

FBI Returns \$23,000 From Pyramid 'Sting' To Local Police

BY ERIC CARLSON

Christmas came in May for the Shallotte Police and Brunswick County Sheriff's departments Monday as a Federal Bureau of investigation agent played Santa Claus by delivering a bundle of \$23,007 in cash to Sheriff John Carr Davis and Chief Rodney Gause.

The money was awarded to the two agencies as part of a superior court judgment against the owner of a Shallotte computer store arrested in January 1993 who offered to buy \$40,000 worth of "stolen" goods from undercover detectives from the two departments.

Store owner Douglas Eugene Thompkins, 26, of Red Springs was charged with conspiracy to receive stolen goods, along with his father, the store manager and an employee of the store.

The four men were arrested after they agreed to purchase a truckload of video games, computers and electronic equipment from an undercover agent in the store parking lot at Shallotte Plaza on Main street.

The officer had represented the truck's contents as stolen. But the vehicle was actually loaded with \$40,000 worth of new merchandise borrowed from a Wilmington department store. After negotiating a price, the suspects agreed to pay \$4,000 for the load.

"They had \$23,000 in cash on them, so they were ready to deal," Sheriff's Detective Billy Hughes said after the arrest.

Police completed the purchase, then arrested the four men and seized the cash and an estimated \$191,000 worth of property, mostly video games and computer equipment.

At the time, Thompkins was the owner of 13 stores, mostly video and video game rental outlets in the Red

Springs and Lumberton areas. The Pyramid store was his only computer store and had been in operation for about six months at the time of the raid.

The FBI was called in when local investigators became suspicious that Thompkins might have been purchasing stolen goods from other states. Special Agent Craig Ackley of the FBI's Wilmington office said the bureau was also looking into the possibility of federal money laundering violations.

Ackley said Monday that the federal investigation is continuing. He said he could not comment on the details of the case.

The local investigation began when the store's manager asked a customer if he could get him 100 Super Nintendo games while in New York, according to court records. The customer told a sheriff's detective that the manager wanted to buy soap, perfume, cologne, 35mm film, clothing, computers and computer equipment.

Under Det. Hughes direction, the informant accepted \$480 from the store manager for samples of stolen goods to be delivered at a later date. He was also given \$280 by a store employee for the purchase of an AK-47 rifle.

Working with undercover officers from Shallotte and the sheriff's department narcotics squad, Hughes had the informant arrange a larger purchase for a truck load of stolen goods. It was that delivery that led to the arrest of Thompkins and the others.

In an agreement with prosecutors, Thompkins pleaded guilty in exchange for the dismissal of charges against his father. The judge ordered the seized cash and a van turned over to the two law enforcement agencies.



STAFF PHOTO BY ERIC CARLSON

SHERIFF John Carr Davis (left) and Shallotte Police Chief Rodney Gause stage a mock arm-wrestling match to decide which department will receive \$23,007 in cash seized in a joint stolen-goods "sting" operation last year. The money, awarded in a superior court judgment, was delivered by an FBI agent Monday and divided equally for use by the two law enforcement agencies.

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