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'Operator' Talks to Probers

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He Made Bugs Good Business

Washington

George Nantes is a so-called "basement operator" who makes wiretapping and bugging equipment, sometimes illegally.

George Nantes is not his real name. It was given him by the National Wiretap Commission to protect him because he is an informer expected to testify against organized crime figures.

Nantes also agreed to talk to the commission, which is reviewing federal and state wiretapping and electronic surveillance laws.

"Nantes has given the commission a rare and valuable glimpse into a basement operator's world," a commission investigator said. A basement operator

manufactures surveillance devices in his home.

Nantes was interviewed for seven hours by the commission investigator with a guarantee of anonymity. The informal transcript of that interview was made available.

Nantes was a television repairman who got into the business of making bugging gear when a policeman offered him "a big payment" if he could reproduce some bugs. He said he worked on it for three months before coming up with a "free-running oscillator with an audio amplifier. It was a little over an inch in diameter, ran off a nine-volt battery for about 30 hours and transmitted at 115 megahertz."

The policeman never picked up the device, so Nantes contacted a detective in the same city who had once arrested him on a drug charge. After that, "the narc unit was my bread and butter for nearly two years," Nantes said. "Little by little, all the cops in the unit came knocking on my door. I sold them \$25 room bugs that cost \$6 to build."

Nantes said he studied the work of other well-known basement operators and found his bugs were the best, "so I progressed into phone bugs, the same oscillators with a trigger switch . . . I raised my price to \$100 for a device that took me 20 minutes to build."

The narcotics unit was eventually broken up.

"Fortunately, about that time I started branching out. I went interstate," he said. On his first job outside the city where he resided, Nantes sold \$10,000 worth of equipment to a Florida sheriff, "pocket transmitters, slave units, harmonica bugs, tape recorders, series and parallel wires, drop-in mikes, the works."

But the sheriff and his men all wanted kickbacks, and Nantes smashed up his \$10,000 car on his way to deliver the stuff. "Believe me, I didn't make a thing!" Nantes said. But he did well for several years and sold \$50,000 worth of devices annually when business was good.

Associated Press