

Professional Crime 'Hunter' Is Sandy Creek Law Officer

BY RAHN ADAMS

An appropriate business card for the Town of Sandy Creek's new law enforcement officer might read, "Have patrol car. Will travel."

Hired in August as the one-year-old town's first and only lawman, Shallotte area resident Tom Hunter's always on patrol whenever he is on duty at Sandy Creek, because the small northwestern Brunswick County community doesn't have a police station yet—just a donated squad car that got the new police department off and "rolling" last month.

"I haven't written anyone up yet," Hunter said in a recent interview. "I figure they need to know I'm there before I start giving them tickets."

For the past several weeks, the police chief has been busy setting up the department, which Sandy Creek Town Council formed mainly to enforce some new local ordinances. The town instituted a 20-mph speed limit on its unpaved streets and erected stop signs at intersections. Also, parking isn't allowed along streets.

Until its incorporation last September, the community—which is located along U.S. 74-76 near Maco—was a private development formed in 1981 as Sandy Creek Acres. The town has approximately 230 residents.

Establishing the police department has been a definite challenge, said Hunter, even with considerable support from other local law enforcement agencies that have donated expertise and equipment. "Actually, I took this for the administrative experience," he said, "and I'm getting more than I bargained for."

Being a one-man police force, Hunter hasn't started working a regular shift yet. "For right now, they're liable to see me any time," he said. "I will be there when they least expect me to be there."

The "they" he was referring to, of course, are individuals who might try to break Sandy Creek's town ordinances. Hunter indicated that a particular problem has been that some motorists have gotten used to ignoring stop signs since no one was there to enforce traffic laws until last month.

Hunting down law-breakers is nothing new to the 47-year-old Maine native, who for the past 3 1/2 years has worked in Brunswick County as a representative for a Pennsylvania detective agency.

Hunter said work as a private investigator wasn't

glamorous, as portrayed on television. His duties mostly included doing "legwork" for local attorneys—assisting them in criminal cases by doing research and interviewing inmates at correctional institutions across the state. He currently is closing out his private caseload.

A dangerous facet of his former job, though, was tracking down criminals as a "bounty hunter." On his last assignment of that type, he and his 24-year-old son, Danny Hunter of Charlotte, located an accused drug dealer from Pennsylvania in Detroit, Mich. The Hunters were hired by a Pennsylvania bail bondsman to make sure the suspect showed up in court.

"Bounty hunting used to be a good job," Hunter said, explaining that the individuals he hunted in earlier years ordinarily gave themselves up without a fight. "When I found them, they'd play fair and usually just say, 'How'd you find me?' Now when you find them, everybody goes for a gun."

