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Orinda detective recognized for work with FBI, and nabbing 'the shaggy bank robber'

By Sora O'Doherty



Detective Denny Cai recognized Photo Sora O'Doherty

It wasn't like television when Orinda detective Denny Cai teamed up with the Federal Bureau of Investigation to track down and arrest a bank robber who had robbed two banks in Orinda and 17 others in the Bay Area. There wasn't any interagency resentment; all the officers worked together toward a common goal that was achieved when Cai entered a hospital room in Oakland where Duane Makela had just become a father and Cai arrested him on 19 counts of bank robbery.

Makela allegedly robbed the Bank of the West in Orinda on April 17, 2018, of \$13,000. In November of that year he allegedly robbed the Orinda branch of Wells Fargo of \$800. No one was hurt during either robbery, but at Wells Fargo Cai says that the suspect pretended to have a gun and pointed it at the teller.

During this period, the San Ramon police department was investigating a similar robbery. The FBI was also looking into a series of Bay Area robberies. The robber had been dubbed "the shaggy bank robber" owing to his modus operandus of wearing a disguise with fake facial hair, a wig, and glasses or sunglasses.

After the first Orinda robbery, Cai watched footage from a city camera mounted near the roof on a Bryant Way building that points toward CVS. During the hour-long footage, Cai saw the suspect walking up Moraga Way. It could be seen that he was driving a black Mercedes van. When the suspect drove off, Cai could see he was

wearing an orange sweater. Cai looked at footage from the camera mounted at the eastbound Highway 24 entrance and caught the license plate. It turned out that the vehicle had been stolen earlier the same day in Walnut Creek.

This did not lead to an arrest, however, and the matter became a cold case. But then there was another robbery in November at the Orinda Wells Fargo. Police knew it was the same guy: wig, glasses, fake facial hair. This guy was committing robberies all over the Bay Area, Lake Tahoe, Mountain View. The break in the case came when the robber dropped his demand note and the police were able to find a fingerprint on the note, which led to Makela.

An FBI agent who was the liaison on the robberies called Cai, who was able to find Makela's phone number on a public database. He wrote a search warrant and asked a judge to ask the carrier to release all call information for a day or two before and after the robberies in Orinda. About two weeks after the warrant was served, Cai received the information.

On April 17 Makela was in the city of Orinda when his mother called him around the time of the robbery. The call was captured by a cell phone tower near the bank. A couple of hours earlier, Makela's cell phone pinged off in Walnut Creek, where the vehicle was stolen. Cai now had probable cause to believe that Makela was the suspect. He obtained a Ramie warrant - a pre-complaint warrant that bypasses the district attorney who is looking for something proven beyond a reasonable doubt to file charges. The FBI wrote a search warrant for the suspect's house in Oakland. At the time, the Ramie warrant was still active. Orinda PD was the only agency that had a warrant out for Makela's arrest.

The FBI planned to do a search to find anything related to the robberies. On April 23, 19 search warrants were executed. Cai - the only police department detective involved in the search - met the FBI at a parking lot where 30 to 40 FBI agents gathered. Oakland police helped by closing off the road. When the group executed the warrants, the agents found disguises, fake facial hair, and a BB gun. A vehicle search revealed a pipe bomb, which the Alameda County bomb squad determined was a hoax bomb.

According to Makela's father, who was at the house being searched, Makela's wife had just given birth and his son was at Kaiser Oakland. Ramie warrant in hand, Cai and another Orinda police officer asked an Oakland sergeant for a couple of Oakland officers to join them.

In plain clothes, Cai knocked on the door, walked in and identified himself, he recalls, "then I took control of him, put him in handcuffs," adding, "Unfortunately the wife had to see all this." Cai told Makela he was under arrest for bank robbery and took his property - a laptop suitcase that contained a BB gun, methamphetamines, lottery tickets, and more than six cell phones. Makela eventually confessed to the robberies and was charged with 19 counts, to which he pleaded guilty. Makela remains in jail pending sentencing in January. The 19 bank robberies netted him about \$70,000.

The Orinda City Council recognized Cai's accomplishment at its Dec. 3 meeting. Cai was also recognized as the Officer of the Year in 2016.

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