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Myth No. 3—

“Black Dahlia Murder Never Solved”

“Since 1947, hundreds of suspects were questioned by LAPD detectives, but the killer of the Black Dahlia was never identified. The case was never solved.”

LAPD, LASD, DA BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION OFFICERS PAST AND PRESENT AGREE:

“CASE SOLVED”

Despite the nearly sixty-year chasm that divides the investigation past and present, we now have statements from the four highest-ranking police officers confirming that the Black Dahlia case was solved.

These four detectives were directly involved in the original Dahlia investigation and privy to its secrets. These officers represented all three law enforcement agencies in Los Angeles: The city [LAPD], the county (LASD) and the Los Angeles District Attorney, the prosecutor for both city and county. Their statements are all the more remarkable in that they were made in absolute confidence and each is derived from a separate person, place, and time, they substantiate each other. None of these command officers' statements were ever intended to be made public. Each was a personal communication, which remained private and confidential decades after their respective deaths. All four indict the same man, “a Hollywood physician, living on Franklin Avenue, involved in abortions.” They kept his name secret for over five decades.

Though never arrested, the Black Dahlia murder, according to top commanders from all three Los Angeles law enforcement agencies agree, was solved.

Now, thanks to the 2003 access and release of the secret DA files, we now know his name and address as revealed in those original reports.

OUT OF THE PAST—THE BLACK DAHLIA’S TOP BRASS:



LAPD Chief of Detectives Thad Brown, circa 1950

“The Black Dahlia case was solved. He was a doctor who lived on Franklin Avenue in Hollywood.” [Statement made in the 1960s to his close personal friend, actor Jack Webb. Dragnet’s, “Sgt. Joe Friday”.]



LAPD Chief of Police William H. Parker, circa 1950

“We identified the Black Dahlia suspect. He was a doctor.” [Statement made to his personal physician circa 1964.]



L.A. County Sheriff's Captain of Detectives J. Gordon Bowers, 1947

"The Black Dahlia case was solved, but it will never come out. It was some doctor they [LAPD] all knew in Hollywood involved in abortions." [Statement made by LASD Undersheriff James Downey to his chief of detectives J. Gordon Bowers circa 1961. Statement made in the presence of Downey's driver, Deputy Tom Vetter, who would later be promoted to LASD Commander.]



DA Lt. Frank B. Jemison

"We know who the Black Dahlia killer was. He was a doctor, but we didn't have enough to put him away." [Statement made to Jemison's visiting nephew and his physician brother-in-law at the L.A. Hall of Justice in the summer of 1951. Jemison's nephew grew up and became a medical doctor.]

OUT OF THE PRESENT- THE DA'S OFFICE, LAPD, AND LASD



Steve Kay, L.A. County Head Deputy DA [ret.], 2006

"Steve Hodel has taken this way beyond the pictures. It no longer depends on the pictures." [Statement in *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, November 21, 2004.]

"I have no doubt in my mind that George Hodel murdered Elizabeth Short...If the witnesses were alive today, I believe if I took that case in front of a jury, that I would convict him." [Rue 13, French television documentary, *The Truth about the Black Dahlia*, November 6, 2006.]



LAPD Deputy Chief James McMurray [ret.], Chief of Detectives

“The hardcover book was pretty compelling. Then when all the transcripts and stuff came out from the D.A.’s Office that took it over the top for me. That would have been enough for me to bring a case against Dr. Hodel.” [LA Times, November 21, 2004.]

“I have told my detectives, unless that can find some major holes in Hodel’s investigation—to go ahead and clear the Black Dahlia murder.” [November 2004]



LASD Commander Thomas Vetter [ret.], Lt. Col. USMC [ret.]

“In 1962, I was a detective and was the driver for Undersheriff James Downey who was the sheriff department’s number two man. One day, he was going to lunch with his good friend, Gordy Bowers, chief of detectives. Somehow, the Black Dahlia murder came up in the conversation. I heard Jimmy say, ‘Oh, that had been solved, but it will never come out. It was some doctor they [LAPD] all knew out in Hollywood.’ In my own professional opinion, Hodel has put the pieces together and solved the case.” [Television interview, October 2004]



LAPD Deputy Chief of Detectives James McMurray and Chief William Bratton honor author at LAPD Author's Night function, 2004

Los Angeles Times 1947



MURDER CLUES SOUGHT—Inspector Norris Stensland and Capt. Gordon Bowers of sheriff's department search canyon culvert near Malibu for possible Short murder clues.

Canyon Combed in Short Killing

Sheriff's officers yesterday searched an area in Las Tunas Canyon, near Malibu, for possible clues to the murder of Elizabeth Short after a blood-drenched man's shirt, bow tie, and a rusty, blood-encrusted razor blade were found inside a culvert.

Inspector Norris Stensland and Capt. Gordon Bowers, of the Sheriff's office, explored the possibility that the "Black Dahlia" was slain and her body severed in the culvert, but a search by them and four deputy sheriffs turned up nothing to bolster the theory.

Stensland said nothing definite yet linked the bloody clothes and razor blade with the Short murder. But, he added, the culvert quite possibly could be the scene of the butchery.

The clothes and razor blade were being scrutinized under microscopes to determine if the dried blood is the same type as Miss Short's.

1947—Then Capt. Gordon Bowers "Working the Black Dahlia Case"

LOS ANGELES SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT COMMANDER THOMAS M. VETTER

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 First Marine Division. [July 2003-August 2005]

I would later discover that Tom was one of LASD's most respected command officers with forty years of distinguished service to law enforcement. His reputation as a leader in both the sheriff's department and the US Marine Corps are twenty-four carat gold.

In September 2004, Commander Vetter was interviewed by a television producer in connection with his knowledge of Black Dahlia-related events that occurred in 1962. But because of time restraints, the interview never aired.

Historically, this is a truly amazing interview that documents the then-young sheriff detective's first-person exchange with his Chinatown drinking-buddy detectives and as driver for Undersheriff James Downey, LASD's number two command officer. As Downey's driver, he was privy to a conversation wherein he learned that "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's killer was, that there was a cover-up, and the reasons why he was not pursued.

As a young deputy in the detective bureau, Tom Vetter was there. Listen to his words as he takes the interviewing television producer back in time to a backroom bar at Little Joe's Restaurant in the heart of Chinatown. The bar was one of the favorite watering holes for old-school cops and deputies to meet, drink, and exchange scuttlebutt.

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!

THE INTERVIEW

Commander Tom Vetter (ret.)
Los Angeles Sheriff's Department
Lieutenant Colonel, USMCR (ret.)
President, First Marine Division, 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, within patrol with the Sheriff's Department, was assigned as the night duty commander. So, I had nearly forty 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 '40s, but—carrying right on into the '50s and '60s, and so on. It's been a big deal, because it's been unsolved and of 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:

All through the '60s—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 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 of 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:

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—it's 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 decision was made—that for whatever reason we're going to 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 forty 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:

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 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 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