



— PORTRAIT NICK CUBBIN —

Back in uniform after three years as an undercover cop, Bob Ridley was called to attend a car parked across a driveway. Handling such trifles could sometimes be bewildering for someone who had spent so long locking up big-time crims, bonging with bikies and training himself in details such as always throwing his litter on the ground when the crooks were around.

Confronted with the errant car, he climbed in, broke the steering lock with brute force, hot-wired it with pliers, like his crim mates had shown him, and moved the thing. Problem solved.

Other coppers knew where he'd come from; that the Russian mob had a contract on his life. And they appreciated that he got the job done. But with speed pumping through his veins and demons coursing through his dreams, it was always going to end in tears. ▶

HELL & BACK

Bitter at their treatment by the police force and out for compensation, undercover coppers tell their stories of trauma, breakdown and abandonment to *Mark Whittaker*.



Former undercover cops Bob Ridley (left, with a target from a bikie gang) and Andrew Curran both sued the force. "They just used us like pawns in a chess game," says Ridley.

The shrink called it an adjustment disorder. It culminated in a nervous breakdown in 1998 and with Ridley suing the NSW force for not looking after him. This April, he instructed his solicitors to settle for \$100,000, plus costs, the last of several such offers. But with at least seven other former undercover operatives lining up to sue the force in NSW, and seven more in Queensland (three of which go to the High Court this week), the police were not interested in setting precedents.

Determined to see someone brought to account for what he'd been through, Ridley gambled his house on the outcome. When the judgment came down this October, he was awarded \$750,000, now subject to an appeal. And so the legal battles are set to continue, and these formerly secretive coppers are coming out of smoke-filled corners to tell their stories about the job and the police forces that created them, then set them loose.

CRICKETER AND WORLD WAR II bomber pilot Keith Miller famously remarked that pressure was a Messerschmitt up your arse. Former undercover cop Andrew Curran can match that. Pressure was infiltrating a marijuana gang suspected of seven murders, then having your cover blown by a Crime Commission search warrant and not being told your cover was blown. Pressure was then turning up for a \$40,000 drug deal on the edge of Pacific Highway on the NSW North Coast and finding yourself in the headlock of a great hairy beast, trying to find the tape-recorder strapped to your body while four semi-trailers roar past a metre from your head. Then, having the balls to yell at him: "Touch me again, you c..., I'll blow your f..king

brains out," just as the beast's hand touches the recorder without noticing.

Curran spent years suing the force for not fulfilling its duty of care to him over this and other such incidents. He took the case through drawn-out preliminary proceedings, battling the bottomless pockets of a police department that turned up to court with two QCs, two other barristers and three solicitors.

But having at last got his case to the hearing proper in February this year, the first undercover to test the legal waters, he realised he couldn't take the stress any more. He says he would have reverted to the suicidal mess he had been on the day he decided to leave the force back in 1999 – when he found himself on the couch sucking a 9mm semi-automatic with a round up the spout and the hammer cocked.

Since then, he'd battled to get his wife and his life back and couldn't face it again. He dropped the case.

Curran does not try to hide his bitterness at having risked his life to make the hierarchy look good, the same faceless entity prepared to spend a million dollars to crush him.

"What they spent on my matter alone they could have paid the lot of us out with a confidentiality clause, and no one would have been the bloody wiser. We weren't looking to make a fortune, just 'how about some recognition for being to hell and back?' and some remuneration for the losses. Believe me, it hasn't been a little bit of pain and suffering for me, the wife and the kids.

"I'm one of the lucky ones; I'm one of the few that doesn't have a drug problem. Got a huge alcohol problem, but not an illicit drug problem. Most of my [former undercover] mates have real problems. Mostly speed and coke and smoko. Some end up on heroin."

GENERALLY IT WAS AN AFTERNOON shift. Bob Ridley would go out to meet informants or crooks. He recalls one day he got a sample of speed from Sydney's western suburbs. He rode the police Harley back to base, got into a car and, slicking his long hair back into a ponytail, drove to the eastern suburbs to buy some cocaine. He came back to base, took his hair out and drove back to Auburn, in the west, for some heroin. Sometimes his name was Neil, sometimes Charlie, sometimes Butch. He'd have to repeat to himself, "Right, this is a heroin job. You're buying this amount. You come from here. Your name is ..." Someone would give him a toke on a joint somewhere along the way, and that wouldn't help. The job came with a car, an expense account for beer, and a buzz you wouldn't believe.

The world revolved around nightclubs and pubs. If there was nothing on, he'd be out meeting people for intelligence. "Know where I can get on?" The shift ended at 11pm, but sometimes it wouldn't. "You'd sort of just lose yourself in the city, you know?"

