

A Grow like no other

Written by Retired Staff Sergeant Andy Golebioski

In policing, every once in a while there becomes a topic that captures the attention of the public, governments, and certainly, the media. Sometimes these topics are short-lived, but others continue to gain momentum and require police agencies to focus on them in unique ways. Shortly after the new millennium, the issue of illicit marihuana grow operations became one of those topics. In Winnipeg, a trend developed regarding the volume, and sophistication of these operations that appeared to be originating from locally organized crime groups. These grow operations were seen not only as criminal actions but also as a threat to public safety and the real estate market. Conventional drug units were burdened with having to dedicate more time and resources to investigating reports about potential grow operations and when they were located and identified, the laborious seizure and storage processes added to the workload of police officers and Evidence Control technicians.

Late in 2003, the Winnipeg Police, like many other law enforcement agencies across the country decided that a stand-alone Marihuana Grow unit or "Green Team" was needed to specifically address this emerging problem. This initial team was supervised by (then) Sergeant Danny Smyth and myself. The members who joined us were assigned from each of the uniform divisions and included Constables Warren Yerex, Myles Riddell, Heather Lysak (O'Kane), Dave Kroeker, Nelson Levesque, Josh Ewatski, and Kevin Senkowski. It didn't take long before the members were quickly identifying large-scale grow operations, making arrests, and seizing large amounts of Marihuana and equipment. The Evidence Control Unit was quickly filling up with exhibits and the team and a variety of media reports were published on the work being done by the Service in this area. But even with the success, the team was enjoying, they were still perplexed by one thing. Throughout 2004 we had received snippets of information that somewhere within the City there was a huge operation, an operation that was either in a warehouse or some other location that was still unknown to police. First of all, could this be true? Where could it be?

Finally, in late November, information was received that guided the investigators to a boarded up, but massive warehouse located at 468 Ross Avenue. This building, which was originally built in the early 1900s, had been added onto over years and encompassed over 19,000 square feet. Aside from the main center section, it had an east section and a west section. It had a large chimney connected to the main section and at first, appearances looked boarded up and vacant. But on November 29th, after completing a regular tour of duty, Constable Levesque walked to his vehicle that was parked between the Public Safety Building, and the warehouse. Since it was so close, he decided to drive by the warehouse on his way home and check it out. He parked his vehicle got out to have a closer look. It was a mild winter day and the humidity

was high. There was a slight northeast breeze and immediately he smelled the unique and strong odor of Marihuana in the vicinity downwind from the building. In his excitement, he drove his vehicle back a few blocks to the Paulin's lot where I was getting into his vehicle to go home. I told him about the smell and together, we returned and confirmed the now unmistakable odor. Could this be it? Could this be what we had been hearing about over these past months? Could something this large actually be smack-dab in the middle of the downtown area, right under our noses only a few blocks from the Public Safety Building?



The warehouse complex at 468 Ross Avenue



Rear View of the warehouse complex

Upon returning to work the next day, the team quickly focused their efforts on this location and undertook surveillance as best we could to learn more. Finally, on December 1st we observed a vehicle in the immediate vicinity containing well-known Marihuana growers from the local community. At one point it appeared a vehicle may have entered the premises but this couldn't be confirmed, aside from tire tracks having recently entered the building through some overhead doors. A decision was made to obtain a search warrant. Up to that point, it was not a high priority to ensure persons were present within the premises. In fact, it was viewed as a potential threat to officer safety as suspects may feel trapped if they have been discovered inside and act accordingly. Late that same evening, armed with a search warrant, the team pried open one of the rear overhead doors to gain entry. We discovered that the main floor areas of all three complexes were largely used for the storage of a variety of old building supplies, but that it was also being used to store items consistent with that of a grow operation. This included tubing, pails, wiring, insulation, and other items that are often found at these scenes.



Evidence located on the main floor

Due to the size of the complex, as the team secured different portions, we had to assign uniform officers to specific locations to ensure that recently cleared areas remained secure. We then attended the upper level in the main complex and were astonished by what we discovered. This floor contained a massive two-stage operation containing 1884 small plants growing in one area and another 1630 plants growing in a second room. Each of these systems had an elaborate lighting and ventilation system

which spoke to the experience of the growers themselves. They had obviously invested a significant amount of time and effort creating a commercial operation of this magnitude.

But for the level of astonishment felt by the members of the team, the building was not yet entirely secure. We still had to secure the basement of the main complex. But before doing so, we had to return to the main level for a short break. The reason, as you can imagine, is that after wandering through the second floor of the complex with its vast lighting system, we needed time to allow their eyes to adjust to any darkened portions of the building we would be entering and searching. No persons had yet been located and if anyone was present, they would surely be aware that the police would be discovering them soon.