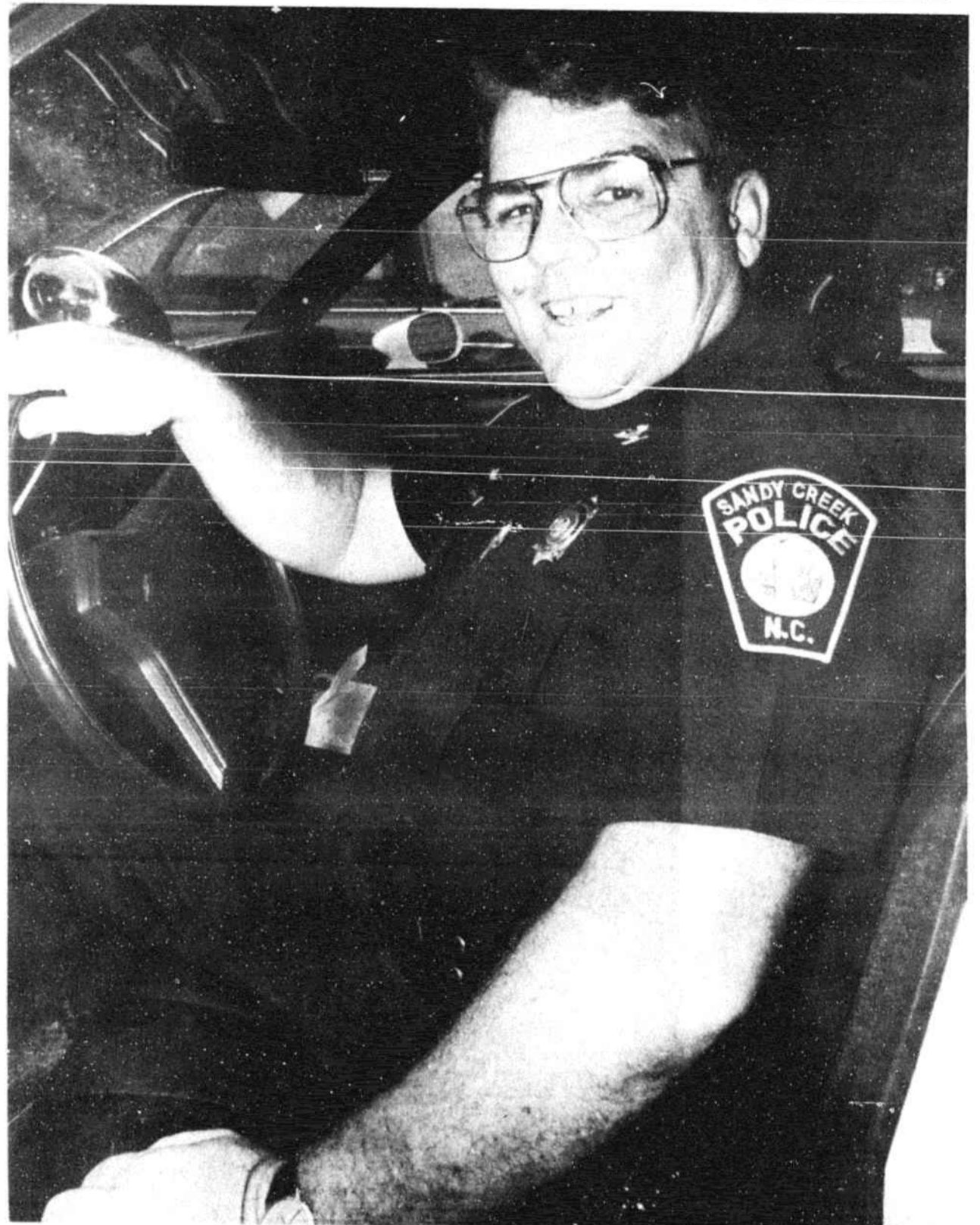
Although no one ever actually used their gun on him during a bounty-hunting assignment, he knows how it feels to be shot at. In the mid 1960s, Hunter served as a U.S. Marine Corps helicopter pilot in Vietnam and was shot down twice.

His background in law enforcement began in 1966 when he left military service and went to work for his hometown police department in Lisbon Falls, Maine. He lived there with his now ex-wife and three children. After two years on the police force, he opted for a higher paying job as a truck driver.

Hunter moved to the Myrtle Beach, S.C., area in 1977 and to Brunswick County four years later. In this area, he worked as a construction superintendent for nine years until 1986 when he became a private investigator.

Over the past few years, he has taken several law enforcement training courses, having studied criminal justice at Cape Fear Community College in Wilmington and at Brunswick Community College in Supply. In March, he completed the N.C. Department of Justice Education and Training Standards Commission basic law enforcement training program.

"Law enforcement has come a long way," Hunter said, in reference to the changes he has noticed from when he was a policeman 20 years ago in Maine. "They've weeded out a lot of the people who were in law enforcement for the authority of it. There is a higher degree of professionalism now."



SANDY CREEK POLICE CHIEF Tom Hunter sits behind the wheel of the town's "new" patrol car—a six-year-old surplus vehicle that Brunswick County recently donated to the fledgling police department.

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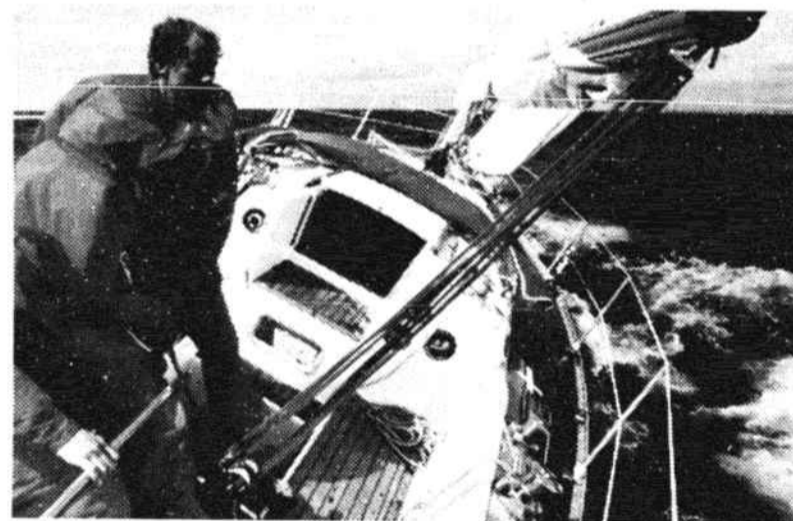
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