

FAQ 60
(Oct. 6, 2007)

60.1

**LOS ANGELES SHERIFF'S COMMANDER (ret.)
THOMAS VETTER**



**Lt. Col U.S.M.C. (ret.) President 1st Marine Division
July 2003-August 2005**



I originally met Sheriff's Commander Tom Vetter in 2003 at a book signing in Orange County. At that time he was wearing a different hat and was Lt. Col. Vetter, U.S.M.C., active president of the 1st Marine Division. (July 2003-August 2005)

I would later discover that Tom was one of LASD's most respected command officers, with 40-years of distinguished service to law enforcement. His reputation as a leader in both the Sheriff's Department and the U.S. Marine Corp are 24 carat gold.

In September 2004, Cmdr. Vetter was interviewed by a television producer in connection with his knowledge of events in 1962 related to the Black Dahlia investigation, but due to time restraints, it never aired. Here is that remarkable interview, [in full](#).

Historically this is a truly amazing interview which documents the then (1962) young detective's first person exchange with Chinatown drinking buddy detectives and as driver for Undersheriff James Downey (LASD's #2 command officer) his presence during a discussion wherein he learned the "Dahlia case was solved." Vetter's first person account leaves no doubt that many "old-timers" on both the LAPD and LASD KNEW: who the Dahlia killer was, that there was a "cover-up", and why the suspect wasn't pursued.

Commander Vetter leaves no room for doubt. He was there. Listen to his words as he takes the interviewer back in time to a backroom bar at Little Joe's Restaurant, in the very heart of Los Angeles' --Chinatown, 1962.

Thank You Tom Vetter! A heartfelt thank you for your years of dedicated service to Angelenos and for your outstanding leadership as an officer and a gentleman.

Steve Hodel,
Los Angeles, California

Commander Tom Vetter (ret.)

Los Angeles Sheriff's Department

LtCol USMCR (Ret)

President First Marine Div. July 2003-August 2005

Interviewed-September 2, 2004

Los Angeles, California

(Tape transcription)

QUESTION:

Tell me a bit about yourself. How you started in the Sheriff's Department, and what you did there.

TOM VETTER:

I started off on the City of Bell Police Department. I was there about a year and a half. And-- started there in January of '57, and-- then I went on the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department-- graduated from the Academy and worked prisoner transportation, and Norwalk Station, and Lakewood Station, and-- Firestone Station in the Night Detective Corps.

I went on the Academy staff as a Drill Instructor-- because of my teaching ability and Marine Corps background. I spent three years there training new cadets. Then I was transferred to Detective Headquarters, and-- from there I was selected to work-- as an aid to Under Sheriff Jimmy Downey.

I worked Headquarters Detective Division, and-- I commanded the Arson and Bomb Squad, working antiterrorist investigations. Got promoted to Captain, and-- went to the Labor Relations Detail-- commanded that. Then I commanded the San Dimas and Walnut Sheriff Station-- a regional command. I was promoted to Commander. I worked at our Headquarters of the Sheriff's Department, and also commanded the Training Bureau later on.

I was a Field Commander. Also with-- in Patrol with the-- Sheriff's Department, and the Night Duty Commander. So, I had nearly 40 years law enforcement and serving the people of Los Angeles County.

QUESTION:

That's quite a resume--

Tom, tell me-- tell me about the Black Dahlia murder. It was a big deal back then, right?

TOM VETTER:

That was a great big deal-- of course it happened in the late 40's, but-- carrying right on into the 50's and 60's and so on, it's been a big deal, because it's been unsolved and-- great notoriety, and it was always of interest-- to everyone.

QUESTION:

You were how old at the time? Do you remember it at all?

TOM VETTER:

In 1947-- I was twelve years old.

QUESTION:

Do you remember hearing anything about it?

TOM VETTER:

No, not at all. I was raised in Missouri and-- I don't remember it being in the papers back there then.

QUESTION:

Big story here, but maybe not so much there.

TOM VETTER:

Right.

QUESTION:

But, surely when you moved out here and-- joined law enforcement here, it's always been-- tell me if I'm wrong, but I-- I believe It's always been one of those-- one of those big cases-- that cops talk about.

TOM VETTER:

It's always been on the front burner. You always hear everybody talking about it. It was always a big deal case, and you-- you'd-- hear it being discussed every now and then by the detectives and-- talking about it. It was of great interest to them.

QUESTION:

Why did they-- was there ever any as to why the thing was-- with all of the manpower that was put on it-- why it was never-- never solved? Did you ever hear that kind of scuttlebutt?

