

April 2009

The Real NCIS: Tom Betro '81 directs agency that fights crime, from drug trafficking to terrorism

Tom Nugent

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Recommended Citation

Nugent, Tom (2009) "The Real NCIS: Tom Betro '81 directs agency that fights crime, from drug trafficking to terrorism," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 98 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol98/iss1/9>

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REAL

BY TOM NUGENT

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PHOTOS BY
SEAN MCCORMICK

NCIS

Tom Betro '81 directs agency that fights crime, from drug trafficking to terrorism

He knew he was in trouble.

Then a special agent for the U.S. Navy's major law enforcement agency—known today as the Naval Criminal Investigative Service—Tom Betro '81 was sitting in a car in a deserted gas station in Norfolk, Virginia. He was supposed to make a drug buy—two bales of marijuana for \$2,000—but was met by four guys armed with knives taped to ax handles.

He knew there were a dozen cops waiting in the darkness. To summon them, all Betro had to do was utter “rip-off” into the hidden microphone taped to his chest.

“Rip-off!” he said, as the four guys drew closer. Nothing happened.

“Rip-off!” he barked again. And again.

“The stupid thing didn’t work,” Betro recalled,

sitting in his flag-draped office at the Washington Navy Yard recently. “I’m yelling ‘Rip-off! Rip-off!’ and no one’s coming.”

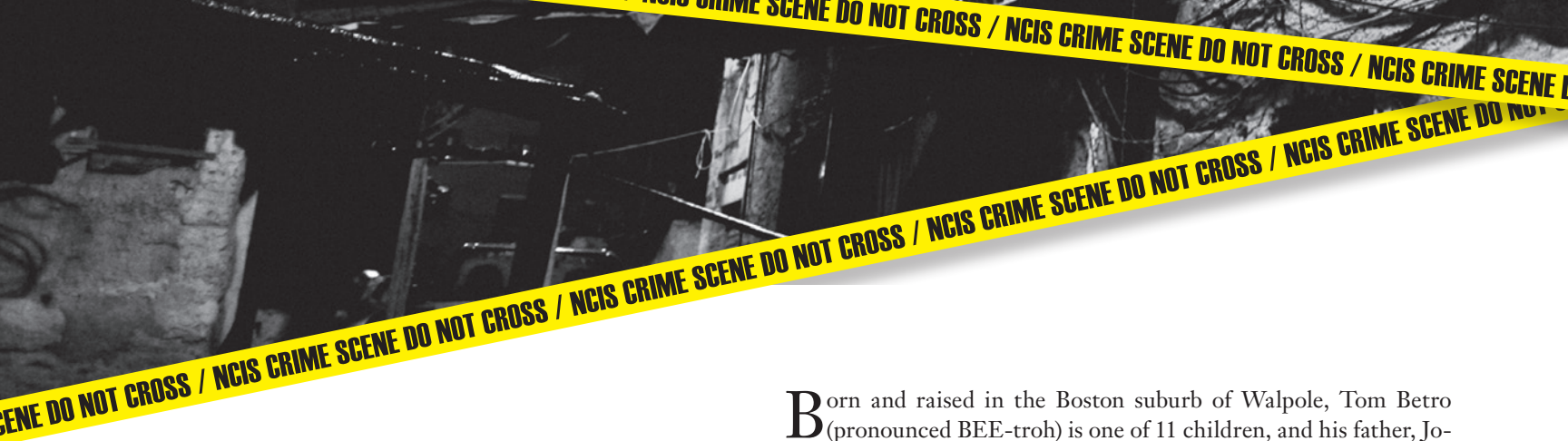
The first ax handle broke the van window.

“It’s not transmitting, it’s dead, and now they’re reaching for the door, and I’m trying to lock it ... but I’m too late, and the first guy pulls it open.

“So I just jammed the gas. The tires are screaming, ... and the guy with the ax handle is hanging on the door. And I’m ripping out of the parking lot, ... I’m going over the curb, ... and they’re all running after me, and it’s just chaos in the streets.”

Betro lived to fight crime another day—and eventually to head the \$500-million-a-year naval law enforcement agency now familiar to millions of viewers of the popular television crime drama, *NCIS*. >

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During the 23 years that followed the rip-off close call, Betro would survive half a dozen similar scrapes—even a heart-stopping near plane crash off the coast of Australia—as he rose through the ranks at the 126-year-old military law enforcement agency.

In recognition of his crime-fighting expertise and his career record, then Secretary of the Navy Donald C. Winter named Special Agent Betro director of the NCIS in January 2006. Said the Navy secretary, reviewing Betro's credentials during a Pentagon press briefing: "Tom is certainly the right person for this job. He has ideas, abilities, and the respect of other law enforcement executives—along with the trust of the NCIS team and my own full support and confidence."

Betro's own assessment of his work is more understated. For more than two decades, he says, he's helped "battle the bad guys" for the intelligence and crime-fighting agency that today operates out of more than 150 locations around the globe.

The battle is fought by about 2,800 personnel in 34 countries. About half are special agents. Another 500 are military, either active duty or reserves; the remainder are civilians. NCIS works to prevent terrorist attacks, combats global espionage, and investigates military-related crimes such as murder, drug trafficking, and sex crimes. Hundreds of NCIS special agents have been sent to Iraq and Afghanistan to perform counterintelligence operations and conduct criminal investigations.

