

# The Chinese Unit

Staffed with agents who know Oriental language and culture, this unit of the DEA works to keep 'China White' off the streets of New York City.

**T**he "Chinese Unit," as it is sometimes called by the media, is Drug Enforcement Administration Group 41, which was formed in late 1985 to target Chinese heroin traffickers in New York City. The Chinese Unit's most successful arrest came in March 1988, with the arrest and indictment of Kon Yu-Leung, also known as "Johnny Kon." Yu-Leung is believed to have smuggled approximately two billion dollars worth of heroin into New York City. At the time of his arrest, nearly 1,000 kilos of heroin were seized, an amount that is nearly ten times the quantity of heroin seized in the "French Connection" case.

"Group 41 was formed to investigate heroin smuggling that originates from Southeast Asia," explained Robert Stutman, special agent in charge of the New York City field division of the Drug Enforcement Administration.

"Group 41 consists of Oriental, Caucasian and black agents from several different investigative agencies besides the DEA. There are agents and officers from the departments of Immigration and Naturalization, Internal Revenue Service, and

Customs, as well as city and state police officers. What distinguishes the group is that many of its agents are fluent in one or more of several Oriental dialects spoken in New York City."

Stutman took over the New York City field division in October of 1985. He came up with the idea of forming a special investigative group to pursue Oriental heroin traffickers soon afterwards. New York City has always had a sizable population of heroin users, estimated at nearly 200,000, which is roughly half of all users in the United States. Up until the early 1980s, heroin distribution had been controlled nearly exclusively by the Mafia.

"The Mafia controlled the distribution and production of heroin in New York City throughout the '60s and '70s," Stutman said. "That changed quickly. Major seizures, such as the 'Pizza Connection' seizure, as well as prosecutions in the United States and in Sicily have weakened the Mafia's control. Another group, the Orientals, have taken over."

Evidence of the increasing involvement of Chinese groups in heroin trafficking has been growing since the early 1980s. Of particular concern are Chinese groups smuggling unusually pure heroin that originates from the

area known as the "Golden Triangle." This is an area that includes parts of the countries of Laos, Burma and Thailand. On the streets, heroin from this region of Southeast Asia is called 'China White.'

The rise of China White in this country has been alarming. The Drug Enforcement Administration estimates that in 1983, heroin from Southeast Asia comprised about 3 percent of the heroin sold on the streets of New York City. The most recent evidence indicates that nearly 75 percent of the heroin sold on the streets comes from Southeast Asia. (There is no Mexican heroin in New York.)

This change from the Mafia as the dominant source of heroin to the Chinese has been documented in various ways over the last two years.

One indication of the rise in Oriental heroin trafficking came from Drug Enforcement Administration analysis of the heroin being sold on the streets. The DEA regularly makes buys of street heroin and analyzes it through a scientific procedure known as neutron activation analysis. Using this test, DEA chemists can make a nearly 100 percent identification of origin. Tests conducted during the last few years have confirmed that more and more of

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*Robert M. Stutman, special agent in charge of the New York City field division of the Drug Enforcement Agency, shown seated in his office on West 57th street in New York City.*

the heroin being smuggled into the United States comes from the Golden Triangle of Laos, Burma and Thailand.

Another indication of the rise in Oriental heroin trafficking is the unusual purity of the heroin. DEA experts believe that this is because the Orientals have succeeded in bypassing the Mafia middlemen with whom they normally deal.

"Chinese groups have always been involved in heroin smuggling," Stutman explained. "But up until three years ago, the Chinese dealt with only two other ethnic groups besides other Chinese; these were the Italians and the Jews.

"Today, the Chinese are dealing directly with just about everybody—Puerto Ricans, blacks, Israelis and Dominicans. For example, we raided a

house run by a group of Dominicans in Washington Heights a short time ago, and found 14 pounds of heroin still wrapped in newspapers from Hong Kong. This is something that would

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never have occurred a short time ago and is indicative of how pervasive Oriental drug trafficking has become."

Prior to taking command of the DEA's New York office, Stutman had travelled extensively and worked with foreign and international drug enforce-

ment agencies. He had never come upon an ethnic minority that Drug Enforcement Administration investigators could not penetrate. Unfortunately, however, although seizures and arrests of Chinese heroin traffickers were taking place, the DEA was unable to penetrate to the upper echelons of smuggling activity because of the differences in language and culture.

"People make a mistake when they think there is only one Chinese language," Stutman explained. "Actually, there are at least seven dialects spoken on the streets of New York. Another problem involved in the investigations of the Chinese groups is our general lack of knowledge about Southeastern Asian cultures."