Once the members did reach the basement level, they were faced with a large metal door on rollers partially covered by garbage. After clearing away the debris, they pushing the door open and were immediately struck by light and humidity that could only be imagined. The combined intensity of over ninety 1000 watt bulbs illuminating an area housing 1990 fully grown Marijuana plants, the full length and width of the center complex, was stunning by anyone's account. After overcoming their initial, the team members spread out along the width of the room with firearms drawn. If there were any suspects in this area, they could easily conceal themselves amongst the plants. Moving forward in a line formation, we slowly advanced. We were only able to gauge the whereabouts of our partners by seeing the tops of their heads over the plants until they finally reached the other end. More than an hour had passed since the team first pried up the rear overhead door, but the building was now secure. No one was located inside, and it was time to take stock of what had been located, and how to dismantle and process the whole operation and over 5500 plants.





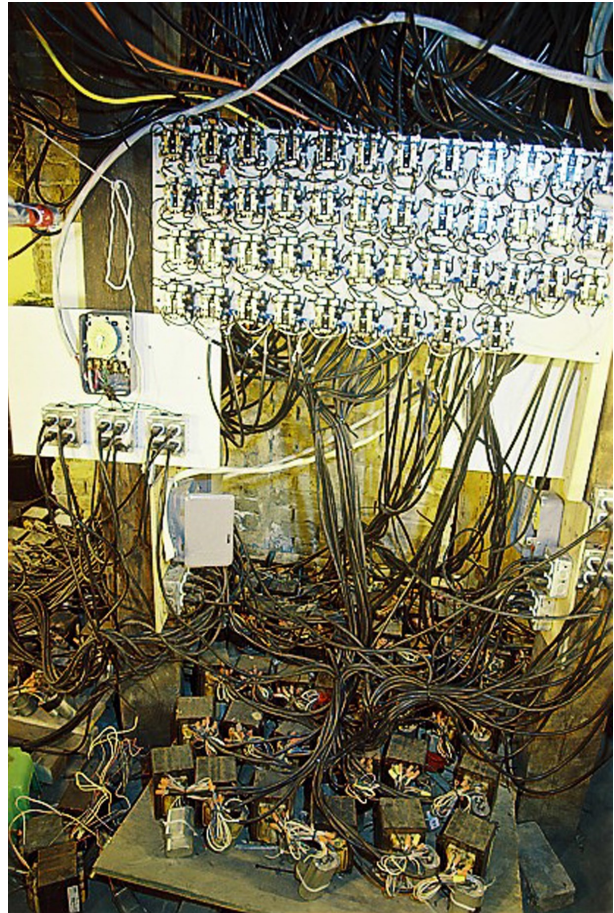
Basement grow room with mature plants



Aside from the volume of exhibits and property that had to be handled, safety was also a concern. Electricity and water mix very well and, in this case, there were plenty of both throughout the warehouse. Cutting all electrical power was not an option as the team still needed lighting to process the scene. Thankfully, the City of Winnipeg electricians were brought in to help and they safely disconnected the power supply for the grow operations. At the same time, they set up temporary lighting so that work could begin. This included tours for executive members of the police service and local government leaders who also had not been previously exposed to such a sight and wanted to learn more.

A portion of the elaborate relay and timer system controlling the light cycle for the basement grow room

The processing of the scene largely fell to members of our Forensic Identification Section. Through meticulous work, several fingerprints of well-known growers were lifted from a number of items and four individuals were arrested and charged for their part in the whole affair. A preliminary hearing was later held, but unfortunately, technical arguments were put forward by the defense and, through no fault of the police, the presiding judge dismissed the charges against the accused. The team members were shocked by the results, but little could be done by this time. It was a bittersweet conclusion to the story.



While the members of the team felt there was more than sufficient evidence to proceed, the result did help initiate a change in the way search warrants were executed. As opposed to minimizing the chances of having persons present when members gained entry, they adopted new measures that would ensure suspects were clearly linked to the location when the warrant was executed. These measures reduced the legal arguments that could be made which would allow a suspect to escape justice because they weren't actually present at the grow itself. This practise continues to this day.

The operation at that building on Ross Avenue was built during the "frontier days" of organized Marihuana cultivation. Even after 12 years, with a street value of over six million dollars and approximately fifty thousand dollars worth of equipment, it

remains the largest grow operation ever discovered in Winnipeg's history. However, since that time much has changed.

First of all, a portion of the building complex itself was demolished and the rest underwent a complete renovation. More importantly, however, is that while the Green Team is still in existence and smaller illicit operations are still being discovered, many in Canadian society are changing their views on Cannabis products. The licencing and distribution of Marihuana are becoming commonplace, and the Canadian government is even considering legalization. The focus is not as much on possession, cultivation, or trafficking today, rather on the hazards of driving while under the influence of Cannabis. Time will tell whether or not this will have an impact on the number or size of grow operations in Winnipeg and the investigations related to them.