TOM VETTER:

Yeah, I have. Just-- that scuttlebutt was going around and-- it'd come out in the scuttlebutt that they had really solved the case, and they knew who did it. However, he was a doctor out in Hollywood, and-- fairly prominent. And-- back in those days that-- some of the police officials, or District Attorney officials-- City officials-- would take their girlfriends there for abortions. And he was doing abortions, and he had a lot of information on various people, and they-- they were afraid of it.

QUESTION:

You're saying this was the scuttlebutt in the Sheriff's Department when?

TOM VETTER:

In the 60's, around 1962. All through the 60's-- usually after work we'd go down to Chinatown and-- have a taste or two while we were waiting for rush hour traffic to clear. And, the Sheriff's Detectives and LAPD Detectives and that-- we'd meet down there. We became good friends and we'd talk about various cases.

QUESTION:

Well, run this down for me again. So, there you are in Chinatown. It's-- it's the early 60s-- you're all having a drink after work, and what's the scuttlebutt about the Black Dahlia case?

TOM VETTER:

Well, it came up occasionally, not often, but it came up occasionally. And, usually around the time of the anniversary of her death, or murder. That's when they'd start talking about it, and the scuttlebutt was going around that it was known who did it, but they were afraid of it.

QUESTION:

Why?

TOM VETTER:

He was a prominent doctor in Hollywood. He hung around public officials, and-- the police officers and this and that. And, the rumor was that many of them went to him to have abortions performed on their girlfriends, or whatever. And-- they were afraid he had the-- the goods on them.

QUESTION:

You-- you heard this in scuttlebutt-- off-hour scuttlebutt in the early 60s?

TOM VETTER:

Yes.

QUESTION:

From the way you tell it, the sense was-- as you say, he had the goods on people? It that-- am I correct?

TOM VETTER:

Right. He did according to them. They were afraid of him, because they had taken-- girlfriends to him to get abortions performed, and-- he knew them and he had the goods on them.

QUESTION:

Was a name ever connected to this person?

TOM VETTER:

Never. I never heard a name.

QUESTION:

But it was fairly common knowledge that-- that this was the story? Am I correct?

TOM VETTER:

That's true. It was fairly common knowledge that it was a doctor in Hollywood.

QUESTION:

And, in 1962 you heard a very specific conversation about this, right?

TOM VETTER:

I did.

QUESTION:

Tell me the circumstances.

TOM VETTER:

I was a detective then in 1962 and I was driving Undersheriff Jimmy Downy And-- he was going to lunch with then Chief of Detectives-- Gordy Bowers, and they were good friends. As we were driving along-- somehow the Black Dahlia murder case came up in their conversation.

And, I heard Jimmy say that "Oh, that had been solved, but it will never come out." Because, it was some doctor that they all knew out in Hollywood.

QUESTION:

Any name attached?

TOM VETTER:

No name.

QUESTION:

Did he go into any more detail about it?

TOM VETTER:

No, he didn't. He really didn't.

QUESTION:

Did that surprise you? Or, did that fit in with what you had heard before to that point?

TOM VETTER:

It surprised me somewhat, yes, because at-- such a high level-- The Undersheriff is the number two man in the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, and he's privy to anything going on in the area. I knew that he knew-- Chief Thad Brown, the Chief of Detectives for the Los Angeles Police Department then. It surprised me that-- he would say that.

QUESTION:

Would you presume that-- he got the information from Thad Brown?

TOM VETTER:

No, I wouldn't presume that, no. But, certainly he had to hear it from someone.

QUESTION:

Set the stage for me if you will a bit about the climate back then in the late 40s in-- you know, in terms of-- law enforcement and how clean or dirty it was, or compromised it was? What was going on during that period?

TOM VETTER:

Of course, I wasn't active in law enforcement at that time, but-- talking to a lot my friends that I worked with in the Sheriff's Department and policemen that I met, it was a whole different atmosphere and-- the Department, perhaps both Departments, the Sheriff's Department and Los Angeles Police Department-- had a graft problem. And-- they were not an honest Department at that time. And I say-- perhaps unethical, to say the least-- in many ways. It was a different atmosphere. Politics was very big and everything in those days. I think you could get things done or covered up, or whatever-- with a payoff.

QUESTION:

We're just going to go over the same ground again.

TOM VETTER:

Sure.

QUESTION:

So, well, let's talk first of all about the-- the scuttlebutt among the troops once again.

TOM VETTER:

Well, the case of the Black Dahlia murder would come up periodically, and-- and especially around the anniversary of her murder. And-- I know the Detectives would be talking about that, and-- some speculating, and just talking about all aspects of the case.

So, it was a matter of scuttlebutt, but it came up that-- some prominent doctor in Hollywood-- who did abortions had the goods on a lot of police officers, and high-ranking people, and-- City officials, Government officials who had abortions. He had performed abortions on their girlfriends, and they were afraid of him. And, that's why they didn't go after him, but they felt he did it. No name ever mentioned.