Ridley was big. Other cops called him Arnie because of his bodybuilder physique, which landed him a lot of bikie jobs where size and tats mattered. His boss, Mick Drury, of *Blue Murder* fame, described him as an "absolute champion" who never knocked back a job.

Ridley declines to talk about many details, such as how he came to buddy up to the Comancheros and negotiate to buy 10kg of hash off them. Trade secret. But he wants to talk about the bust. It was July 1990, on a half-hectare property at Oxford Falls, in Sydney's north. Six bikers showed up to be in on the deal.

When the \$130,000 was counted and the cellophane-wrapped blocks of hash sighted, Ridley said a code word to call

in the massed troops. There was a roar of engines as 15 police cars went racing down the driveway next door. Wrong house. Ridley and his offside suddenly felt very alone with half a dozen very concerned Comancheros, some of whom they knew were armed.

Ridley decided he had to bluff. He grabbed the principal by the ponytail. "The joke's up. We're the cops." His mate jumped on the back of a leather-clad gorilla and rode him around the paddock, telling him he was under arrest. "Get down. You're surrounded. Don't make it hard for yourselves."

Eventually the cop cars came down the right driveway and the arrest was done. It was a moment Ridley would relive often, wondering how bad it could have got. But at that time, early in his career, there was nothing else to do but get straight to the nearest pub with his colleagues and try to drink the adrenalin away.

Two months later he began his formal training as an undercover operative, much of which involved learning drug lingo and metric conversions that Ridley still reels off with ease.

There was a job where he was the money man on another operative's bust. The other operative, "Brad", had organised to buy a pound of heroin for \$75,000 (Ridley seems to recall all the quantities and prices) from a Chinese gang. There'd been a complication, though. The night before the deal was to go down, the targets were believed to have murdered a man in the inner-Sydney suburb of Marrickville. So it was a charged atmosphere when the two cops pulled their car over on a dark street to do the deal with the two gang members in the back.

It was comforting to know that police snipers had head shots on the two back-seat passengers. But as the deal was



'It's like heroin'

Victorian ex-undercover operative Damian Marrett (above) reckons no one gets out of his former line of work unscathed.

Back in the early '90s, Victoria led the way in demanding its operatives be psychologically counselled every three months. Other states have followed that lead in the hope of stemming the tide of damaged undercovers falling by the wayside. While no ex-operatives are suing the force in Victoria, Marrett says it has nothing to do with the counselling.

"It was tick-a-box bullshit," he says. "You'd drop down there, tick your name off, talk to the psych for half an hour – Yeah, I've got no problems' – and then you leave. You might know you're having problems but you still sit there. You're an undercover, so you can make them think you're OK, like you do on every job. You might be shit-scared but you sit there and act fine."

Why did he do that?

"Doing undercover is like heroin. You can't stop using, even though you know it's giving you these problems. You want to do bigger and bigger jobs and you don't want to threaten that..."

"I believed I could fix myself better than a psych could, if I got the chance to sort it out. It's just that you never get a chance to stop and take note of what is happening."

Marrett wrote a book, *Undercover*, about his role in bringing down key members of the Griffith mafia. In it, he details his breakdown, but says he didn't go into the full extent of it. No need to put it all out there and have people think there was something wrong with him. "I've seen it happen to so many undercovers; it is not a reflection on the individual. You cannot put yourself under that sort of pressure without having something happen because of it."

He also didn't mention taking drugs in the book, to avoid any poor reflection on Victoria Police or the undercover unit. "Our written policy is we don't take drugs. You'd love to write a book with the whole truth, but you've got to be a bit careful."



Ridley (above right) with Russian mafia boss Alex Nuchimov (above left; below). "The scariest mob of bastards I've ever met," says Ridley.

being done, a car came flying over the hill towards them. There was an almighty screeching of tyres as the driver pulled a handbrake turn. Everybody in the car swung their heads towards it. "Before we knew it there were guns pointing through the windows," recalls Ridley. Fortunately they were the good guys' guns. Unknown to the two undercovers, the car had been a diversionary tactic. Again, it was off to "debrief" with beer, to slow the racing heart. ("Brad" later rose to the rank of detective inspector but he had his breakdown last year and is now on a "hurt on duty" pension.)

Meanwhile, Ridley was knee-deep in a Russian mafia job. For 18 months he pretended to be a go-between for the triads doing a complex deal with Russian mob boss Alex Nuchimov and what he calls "the eastern suburbs good crooks".

Gangster George Savvas was putting the money together from his jail cell in Long Bay. "Con Kapeliotis, Savvas's offsider, had five or six Customs people on the payroll. He showed me how to wax the inside of a suitcase so we could bring heroin in without the dogs detecting it. [Drug importation charges against Kapeliotis had been dropped in the early 1990s because an AFP undercover was unable to give evidence due to a "stress-related illness".] We had a Russian diplomat, one of Alex Nuchimov's friends, who could come in and out of the country without being searched."

