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Once a model cop, now the dirtiest?

CHARGED IN MURDER PLOT | 'Resume looked great,' but reality may be much darker

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His law enforcement career started badly -- and will probably end much, much worse.

Back in 1984, Jerome Finnigan was 21 and in training to become a state correctional officer.

But he was fired after only five months, said Department of Corrections spokeswoman Dede Short, who didn't know why.

That failure didn't stop Finnigan from getting hired in 1988 as a beat officer in the Chicago Police Department's rough-and-tumble Englewood District. Soon he was transferred to the citywide gang crimes unit, which he left in 1993 to become a member of the elite Special Operations Section.

Finnigan, 44, won numerous awards for his work in SOS. He was a member of the Hostage-Barricade-Terrorist Incident team and won the Superintendent's Award of Valor in 1999 for saving a store owner during a robbery attempt. He also was named top cop by the Illinois Police Association.

Now, however, Finnigan is accused of being one of the Chicago Police Department's dirtiest cops.

Fired after September 2006 arrest

Finnigan was charged last year in Cook County Criminal Court with leading a band of six other SOS officers in carrying out home invasions, robberies and assaults since 2002. One of his co-defendants, Officer Thomas Sherry, boasted on his MySpace site that he was a fan of Vic Mackey, the fictional crooked cop in the TV show, "The Shield."

In an eerie parallel to "The Shield," Finnigan was charged last week in federal court with plotting the murder of a former officer cooperating with prosecutors in the corruption case. When he was freed in lieu of \$4 million bail last year in the corruption case, Finnigan allegedly told fellow SOS Officer Keith Herrera that he felt like killing himself and "would take someone out" if he had to go back to jail.

Finnigan, who is being held in a federal lockup, could not be reached for comment. His attorney did not return calls.

Right up to the point he was first arrested last year, Finnigan was considered by many to be a model cop.

He was appointed a member of the Summit Police and Fire Commission in February 2006, using an SOS boss, John "Jake" Blake, as a reference. He knew one of the village trustees because their kids went to school together.

"His resume looked great with all those accolades," said board chairman Eugene Wroblewski.

But Finnigan attended only two or three meetings, saying he was "tied up in court," and was fired after his September 2006 arrest.

DuPage County State's Attorney Joe Birkett once thought Finnigan was a good cop, too.

They met before Birkett ran for Illinois attorney general in 2002. Birkett was visiting

the Chicago Police Department's Austin District on the Far West Side.

"I was in the hallway," Birkett recalled. "He said nice things and handed me his card. He said, 'Joe, if you ever need any help' and I said 'thanks.'"

Finnigan started coming to Birkett's events, including a high-profile fund-raiser. Birkett said he checked with his Cook County counterparts and was told Finnigan was a decorated, respected cop.

"Of course, now I think this guy should go down and never see the light of day again," Birkett said.

Birkett said he's not going to return Finnigan's \$2,500 in political contributions between 2004 and 2006. Instead, he plans to donate \$2,500 to charity.

"Talk about a huge stain on the Chicago Police Department," Birkett said.

Finnigan, called Jerry by his friends and family, is married with a 16-year-old son and was living on the South Side. He's one of 12 siblings.

He graduated in 1981 from Kelly High School on the South Side and attended various city colleges and Lewis University in Romeoville, where he studied criminal justice, according to his resume and other records.

Brother's suicide 'was very traumatic'

Finnigan was a carpenter before becoming a cop, and his father was a painter. Ironically, in his murder-for-hire case, he's accused of code-naming intended murders as "paint jobs."

In 1999, he was rocked by a tragedy in his family, which some people close to his corruption case say may have sent him off the deep end.

A brother, John Finnigan, committed suicide with his girlfriend's .38-caliber pistol.

The girlfriend, Chicago Police Officer Mariam Hamad, said they had argued after visiting a Rush Street bar. At her Northwest Side home, John Finnigan asked if she wanted to play Russian roulette before he shot himself in the head, she said.

"The family didn't want to believe that he killed himself. They wanted to blame somebody, and that person was me," Hamad told the Chicago Police Board in 2006.

Jerome Finnigan was furious that Hamad kept his brother's Ford Taurus after his death.

For two years after the suicide, Finnigan drove past her home looking for the car. Then in 2001, a cop tipped him that it was in her driveway. Finnigan and SOS partner Carl Suchocki, also a co-defendant in the corruption case, drove to Hamad's home and had the car towed, records show.

In his testimony at Hamad's 2006 Police Board hearing, Finnigan acknowledged he never forgave her for his brother's death, saying, "I didn't really want to talk to her."

"I don't know if you lost a family member, but my brother was very close to me and it was very traumatic for me," Finnigan testified. "To be honest with you, it took me a long time to get over it."

Birkett is confident the courts will come to the right decision on Finnigan's fate.

"It's always sad to see officers abuse the badge. He is going to be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law."