QUESTION:

And, then tell me about the conversation in 1962 that you-- you heard between some of the-- some of the brass in the Sheriff's Department.

TOM VETTER:

At the time-- I was a Detective and assigned to Under Sheriff Jimmy Downey's office. I was his driver, and he was going out to lunch with our Chief of Detective, Gordy Bowers. They're very good friends. And-- in the conversations just driving along, I heard then talk about the Black Dahlia murder. It just came up. And-- Jimmy had mentioned, "Hey, they know who did that. It's-- it's a doctor on Hollywood. End-- end of story. He didn't name any names.

QUESTION:

Did he say anything about why he was never arrested, or wasn't pursued?

TOM VETTER:

No, he didn't bring it up.

QUESTION:

But the story fits and dovetails very well with the story that you-- the guys had heard out on the street, essentially, right?

TOM VETTER:

Yes, it did. And, I heard that for years-- through the 50s and 60s-- 70s-- just hear it every now and then about the Black Dahlia murder case.

QUESTION:

In all those years-- clearly there are unsolved cases, and then there are big unsolved cases. Where-- where does the Black Dahlia fit in all of that?

TOM VETTER:

Probably one of the biggest, if not the biggest. I've heard about the Black Dahlia murder case ever since I came on and after I retired. And, I read in the paper where Steve Hodel was going to speak at-- one of the local book stores. And-- its always been a fascinating case for me as a professional law enforcement officer I felt I really wanted to go up and meet him. I did and I listened to his talk, and-- afterwards I went up and talked to him a while. And-- I thought, "This guy is really on to something. He really knows what he's doing and talking about.

QUESTION:

It had the ring of truth to you from what you knew about-- what you'd been hearing back in the 60s?

TOM VETTER:

Yes, it did. It was all fitting in-- all these little pieces. It's almost like a jigsaw puzzle, and it started fitting in, and from a professional standpoint. And looking at it from the outside, I could see where it was falling in place.

QUESTION:

Once again just about the climate back then in law enforcement in the 40s that you-- that you were talking about.

TOM VETTER:

The Sheriff's Department, and especially the Police Department in Los Angeles-- did not have a good reputation then for honesty, integrity, ethics. They had some great problems then. They were known for payoffs and graft, and what have you. And-- and the atmosphere was bad. Probably stayed that way until about the early 50s when Chief William Parker came in and he really reformed the Department and cleaned it up then.

QUESTION:

Do you think-- as you know, Steve has written that-- that he believes that a command decisions was made-- that for whatever reason we're going take a pass on this. We're going to let the guy get out of the country, or, you know, kind of sweep it under the rug. Do you believe that? Is that in keeping with what you know about-- about Parker?

TOM VETTER:

Not really. I just don't think Chief Parker would do something like that. He was a man of integrity and honesty, ethics-- just top man. However, it might be in keeping with some of the-- people at lower ranks below him.

QUESTION:

And, the conversations that you've described for us would certainly indicate that something like that did happen?

TOM VETTER:

We could assume that.

QUESTION:

That there was a suspect. They knew who he was, and for whatever reasons, they either couldn't touch him or didn't want to touch him.

TOM VETTER:

I would think they probably did not want to.

QUESTION:

Because?

TOM VETTER:

Because of his political connections, it would appear. And-- his personal-- personal knowledge of them. You know, really back in those days, abortion was of course, a crime, and-- certainly if somebody got caught performing abortions, or having one done, or what have you, they were in great trouble. People would go after them. The law would go after them.

QUESTION:

Do you think this case-- has been solved?

TOM VETTER:

I think so. From my own professional viewpoint. I think Steve Hodel did an outstanding job in putting the pieces together. I think it's been solved.

QUESTION:

And, when you read his book, it-- tell me if I'm wrong, but it would seem that it had-- again, the ring of truth about it based on what you knew and had heard 40 years ago.

TOM VETTER:

Exactly, because just some of the pieces-- what I'd heard were small pieces. But, when you put them all together, it's bringing the whole big picture together of the Black Dahlia murder. I think Steve solved it.

I wouldn't be surprised if that doctor kept a diary of some type or note, and-- certainly he knew who these politicians and officials were in Government. And-- I think they were really afraid of him. I would have to think that many of them were married, and had these girlfriends or mistresses on the side.

QUESTION:

Was there ever any talk about-- about a VD Clinic, or a doctor treating people with VD? Or, was it all about abortions?

TOM VETTER:

No. That talk has gone around, too, because-- you've heard that about various doctors, if you will, in different locations. And-- people say, "Oh, you know, if you get a dose of venereal disease, you can go to Doc so-and-so, and he'll take care of you."