After 24 meetings with Nuchimov, the bust came down in mid-1992, and Nuchimov, Savvas and the crew were charged with conspiring to import 40kg of cocaine and 20kg of heroin. The bust also netted 750kg of hash.

But Ridley wasn't going to extricate himself easily from such a betrayal. A police intercept picked up that Nuchimov had contracted a hit man to kill him. Ridley was put into witness protection

with his wife. They moved house, but he opted not to have a 24-hour guard. He couldn't see himself living with someone breathing down his neck, and it wouldn't have lasted anyway. He opted for a Browning 9mm semi-automatic pistol instead. "It caused a hell of a lot of turmoil in our life, during which time the police offered no counselling. I continued to do undercover work, continued to give my real name in unrelated court matters. Just no protection in that regard. But as a dedicated copper who wanted to go somewhere in the police, you're not going to start whingeing."

But Ridley was spooked. He was told the name of the hit man and he knew the Russians didn't mess around. "They would be the scariest mob of bastards I've ever met. They don't take prisoners. Their coldness ... Bikies will threaten and carry on. Russians, they'll carry out their threats."

It was right in the middle of this turmoil that he was taken to a heroin supplier's house by two female dealers. He'd never met the supplier but they got straight down to business, talking about a large buy of smack. "Try some of it now," the supplier said, lacing a joint with heroin and passing it over.

Ridley had taken a lot of speed in the line of duty, but never heroin. He knew, however, his credibility was on the line. "I tried to simulate it but you can't do that when he's standing there staring at you." Ridley took a puff and felt sick – almost vomited. Then he felt cruisy for a while, but he knew it was wrong and felt bad that his life had come to this.

"I'd lost contact with my wife. I wasn't home often. I drifted apart from



her. It was none of her doing; it was mine. She went through a hell period with me. I feel sad and sorry that it happened, but it did.

"That's another failing of the police department. They knew I was having marriage problems but it was never addressed. Heavy drinking, not going home, not being interested in seeing friends.

Being introverted at home, running jobs from home, being on the phone constantly to crooks – all that sort of thing."

WITHIN A FEW MONTHS OF puffing on that joint, Ridley's two-and-a-half years of undercover work were over, as was his marriage. He finished a 13kg cannabis job on a Thursday and on Monday was at Task Force 4 investigating clandestine speed laboratories. "I wasn't given any training to come back to who I was."

Ridley continued hitting the same nightspots in his own time, continued taking drugs. Sydney was a big enough place that his "friends" need not know that big "Neil" was a cop.

"When you're living the life of someone else for so long, it doesn't take Einstein to figure out that eventually it's going to rub off and you're going to believe you fit in better with these people. I know now it was nothing more than trying to find my real identity. I was having a hard time becoming Bob Ridley again.

"It's something you don't know is creeping up on you, and all of a sudden it's got you and you don't know it's got you. What they [the police] should have done was work through the issues I had. I should have been counselled and reaffirmed who I was."



Ridley (above left) at a meeting with Con Kapeliotis, later jailed over a drug importation conspiracy, as was George Sawvas (below).

Such policies are in place now across the country, with forces going to extraordinary lengths to manage the mental health of operatives. They are slowly reintroduced to the mainstream, like prisoners on day-release, counselled regularly and drug-tested.

But in 1992 it didn't matter because, knowing the worth of a good operative, the taskforce sent him

back undercover to have a crack at the Rebels bikie gang. His undercover girlfriend was "Stephanie" [she did not want her real name published], who had been doing undercover work for six years.

Arriving cold in Queanbeyan, near Canberra, they had no easy introduction into the gang, so when Ridley saw one of the gang had a bike for sale, he went and had a test ride, struck up a friendship and they were away. His story was that he was associated with a nightclub in Sydney and was looking for a new supply of speed. Sydney gear was too expensive and didn't have enough kick. Spending up to 12 nights at a time in town, they ended up staying at a farmhouse with a whole lot of Rebel associates, living the life of booze, loud music and racing off to find smoko when the bowl ran dry.

One night, Stephanie went out with the bikie women to see the Chippendales male-stripper show. The women were loud and abrasive and lots of fun. As she inevitably did, Stephanie found herself liking the targets.

Stephanie had topped her class at the academy and topped it again on the detectives course. She had three degrees and aspired to be the first female commissioner. In her six years undercover, she had never felt scared on a job. No one had ever suspected her of being



a cop, and no-one had ever expected her to take drugs.

