

Predawn arrest in New Orleans triggers seven-state FBI sweep

November 8, 1990

By **Carlos Harrison**

At 5 a.m. Wednesday, 25 elite FBI arrest teams banged on doors in seven states, summoning followers of Yahweh Ben Yahweh to answer their indictment. Minutes earlier, the phone had rung in a \$390-a-night New Orleans hotel suite, waking the sect's leader:

"FBI," he was told. "We have a warrant for your arrest."

By the time the FBI pounced in seven other cities, Yahweh Ben Yahweh -- known to his followers as the "True God," known to the FBI as Hulon Mitchell Jr. -- was in metal handcuffs. If he had somehow slipped the net, the raids on the others would have been called off until Mitchell was found.

For six weeks, even before a Miami federal grand jury issued the racketeering indictment against 17 Yahwehs, the FBI plotted the precision predawn raids. The operations were successful in four states.

They had been tailing Mitchell in New Orleans since Monday, when he stepped off a plane from Miami and checked into a two-bedroom suite on the 14th floor of the Monteleone hotel in the French Quarter, a block off Bourbon Street.

When the phone rang early Wednesday, he answered it himself.

Mitchell asked for a few minutes to get dressed. The FBI agreed and asked him to order the two bodyguards stationed outside his door not to resist. Mitchell agreed.

When he stepped out into the hallway in his white robe and turban, he was met by a 10-man arrest team.

Then an agent telephoned FBI headquarters in Miami, the command center for the Yahweh sweep, and said Mitchell was in custody. The rest of the raids were on.

FBI agents planned to meet the worst that the militant, white-robed sect could offer -- to "overpower any firepower" they might encounter, as one agent put it.

For the Dade County raids, the government sent in heavily armed FBI and Florida Department of Law Enforcement agents and Metro-Dade and Miami police SWAT teams. The two local departments also sent homicide detectives who had investigated the 14 murder cases behind the indictment. In all, nearly 300 law enforcement officers hit their South Florida targets on cue.

Minutes before the raid on the headquarters of the Yahweh Nation began, Metro squad cars with warning lights flashing blocked off traffic in a three-block perimeter surrounding the Temple of Love, 2766 NW 62nd St. FBI sedans and police squad cars similarly swooped to keep passersby back from Yahweh-owned apartment complexes and private homes throughout the county.

More than 50 agents and Metro police circled the Temple of Love, a sprawling, single-story complex nearly a city block long that is painted traditional Yahweh white. The FBI agents brandished riot pump shotguns, M-16 assault rifles and 9mm SigSauer pistols. They wore body armor over their blue combat suits.

They were looking for the people named in the federal grand jury indictment. They were not looking for evidence or weapons.

Each arrest team leader carried 17 photographs -- one of each of the Yahwehs named in the indictment.

Ninety-two minutes before sunrise, a 10-man FBI arrest team sprinted across the temple's parking lot and pounded on a metal-grated door. The Yahweh members inside refused to open up. The FBI then smashed through the glass and metal with a modern-day battering ram.

As the team fanned out through the building, other raiders searched through six motor coaches and six sedans -- all painted Yahweh white -- that were parked in front. Miami Special-Agent-in-Charge William Gavin said 12 to 15 people were escorted

from the temple and ordered to lie down on the asphalt parking lot.

One of the people inside matched a photograph in the team leader's pocket. Richard Ingraham, 48, was handcuffed and driven away to FBI's North Dade headquarters.

The other Yahwehs were released.

Similar successful raids, all without shooting, took place in South Miami; Carol City; Liberty City; Durham, N.C.; and Atlanta, where Linda Gaines, the deputy leader of the sect, was grabbed as she drove a white Lincoln sedan from the garage under Arts Center Tower, an upscale high-rise apartment building.

Back in Miami, Robert Randolph saw FBI agents arrest his neighbor, William Lightburn, at a Yahweh-owned apartment building, 1241 NW 61st St.

Randolph, who woke up early to take a friend to work, said 15 to 20 agents gathered outside the white, three-story building. He watched agents break a lock on a black iron gate, dash across a courtyard and emerge moments later with Lightburn in handcuffs.

"It was done so professionally. They really meant to get whoever they were after," said Randolph, who said he did not know Lightburn.

Three other Yahwehs named in the indictment were arrested as they drove west on Interstate 10 just outside Lafayette, La., about two hours from New Orleans. Two FBI agents in a Cessna spotted their white van and bus about 6 a.m. and radioed to Louisiana state troopers to stop them.

The dragnet missed four of the 17 indicted Yahwehs. Wednesday night, the search continued in five states, including Florida.

Herald staff writers Arnold Markowitz, Sharony Andrews and Rene Rodriguez contributed to this report.