QUESTION:

But, specifically, back in the 60s, when you were hearing these other things about the doctor in Hollywood and-- and abortions and all that, did VD treatment, or VD Clinic or any of that come up in-- at that time?

TOM VETTER:

No, it didn't come up. You're probably missing, and it's all hearsay...

QUESTION:

Yeah. Tell me what we're missing.

TOM VETTER:

Yeah-- you're missing the every night at happy hour, or social hour after work-- primarily down in Chinatown-- at various bars down there the Detectives from the Sheriff's Department-- our Headquarters was in the Hall of Justice, so Chinatown's only two blocks away. Instead of trying to jump in rush hour traffic on the freeway and that, it was common practice to go down to-- Chinatown and have a couple hits-- before you jumped into traffic and went home.

And, we got to know each other very well. And-- we met with Los Angeles Police Department Detective down there and-- City officials.

But, there were always stories or scuttlebutt going around down there, and this went on every-- every night-- every year-- just for many, many years. Actually, until they closed the Hall of Justice-- from the earthquake damage, but--

QUESTION:

Yeah, and the Black Dahlia would come up from time to time and all?

TOM VETTER:

It would and-- and mostly-- around the anniversary of her murder.

QUESTION:

Tell me once more... What would you hear? What sorts of things would you hear-- the scuttlebutt?

TOM VETTER:

They'd just start talking about her murder, and-- how she'd been murdered-- how they found her-- how she'd been carved up. And, because of the-- cuttings on her-- if you will, and dismemberment, it had to be done by-- some medical person, probably a medical doctor. And-- they'd discuss that. A lot of guessing on-- on everybody's part as to what happened.

QUESTION:

But educated guesses, apparently, right?

TOM VETTER:

Educated guesses-- I was a pretty young detective during those years in-- in the 60s and-- these other-- these other men down there-- other detectives had many years experience. So, it was interesting to listen to them and just gain knowledge from their expertise.

These guys had worked the Homicide Detail and places like that and he had-- great experience, so—

QUESTION:

And once again, just putting a-- putting a cap on it... Did he ever mention-- use the term "covered up," "covered over" or you know, because of the doctor's influence or power. Do you know if they ever used those terms?

TOM VETTER:

Yeah, it was a cover-up. Just the scuttlebutt going around that-- they had found who had murdered-- they had discovered who had murdered her, and it was really a cover up. Somebody had covered it up.

QUESTION:

Because?

TOM VETTER:

Because they were afraid that the doctor had the goods on too many people in high places-- Police official and City officials-- politicians and that-- regarding abortions.

QUESTION:

Abortions involving what?

TOM VETTER:

Abortions involving their girlfriends-- their mistresses. Many of them were married at the time, and-- they just felt the doctor had a lot of goods on them and - perhaps he kept a diary or notes, or something.

QUESTION:

Now, as you say, you're a young cop-- a young-- Sheriff's Deputy at this-- at this point-- kind of learning the ropes. Were you shocked at this?

TOM VETTER:

Yeah, a little bit. You hear things, and you know, you experience things as these cases unfold, and-- and you go through your career, but-- it was a little bit shocking. I had to adjust my thinking back to the 1945s and what type of-- atmosphere pervaded the Police Department then, and the Sheriff's Department.

END OF INTERVIEW...

DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES' CHINATOWN & VICINITY



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| <p>1 Dr. George Hodel's L. A. County Health Office- 808 N. Spring St (Chinatown)</p> <p>2 Little Joe's Restaurant/Bar 900 N. Broadway (Chinatown)</p> <p>3 Hall of Justice, Temple & Broadway, L. A. Sheriff's Homicide Detectives</p> | <p>4 L. A. P. D. PAB, 150 N. Los Angeles St., LAPD Homicide Detectives</p> <p>5 Dr. George Hodel's Private V. D. Clinic, 369 E. 1st St.</p> <p>6 Dr. George Hodel's Private Medical practice, 727 W. 7th St.</p> |
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Note- Loc-2- *LITTLE JOE'S* restaurant-bar in Chinatown (closed in 1999) was the bar described in Cmdr. Vetter's interview where he regularly met and drank with both LASD and LAPD detectives in the early 1960s. *LITTLE JOE'S* was THE watering-hole for "old school detectives" and the "top brass" going back to the 1930s. As can be seen above, the bar was just 200 yards from Dr. George Hodel's L.A. County Health Office, where Hodel served as Chief Venereal Control Officer for all of Los Angeles County. Loc-5- Dr. Hodel's First Street V.D. clinic, is the location mentioned by him on the DA surveillance tapes where he admits to performing surgical abortions, "lots of them."