

New Task for U.S. Marshals

'Safe Houses' for VIP

By Douglas Watson
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Washington

RESTRICTED AREA U.S. Govt. Training Center," says the sign on the barbed wire-topped fence surrounding a barracks at Ft. Holabird on the edge of Baltimore.

The sign doesn't say it, but the barracks is one of several "safe" houses that the U.S. Marshals Service operates for the special care and feeding of very important prisoner-witnesses such as Watergate conspirator E. Howard Hunt, political saboteur Donald Segretti and stock manipulator Joel Kline.

Three to five safe houses have been in existence around the country for about a year, usually holding about 50 "principals," as they like to call themselves. They are federal prisoners who usually were involved in organized crime and who are considered too valuable as government witnesses or too endangered by threats to be incarcerated in the usual prison.

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THE SAFE HOUSES aren't country clubs — there are guards, strict rules and a daily regimen. But those being held in them (usually for no more than six to eight months) cook their own meals, don't wear prison garb and are urged to use assumed names.

Safeguarding the safe houses is only one of the many roles of the U.S. Marshals Service. The U.S. marshal in the 20-year-old "Gunsmoke" television show would be surprised to learn that today's real marshals and their deputies also carry out such varied functions as:

- Providing new identities — meaning new names, new jobs and new homes in another part of the nation for government witnesses

whose lives were threatened because they had talked to police investigators. They provided such services to 122 persons during the last fiscal year.

- Bringing in a task force to Washington this spring to help find and arrest 2000 fugitive felons sought on warrants issued here.

- Maintaining a 150-man Special Operations Group that was called on last year to restore law and order to Indian-occupied Wounded Knee, S.D., and whose riot-ready members can

assemble anywhere in the country within hours to keep peace.

- Operating a nationwide bus system to transport federal prisoners. In its first two months this spring, the bus service carried 1200 prisoners back and forth across the country.

Despite their varied activities, or perhaps partly because of them, the nation's present 94 U.S. marshals (one for each federal court district) and their 1600 deputies have a low public profile.

The safe houses on both the East



"Quite honestly, I don't know why you bother."

Witnesses

and West Coasts are an example. The Marshals Service does not identify the locations of the houses or even say exactly whether it is now operating three, four or five of them.

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IT IS nothing new for federal courts and prosecutors to ask the marshals and their deputies to provide special protection for certain highly valuable and vulnerable prisoner-witnesses, considered "stool pigeons" by the criminals they are testifying against.

But until about a year ago such special prisoners were usually guarded in hotel or motel rooms, which was an expensive and not especially secure practice. The safe houses, which are guarded around the clock by deputy marshals, provide better protection, while keeping the prisoners more readily available for weeks and months of questioning by federal investigators and for courtroom appearances as government witnesses.

The principals don't wear uniforms, but their own informal clothes slacks, sports shirts, even bermudas. They are provided with small allowances and often receive some family support.

The prisoners are encouraged to use assumed names and not to talk to each other about their crimes, a standard topic in most prisons.

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THE MARSHALS SERVICE last fiscal year provided special protection for 551 witnesses, including many not held in safe houses. Different identities and relocation to another part of the country were provided for 122 of these people so they could start new lives free of the fear of retaliation.

No witness under protection by the Marshals Service has ever been assaulted.