



California Hells Angels Are Suing the Government for Blowing Up Their Clubhouse

By Allie Conti
October 27, 2014

On August 2, 2011, Special Agent Patrick Ryan of the DEA obtained a search warrant for the Hells Angels clubhouse in San Diego county, California. As night fell on the city of El Cajon, a voice sounded over the police scanner.

“If you are inside... get away from any doors or windows in the building,” it blared. Moments later, what sounded like a gunshot sent a bright yellow blast through the clubhouse's front door, setting off a cacophony of car alarms. Explosive breaching charges and flashbangs had been set off.

The Hells Angels are an outlaw motorcycle club that the US Department of Justice estimates has between 2,000 and 2,500 members in more than 230 chapters around the world. They pose “a criminal threat on six continents,” according to the DOJ website. They also tend to have a relationship with law enforcement that's cartoonish and characterized by excessive force and camera-friendly moments of chaos.

The raid in El Cajon was the result of a two-year investigation, and agents were looking for specific Hells Angels members, but the explosion revealed a building empty except for a terrified dog. A month later, authorities arrested three dozen club members for conspiracy to traffic meth. The chapter's leader, Stephen Sanders, was sentenced to 25 years for the 2007 kidnapping, torture, and robbery of a gang member who wanted out.

Hells Angel Maurice Eunice did not get pinched, but in a lawsuit filed in 2012, he doesn't contest the warrant's validity—after all, the California Hells Angels have a long criminal history. Instead, Eunice claims that the United States, the agent who ordered the raid, and the city of El Cajon blew up his buddies' hangout to put on a show for the press, rather than just calling him up for a key to get inside. As the Angel who owned the clubhouse, Eunice says the government conducted an unreasonable seizure and, once inside, intentionally caused him emotional distress by stomping on pictures of his dead friends.

“We found the pictures inside with footprints on the glass,” says Julia Yoo, the civil rights attorney who wrote the complaint. “And there's a video of the incident that was filmed before any of the other [members of the media] showed up. There was an agent standing outside giving interviews. Somebody tipped them off.”

In the past, these kind of heavy-handed raids have caused unnecessary violence. In 2003, cops in Phoenix conducted an early-morning raid on a Hells Angels clubhouse by knocking, waiting six seconds, and deploying a flashbang. According to a [study](#) by the libertarian Cato Institute, a sleeping member thought he was being robbed and picked up a gun, at which point an officer shot him. (Police didn't find any drugs.)

That same year, police officers in San Jose shot some of the Hells Angels' dogs during a raid and caused structural damage by using drills to remove the club's insignia from a driveway. In that case, the Angels sued, eventually getting a \$990,000 settlement.

As one commenter wondered on the [legal blog Overlawyered](#), “The real question here is just how necessary the raids—with their attendant purile Boys-Own-Adventure “Dynamic Entry” SWAT procedures—really were. Might not been better to show up in less dramatic fashion, warrant in hand, and simply knock politely at the front door?”

In recent years, the Angels have taken to suing the feds, who they believe unfairly peg them as criminals. In 2012, they sued the US government for denying visas to the group's foreign members. That case, which listed Hillary Clinton and then Homeland Security boss Janet Napolitano as defendants, was ultimately dismissed. Likewise, in the San Diego case, the Angels had no luck: Earlier this month, a district judge [granted a summary motion](#) on the exploding clubhouse that ruled in the government's favor.

But the notoriously antiestablishment club—which has a [penchant for using lawsuits](#) to get its way—is determined to get revenge on the DEA for turning a routine raid into a Michael Bay movie. Yoo plans to appeal, and her partner, Eugene Iredale, says the officer's actions caused about \$130,000 in damage to the clubhouse.

Amy Roderick, a DEA spokeswoman in San Diego, said she couldn't comment on the decision to use explosives at the clubhouse, as the raid was carried out by the El Cajon Police Department's SWAT team. Lieutenant Mike Molton of the El Cajon PD said that he wasn't able to comment on the specific case but told me the devices are typically used to distract suspects or when the cops suspect a place might be booby trapped.

But Eunice, the Hells Angel who filed the lawsuit, insists this was a case of unnecessary force, and that suggesting his clubhouse might be booby-trapped is insane. Although the Angel doesn't much like to discuss things over the phone, he did tell me that it's not so strange for an outlaw motorcyclist to use the court system to his benefit.

“I've never had too much experience in the courthouse,” he said, “but I'm just trying to express my right as an American citizen.”