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## Operation Leatherneck—DS Shuts Down Multinational Visa Fraud Ring

In the high heat of June 2002, the DS Visa Fraud Branch and the DS San Francisco Field Office embarked on a visa fraud investigation that would end in a massive operation involving more than 150 law enforcement personnel acting simultaneously in Virginia, Oregon, California, and Sri Lanka. Code named Operation Leatherneck, this would be one of DS' largest cases.

In June 2002, DS was contacted by the Terrorist Unit Group at FBI headquarters. According to the memorandum sent to DS, the FBI had an informant who alleged several State Department employees were involved in a visa fraud and alien smuggling operation. DS special agents from the Visa Fraud Branch in Washington and the DS San Francisco Field Office were brought in to work the case. The informant who provided the information to the FBI was handled by the FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF) in Sacramento, California.

Through informant reporting and extensive cable traffic with DS agents in Fiji and Sri Lanka, DS began to lay their sights on consular associate Acey Johnson as the primary suspect of the conspiracy. Johnson and his Foreign Service officer wife, Long Lee, had been previously posted to Suva, Fiji, and were most recently posted to Colombo, Sri Lanka. Visa fraud agents searched the Consular Consolidated Database for visa adjudications performed by Johnson in both Sri Lanka and Fiji. The

numbers made it apparent that Johnson was issuing visas to Indian nationals at an unprecedented rate at both posts. When graphed, the increase in issuances to Sikh Indian nationals during Johnson's tenure was astounding.

DS had been in constant contact with the Sri Lankan authorities and had obtained their government's permission to investigate this case in Sri Lanka. A steady, indepth investigation of Acey and Long began turning up great evidence such as torn visa applications, photocopies of passports, and other incriminating documents.

During the investigation, many of the original visa applications for the Indian visa recipients and numerous visa applications for Vietnamese nationals were recovered. As Sri Lanka has no significant Vietnamese population and is not geographically close to Vietnam, the high number of Vietnamese visa recipients cast suspicion on Johnson's wife, Colombo administrative officer Long Lee, a naturalized U.S. citizen of Vietnamese descent. Due to its complexity and the enormous amount of information to review in this case, another DS agent joined the investigation to concentrate on Long Lee's involvement and the Vietnamese angle to the case.

The prosecutorial team working the investigation sent out subpoenas to Internet service providers, banking institutions, and phone companies, eventually totaling over

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200 subpoenas. The prosecutorial team was a partnership between the Department of Justice, Public Integrity Section, and the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of California.

As summer turned to fall and fall to winter, the team decided to conduct an undercover operation which seemed straight out of a spy novel. JTTF Sacramento began the operation by having the informant tell the visa brokers that he knew someone abroad who was willing to pay to come to the United States. After obtaining approval from the highest levels of the State Department, Justice Department, foreign governments, and several ambassadors, an investigative team of four agents, two attorneys, and a technical investigative specialist flew to Sri Lanka to conduct Operation Leatherneck.

The team in Sri Lanka worked side-by-side with the Sri Lankan authorities, with DS agents coordinating the delicate operation. As time was beginning to run out, JTTF Sacramento phoned Sri Lanka and said that the visa brokers had given the green light to send in the undercover operative for his genuine U.S. visa. During a lengthy, monitored phone call, the visa broker coached the undercover operative on how to apply for his visa at the embassy. Subsequently, the operative went into the embassy, received the visa, and passed \$25,000 to the visa brokers as JTTF Sacramento and DS watched out of sight. Months of hard work and long nights culminated in a successful undercover operation conducted far from U.S. shores.

January and February 2003 were busy months for the investigation. DS agents coordinated surveillance operations of both Johnson and Lee as they returned to the United States. From the jetway to their front doors, the DS and JTTF team had a watchful eye on the suspects. On one operation, DS San Francisco agents performed 8 hours of vehicular

surveillance with aerial support from San Francisco to Port Orford, Oregon. While Johnson remained in Oregon, Lee eventually returned to Sri Lanka.

As the investigation continued, prosecutors became more and more confident that the time for arrests and searches was quickly approaching. The DS agent heading the investigation swore out a 129-page affidavit in the Eastern District of California, and in April 2003, more than 150 federal and state law enforcement personnel executed eight arrest warrants in California, Oregon, and Virginia. Simultaneous to the domestic operations, Long Lee was called into the U.S. Embassy in Sri Lanka for an interview prior to her voluntary return to the United States and subsequent arrest at Dulles Airport.

The final takedown was a huge success. Coordination between DS, FBI, JTTF, the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and several state law enforcement agencies, allowed all arrests and search warrants to go down safely and effectively.

Days later, a federal grand jury returned a true bill indictment against nine individuals for charges including conspiracy, visa fraud, bribery, mail fraud, and wire fraud. That initial indictment was superseded twice to include additional defendants. As of publication, 11 individuals have been indicted for this conspiracy. Of the 11 co-defendants, 8 have pled guilty and are awaiting sentencing. Those who pled guilty face prison sentences of 2 to 5 years each.

Most significantly, former consular associate Acey Johnson and former Foreign Service officer Long Lee entered guilty pleas in the Eastern District of California on April 30, 2004, almost a year to the day of their arrest. According to the terms of their plea agreements, Johnson and



## Behind the Scenes

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Lee will each serve a minimum sentence of 5 years incarceration and will forfeit \$750,000 dollars worth of ill-gotten property and assets.

Operation Leatherneck was a great success and displayed DS's strengths in

the timely coordination of domestic and overseas elements. Most importantly, those involved in the case saw first hand how DS rises to the occasion and successfully investigates a large, multinational, multi-agency case. 