Stutman wanted to form a specialized DEA group to investigate Chinese groups. However, formation of such a group might have proved impossible because of the lack of Oriental agents in the Drug Enforcement Administration, which has a total of 2,800 agents around the world.



Luckily, Stutman had in the New York office an agent—whom the DEA prefers be referred to only by his first name, Richard—who is acknowledged by United States and European law enforcement agencies as being one of the few experts on international Chinese drug smuggling. Richard is 40 years old and grew up in Pennsylvania, of Italian descent. Richard joined the DEA's New York office in 1971, and shortly thereafter became involved in investigating Oriental drug traffickers. Over the course of the next decade, the scope of Richard's investigation took him to Thailand, Taiwan and Hong Kong.

Richard immersed himself in Oriental culture during his travels. He speaks fluent French and Thai, and also the Chinese dialects of Mandarin and Cantonese. His wife is Korean. They met while he was in Korea on an investigation.

"I gave Richard the task of forming DEA Group 41," Stutman said. "I told him to wait at least a year before he made any arrests. His main task was to put the group together and make contacts within the Chinese community. We filled in the group with Chinese- and Thai-speaking agents from within the DEA. We built it up to a pretty sizable unit, and soon we were flooded with investigations.

"About eight months ago, I went out with a request to all of my counterparts in every law enforcement agency in New York City and laid out the problem. I told them that the Chinese are now controlling the heroin traffic in New York City and asked them to assist us. Virtually every agency we contacted provided us with law enforcement agents, and today DEA Group 41 now numbers well over two dozen agents and officers. Many of these agents are fluent in one or more Chinese dialects."

Agents from other enforcement agencies who were selected to work with DEA Group 41 received assignments lasting several years. For all practical purposes, although the agents would still be on the payroll of the enforcement agencies from which they

came, they were members of the Drug Enforcement Administration. Each agent was issued DEA credentials and became an integral part of Group 41.

Richard has never been photographed. He has been interviewed only once, when *New York Times* reporter, Peter Kerr, was allowed to accompany Richard on the surveillance and arrest of Dong Hsiang Chen and Yin Yuen Wong. This investigation lasted approximately 20 months and

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resulted in the seizure of 7.5 million dollars worth of China White.

Robert M. Stutman has won kudos and national publicity for his innovative enforcement ideas. For instance, he pioneered the seizure of drug buyers' cars under federal law, allowing investigators to go after out-of-state users coming to buy drugs in New York. On another occasion, to show how grave the crack situation is, he convinced New York State Senator Alphonse M. D'Amato and United States Attorney Rudolf Guiliani to make a plainclothes drug buy in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Washington Heights, to dramatize how easy buying crack is.

Stutman has his detractors, who have criticized him for breaking from the DEA tradition of anonymity in regard to its operations. Rather than take offense at such criticism, the person-

able Stutman has dubbed himself "Captain Bob Video," and encourages his detractors to call him by that name.

In Stutman's first year in command of the New York office, DEA arrests jumped nearly 80 percent, while seizures of cocaine nearly doubled. In fact, cocaine trafficking headed Stutman's list of priorities upon being assigned to the New York office.

Late in 1988, DEA agents seized nearly 8,500 pounds of cocaine from the Medellin group, which is one of the two largest Columbian cocaine cartels operating in the United States. The other cartel is the Cali group. The groups are named for the cities of Medellin and Cali in Columbia.

"The papers described this as a 'sting' operation," Stutman explained. "It was much more than that. Thanks to some incredible police work, we managed to penetrate the Medellin cocaine cartel, and several key traffickers were arrested."

In retaliation, the Medellin group has openly declared that it intends to assassinate Stutman and Sterling Johnson, New York City's special narcotics prosecutor.

"We get very angry at this type of thing," Stutman said. Nonetheless, Stutman is concerned that the Medellin group, which has traditionally controlled the cocaine trade in the Southeastern United States, is trying to take over New York City distribution from the Cali group.

"The Medellin group is the traditionally violent group," Stutman explained, "much more violent than the Cali group. I would not doubt, and have strong reason to believe, that there will be strong intergroup rivalry here in New York. The Cali group, which has controlled cocaine distribution in New York for the past decade, is not going to back off. We have strong reason to believe that both groups are importing shooters into the area, to get ready to defend their turf."

The DEA, in turn, has no intention of backing down. ■

Mr. Paradise is a free-lance writer whose latest book is *Cockatiels*.