers claim they're just visiting. The eldest man seems to be the father of the other one, and the owner of the house. The police question them in Afrikaans. "Rook julle? Wie rook hier? Ons weet julle rook hier."

They all deny it, but don't really say too much. They, like the women in the street, have seen it all before. Their attitudes are defiant: *this'll soon be over. You've got nothing on us.* I sense the frustration among the police, but they remain composed and carry on with the job at hand.

One of the community police officers comes out of the house with a bread packet full of tik lollies (a small glass tube with a bulb on the end used to smoke tik). "Wie sin's die? Ek dog julle rook nie hier nie?" It's a statement more than a question.

The young officer's got a scowl in his eyes I recognise. It was the same look my primary school headmaster wore when a friend and I broke the stage curtain in the school hall: *yes I'm pissed off; yes I know it was you guys and, yes, I'm going to make you suffer before I decide what to do about it.*

Being a station cop in a place like this takes balls – and a lot of watching your back. A large part of the community appreciates you and supports what you do, but to the rest, you're a nuisance and a threat. The search continues for another half-hour or so. They leave one couch unturned, but go through the kitchen cupboards, the oven, the leaky roof, the slightly loose corner of the stained carpet. They even climb into the dog kennel and scour a wheelless VW Golf rusting in the backyard. One officer radios the VW's VIN back to the station for verification. It takes less than three minutes to establish it's legit, although totalled and marked as scrapped.

The final haul? Two bags of tik lollies (about 40 in total), one bottleneck (called a "witpyp" used for smoking mandrax and marijuana) and several sealed straws and other tik paraphernalia.



THE CONTROL CENTRE

The Western Cape 10111 call centre in Mowbray receives an average of 4 600 calls through its 25 lines every day. This increases to 9 000 on weekends. Of these, 60 percent are admin related or hoaxes and only 40 percent real and urgent complaints.

If a call is made from a landline the address immediately appears on the call operator's screen. Once the address and complaint has been identified the call is patched through to the relevant "talk group" (Mowbray has 13, each connected to about eight stations) from where they dispatch the appropriate action.

"We could arrest the dad," says Pharo, speaking for the first time since we entered the premises. "There's enough here to arrest him on suspicion of dealing, even though we didn't find any actual drugs." According to law, the owner is legally liable for anything that happens on his property. So even if his sons were running the drugs and he had no knowledge, he's in trouble first.

"But that won't do us any good," he says. He sighs, resigned. I get the sense this happens often, as though the law enforcers are chipping away at a massive block, hoping a chunk falls off here and there – a big drug bust, a big victory.

"The raid..." Pharo pauses, looking out into the street at the crowd that's swelled to over 30-strong. "Raids like this and visibility go a long way. The stats prove that."

We walk back out onto the street. The cop who found the first bag of lollies pulls out his service pistol and uses the butt to smash the little glass bulbs into shards in front of the crowd and the suspects.

"At least we know the informant is real," says Pharo. Informants, often previous offenders, are paid for accurate information.

We get back into the vehicles. "You know," says Pharo, smiling for the first time today, "you should've been with us yesterday. We got some action in Kayalitsha and retrieved three unlicensed firearms." Three? It hardly seems like a big deal to me. I'm used to headlines like: "20 Tons of Dagga Seized" or "Massive Arms Cache Uncovered", but I realise that without the small victories, you'll never have the big ones. Or appreciate them.

"They [the weapons] were positively linked to two armed robberies." Pharo's genuinely excited. As is Carelse – I'd hardly seen her during the raid. She was scratching in every nook and cranny for contraband. As we drive off she chirps: "That lady who shouted at us like that? The fat one with the small baby? That type of thing is usually to create a distraction. It's a sign that there's definitely something in the house."

As we leave the scene, I take what feels like my first breath that morning and think: at least I know what to look out for at the next house.

Check out more behind-the-scenes photos at www.mh.co.za/guy_wisdom

WHAT OUR WRITER LEARNT

First off, Atlantis exists. But it's not some mythical under-sea realm where topless, blonde, pouting mermaids fin about, and the only King Neptune you're likely to find is some gang kingpin. The second lesson is a lot sadder – as South Africans, we don't appreciate our police force enough.

GOT WHAT IT TAKES?

Taken from a career ad on www.saps.gov.za, the Flying Squad functions are:

The Flying Squad official provides a quick response to priority, serious and violent crimes in progress in an attempt to apprehend the suspect and to limit possible further danger to the victim. He/she stabilises the crime scene by arresting the suspect, protecting and securing the crime scene before the arrival of the investigating officer. Visible policing is done by means of vehicle patrols. They are also involved in crime prevention. Other functions include assistance to police stations in attending minor complaints, serving as back-up during policing of major events and attend to suicide scenes. These members are only deployed in larger metropolitan areas. The only difference between Flying Squad and Highway Patrol is that a Highway Patrol primarily function on the highways.

What are the minimum requirements to become a Flying Squad Official? Two years functional policing experience is a recommendation, but not a prerequisite; a Code 08 driver's licence; must fit the competency profile; must be medically fit and have completed Tactical Training Level I and II.

Training Emergency life support and advanced defensive-driving training, as well as a Tactical Refresher Course.

TIK – THE REAL BAD GUY

"Tik", "crystal", "tuk tuk", "globes", "choef" and "straws" are all street terms for the psychoactive stimulant drug methamphetamine. It increases alertness and energy and, in high doses, induces euphoria and increased sexual pleasure as it spikes dopamine and norepinephrine levels in the brain. It can also lead to unnatural aggression, and was allegedly used by Hitler's Nazis as a combat drug.

Besides the obvious problems related to elevated aggression, it's also highly addictive and fairly cheap. A straw will only cost between R15 and R30. Its price and accessibility (with minimum input and ingredients it can be produced at home) are the main reasons why it has such a grip on poorer communities, such as Atlantis. Found in many forms, from a fine powder to larger crystals, it can be snorted, orally ingested, injected or smoked. The "lollies" we found are small glass bulbs used for smoking the drug in.