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Threats Over Police Radios Have Officers and Scanner Buffs on the Case

Crime Scene

By MICHAEL WILSON AUG. 7, 2016

A male voice came over the police radio, speaking in standard departmental jargon as he asked to be patched through to the duty captain in the Midtown South Precinct in Manhattan on July 30. The captain responded.

“South captain, remember how you put me in jail?” the man on the radio asked. “I am out now, and I’m coming to put a bullet in your head.”

The threat, so brazen across the restricted airwaves of the New York Police Department, was a shock. How had the man gained access to the radio frequencies? Had he stolen a police radio?

Another theory was widely repeated in conversations last week with experts on the radio system: The man had hacked a store-bought two-way radio and turned it into a police walkie-talkie.

The man returned to the airwaves three nights later, threatening a different captain: “I’m going to put a bullet in your head,” he said, according to the police. An investigation is continuing.

Breaches in police frequencies are infrequent, the police said, although just a day before the man’s first threat, a similar episode occurred in Queens when a

different-sounding voice repeatedly shouted “Officer down!” and gave a location. In urgent tones, a dispatcher sent officers there. “Nothing going on,” an officer reported back.

The appeal is as old as prank calls. “You could make the police jump up and down,” said Robert Geis, a retired New York police detective and an amateur radio enthusiast. The false alarms resemble what has become known as Christmas scanner syndrome.

“Every Christmas and the day after Christmas, you see an increase in phony calls,” said a longtime radio and scanner operator in his 60s, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he believed the man who made the threats could be dangerous. People get scanners for Christmas, and then they make prank calls to the police so they can listen to the response.

Making a call over police frequencies, a big step beyond a phone call, has never been easier, Mr. Geis said.

“What’s changed over the years is the availability of radios that can be programmed to police frequencies,” he said. “Twenty years ago, you had to cut a wire or clip a diode. It would open up the radios to go on frequencies they weren’t intended to go on. Now, they come out of the box like that.”

A man in Astoria, Queens, Daniel Delise, 48, was arrested on April 16 after using a police frequency to make a false call about an officer in need of assistance in the neighborhood, the police said. A search revealed 14 radios in the home he shared with his parents, according to a criminal complaint.

“He would always listen to those things,” said his mother, Josephine Delise, 84. “It really got out of hand. My husband and I went through hell with this radio.”

Mr. Delise was in jail when the latest calls were made and is not a suspect.

A parallel search for the culprit seems to be underway within the community of amateur radio operators and those known as scanner buffs — people who listen to police frequencies at home. It is a long-established group in the city, but at times, a

fractured one, with feuds over the airwaves that have devolved into curses, threats and “jamming,” or blocking a frequency from legitimate use.

“I’ve been beating the bushes trying to figure it out,” said the veteran scanner operator.

The operator thought about the pool of people capable of breaching the police airwaves.

“I know of at least 50,” he said. “There may be 500. Five thousand. These radios are \$29.”

An executive in the police radio industry who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he worked for a different police department said that the New York Police Department’s radio system was similar to those used in many cities, and that it was vulnerable to intruders.

“You could go on a website right now, and all the frequencies are listed,” he said. “There is no magic formula to make your police radio work only for you, unless you’re willing to spend billions of dollars.”

The man who made the threats against the police captains said at one point over the radio that he was near a Walgreens in Times Square. Officers rushed to the location but found nothing suspicious. The radio industry executive said he felt certain the man would return to the airwaves with more taunts.

“They leave a trail a mile wide,” he said. “They’re addicted to stupid.”

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