It was different for girls. She got closer to her subjects than the men, spent longer on the jobs and was invariably invited home for dinner and given a grand tour of her targets' shabby little homes. She played with the kids and rarely felt good about locking up their parents.

It would be seven more years of undercover work, and another four trying to recover, before she suffered her breakdown, being diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder in 2003.

She realises now that the day she went undercover was the day her dream of becoming commissioner was lost. Her civil action against the police force begins in May.

This was just another job for Stephanie, and she wouldn't remember much about it, but for Ridley the demons were already dancing. He was at the bikie farm one night, buying an ounce of speed with no back-up. The chief target was using a hunting knife to chop up the white crystals on the kitchen table. He put a fat line on the blade and stuck it under Ridley's chin, the blade pointing towards his throat. "Try it now, mate."

Ridley was sure it was a test. He couldn't flinch. He buried his nose deep in the powder, top lip on cold steel, and snorted it all up. But that was it, the end of his undercover career. Next day, he canned the job; he wasn't going back.

His commander wanted to lock up everyone who'd supplied him so far, but Ridley wouldn't be in it. "I will not give evidence," Ridley told him. "It doesn't amount to enough and I'm not exposing myself to any more danger for some

minor charges. So you can take it or leave it." They left it.

"My state of mind was f..ked up anyway," explains Ridley. "I'd had enough of the whole thing. I could see I was being used."

"The big lie through this whole thing is the company line that you will never take a drug unless your life is on the line. When you're undercover, your life is on the line every minute you're out there."

ALEX NUCHIMOV ESCAPED FROM jail in January 1994, shortly before his committal hearing began. He's never been seen since. In the wake of the escape, Ridley felt that penny-pinching stopped him being properly protected. "All of a sudden I realised I wasn't going to be looked after the way I thought I was going to be. The promotional side of things wasn't going to occur after my excellent undercover work. I dropped out of the detectives training course and said, 'I just want to go back to general duties.'"

So, even as his undercover work saw George Savvas sentenced to 18 years in jail, Kapeliotis five years and a third man four years, in 1994, Ridley's career was back-peddalling.

General duties didn't work out, and he found his way to the Water Police. But he was still escaping into the city at night. Still being Neil.

Then, in 1998, an old case Ridley had done years earlier turned up in court. The vice-president of the Black Uhlans bikie gang was up for trial. The case officer who was supposed to run the matter couldn't be there, so Ridley found himself running the show, in court every day, facing the accused and his family and friends - people Ridley had befriended. "I shouldn't have been doing it. As an undercover operative, you should just go in, give your evidence

and go away." The bikie's cohorts eyeballed Ridley in court, sometimes pointing fingers at their heads like guns, mouthing "F..k you" or "You're dead". They followed him around the court precinct. He asked for protection but got none.

"The Water Police didn't understand and they expected me to work nights as well as the court matter in the day. I was getting hammered from both ends."

When the bikie went down for seven years, one of his kids yelled out "Daddy!" as he was taken from the dock. Ridley felt nothing but pity. Which side was he on? He didn't know any more.

He had his nervous breakdown six days later, finding himself driving the streets in a suicidal mess.

WE'RE SITTING ON RIDLEY'S balcony up the coast, having a beer in the sun. He owns a small business, is remarried and lives in a great house. He seems a big, gentle guy. "I can't fathom what was going through my mind," he says, "but I feel I've come out of it stronger now. I feel vindicated because of the judgment - that I wasn't wrong. When you leave under a cloud, like I did, you feel like you've let yourself down, your partner down, your family down. Your career's in tatters. You feel like everyone's talking about you. Paranoia is a big part of being an undercover operative. You do get paranoid."

He blames merit-based promotions for what happened to him and all the colleagues he's seen bent out of shape. The bigger the bust, the higher the bosses would climb.

"When you've got a tool like me in the shed, use it up till it wears out, then get a new one. Those commanders who were in charge then, they just used us like pawns in a chess game. If you said, 'I can't handle this; I'm having difficulty,' they'd say, 'F..k off, we'll get somebody else and they'll take your company car and they'll take your expense account and they'll have your promotion.' There were plenty of people lining up to be an undercover police officer."

Several weeks after we talk, news comes through that the force is appealing against Ridley's payout. He stresses over and over to me that I must mention that he offered to settle for \$100,000; that the waste of public money is the reason he has broken his cover and talked to the media. With legal fees, the total cost of the case would already be heading towards \$2 million.

"The standard procedure for the Government is to wait until you die or lose interest or get scared off," he says. "I put my house on the line here. The crown solicitors can't even look you in the eye at court. They know they're doing the wrong thing. I worked for them, putting evil people away for a long time. Now they treat me like this. They can all get f..ked." ☉