

Behind the Badge

By Joseph Wenzel
Bradford County WCO

“And, after all, what is a lie? Tis but the truth in masquerade.”

— Lord Byron

The Charade

THE WEATHER was unusually mild that hunting season. I believe it was 2003. As I recall there was no snow cover, which was not what we are used to on the Pocono Plateau. One of the benefits of being a region supervisor, which I was at the time, was being able to get out and work with the region's WCOs during the hunting seasons, especially those who didn't have a deputy or anyone else to work with.

The first Saturday of the late flintlock deer season I chose to work with now retired WCO Ray Lizzio, who was covering eastern Carbon County. Years prior I had been Ray's neighboring officer in the western half of the county, so I was pretty familiar with his district. I met Ray early that morning at Beltzville. It felt good to be the passenger, and just being an extra set of eyes as we headed out on patrol. Ray did not have anything in particular to concentrate on that day, so we just worked our way across the district. It was nearing noon as we skirted along the Blue Mountain, checking all the nooks and crannies for hunters. I was surprised at how many hunters were out that day. Ray and I were pleased to see several groups of hunters putting on deer drives, which reminded me a lot of my early years of hunting with my family. It was good to see so many hunters out enjoying themselves.

We were on a road in Lower Towamensing Township that led into Eldred Township, Monroe County. Just over the county line we noticed several vehicles parked along the roadway at the bottom of a steep hillside. A good portion of the hillside was wooded, but it was surrounded by several large open fields. Ray mentioned that there was a paved road up on top, and it was likely that hunters parked up there were driving the woods out to the bottom, to the watchers' vehicles.

Although during the late flintlock season hunters are not required to wear fluorescent orange, many do. As we scanned the hillside we could see hunters making their way down the hill. It seemed there were at least 20 in this group. Ray and I scanned the hillside with binoculars, and about 800 yards away a few guys came together in an open field and appeared to be talking. I watched one hunter in particular who seemed to be acting strange. I pointed out the guy to Ray and we concluded that because we could see them, they could see us. I'm sure our Game Commission vehicle caught their attention. At that point some of the hunters dispersed and headed back up over the hill, while others kept making their way in our direction. Most likely they didn't have a roster, required when 25 or more hunters are in a group.

I kept my attention on the one hunter in particular, as Ray continued to scan the group as they continued on. Ray and I decided that we would need to check some licenses and to see how the gang was making out. I remember Ray and I joking that we were going to come off as two lazy game wardens just riding around being oblivious to reality. Ray said, "That shouldn't be hard to do," as we continued to laugh about it.

The hunter I was focusing on was definitely carrying a flintlock rifle. Just as he walked past the last corner of the woodlot he seemed to make an abrupt about-face and entered the woods. Because he was in camo and had no orange, he was difficult to see at times, but

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I could catch some movement. Finally he stepped back out into the field. "Uh-oh, Ray, our guy just came out of the woods without his rifle," I said.

I made a mental note of the location where the hunter entered the woods and where he exited. Ray and I wondered what the guy's problem was. Could it be he had no valid deer tags or no license at all? Was there something about his firearm? All we could do was wait and see.

Finally, the remaining hunters who chose not to break back up over the hill arrived at our location. Ray and I got out and made friendly conversation about the day, the weather and their hunt, all while we checked everyone's licenses and identification. When I checked the one particular hunter's license I noticed his antlered deer tag was missing and he had no antlerless deer license in his holder. "It looks like you had a successful season," I said. He told us that he was just helping out his buddies drive deer and, in fact, he did have a valid muzzleloader stamp attached to his back tag. Again I made a mental note of his name and license number.

Everyone then jumped in their vehicles and started heading out. Ray took note and jotted down the vehicle license number from the truck our suspect was driving. As everyone pulled away Ray decided we would drive to the top of the hill to see who had walked back to their vehicles from the deer drive. Everyone was gone, though.

We drove back down to the dirt township road where we had been sitting but continued farther down the road directly below the large woodlot. We were anxious to head into the woods to see if we could find the guy's rifle. Ray and I climbed the steep hillside to look around. When we neared the top corner where we had last seen the hunter in question exit, Ray looked for some kind of a marker, maybe a rock or a stick the hunter may have left as a landmark. I started zigzagging my way up toward the open field when I came upon a large decaying log. Sure enough, there lay the flintlock rifle. Ray came down and surveyed the area. He took a few photos of the gun just as we found it. Ray carefully picked up the flintlock rifle and we noted that there was powder in the flash pan.

We briefly discussed the next course of action. We could either stake out the area, which could take hours and it would be difficult to hide our vehicle, or we could take the gun and leave a business card by the log. We decided to take the firearm and Ray tagged it with an evidence tag. We documented everything that had occurred, along with the suspect's information that we recalled from our license check. Ray called the region office to run the vehicle information, which came back to our person of interest. Ray and I continued patrolling into the evening, wondering when the rest of this story was going to unfold. It was near dark when Ray drove me back to my car. In parting I asked Ray to keep me posted, as I was quite interested in how this case was going to play out.

The following Monday morning I was at my desk at the Northeast Region Office when Ray called to tell me that he had just gotten off the phone with our suspect. Ray said the first words out of the guy's mouth were, "What's it going to cost me to get my gun back?" Ray implied that the guy was pretty straight forward and admitted to him that he had already killed a buck earlier in the season, and was in fact trying to kill another deer unlawfully. The guy ended up pleading guilty to at least two charges and his firearm was returned. Through the years I can think of many circumstances where a hunter in an unlawful situation would go to great lengths to deceive us, as if they were playing charades. I've told many a coworker over the course of my career that if only some of these people could see themselves through our eyes and how foolish they are acting just to cheat the system or to take advantage of our natural resources. I think WCO Lizzio and I did a pretty good job of playing the game ourselves that day.