Betro—square-jawed and clear-eyed, with the air of a college athlete—is responsible for all of the above. And the Colby government major—the son of a former Massachusetts police chief—wouldn't have it any other way. "This kind of work, I think it gets in your blood," he said. "Once you experience the camaraderie, the bonds that develop between us after all those nights spent hiding in the bushes—well, I think this job gets into your DNA, that's all."

"After the tragedy of 9/11, we take our responsibility to help protect this country very seriously ... and we're absolutely determined to do whatever it takes to accomplish that goal."

Born and raised in the Boston suburb of Walpole, Tom Betro (pronounced BEE-troh) is one of 11 children, and his father, Joseph Betro, worked around the clock. "My dad worked as a police patrolman when I was a kid," Betro said, "and, as you might imagine, it was pretty difficult to make ends meet with eleven children to feed. So he had three or four other jobs going at all times, and I don't think he ever slept."

"I have a great deal of admiration for him—and also for my amazingly hard-working mother [Carol Sullivan Betro]. And, to this day, those two are still my heroes. Nobody in our family had ever gone to college ... but my parents made it clear that they expected us to go, and that there was nothing in life more important than getting your homework done."

A standout student and athlete in high school, Betro was amazed to discover that most Colby students were just as bright as he was. "I got a major wake-up call right at the end of the first semester," he said, wincing, "when I learned that I'd gotten a D in Biology 101."

"Up to that point, I'd been cruising along, playing soccer and attending lots of fraternity parties and assuming that I could get by with minimal academic effort. And then all at once the reality hit me: this isn't going to be easy—you're gonna have to put the [study] time in."

Betro was a star soccer player at Colby, three-time All-New England forward, and the leading scorer on a team that won the Eastern Collegiate Athletic Conference New England championship in 1978. "He was definitely our go-to guy up top," said soccer coach Mark Serdjenian '73. "He was one of the best."

Early on Betro fell under the sway of Government Professor Sandy Maisel. "Sandy was extremely passionate about political science," Betro said, "and I can remember many occasions when he'd invite a bunch of students to his house and we'd all sit around arguing about the 'shadows at the back of the cave' [from Plato's classic political dialogue, *The Republic*] and concepts like that."

Maisel recalls Betro's "transformation," though he was surprised to have been credited for it. "He was no longer the fair-haired boy on the soccer field but somebody who was talking about interesting things in class," Maisel said.

Betro says Maisel and other Colby professors taught him how to think critically and write clearly. "And that really paid off at NCIS ... because, as I later discovered, knowing how to write clear, well-organized [investigative] reports was actually a crucial factor in career advancement."

"This kind of work,
I think it gets in
your blood ..."
—Tom Betro '81

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“After the tragedy of 9/11, we take our responsibility to help protect this country very seriously ... and we’re absolutely determined to do whatever it takes to accomplish that goal.” —Tom Betro ’81



Tom Betro '81, director of the Naval Criminal Investigative Service, at work in his office at the Washington Navy Yard. Betro rose through the NCIS ranks to head the agency's global operations, which are carried out by more than 2,800 personnel in 34 countries.

Just a year after receiving his Colby A.B. in 1981, Betro launched his career as a special agent at the Navy's famed criminal investigative branch and spent the next two decades working on a variety of cloak-and-dagger assignments, often having to immerse himself in dangerous situations. He was kidnapped in Pakistan during a botched undercover drug operation and held by a knife-wielding as-

sailant before escaping. Betro survived another drug deal gone bad by signaling to police as he rode in the back of a taxi, sandwiched between two dealers and a bag full of hashish bricks. ➤

the aircraft carrier was the way to get the rest of the Navy's fleet. After the 1945 victory, the Navy directed the fleet to the North Pacific. In recent years, the Navy has made her

Not all of the highlights of his career have involved drug dealers and maydays. He did two tours as an NCIS “special agent afloat” on

After stints as assistant director of counterintelligence and deputy director for operations, he was selected to become the director of the Navy's primary investigative service.

In recent years, partly as a result of Betro's leadership, NCIS has made headlines investigating the 2000 bombing of the *USS Cole*





Left, NCIS Director Tom Betro '81 crosses the grounds of the Washington Navy Yard en route to his office. Above, a director's chair given to Betro by the producers of NCIS, the popular television drama based on the real-life agency. The show's writers and producers have consulted with Betro as they create weekly episodes. Betro filmed a skit with the cast (see link, above right).

More on NCIS, the agency:

www.ncis.navy.mil/

More on NCIS, the television show:

www.cbs.com/primetime/ncis/

To see NCIS Director Thomas Betro with his television series counterparts:

www.etonline.com/news/2007/10/54850/

guided missile destroyer in Yemen, for uncovering millions of dollars worth of fraud against the federal government, and for solving 50 homicide cases with its renowned cold case unit.

Betro may not be married to his job, but he is married to NCIS Special Agent Erin Betro. The Betros have two children, Courtney, 15, and Tyler, 10. But the couple is careful not to bring their professional roles home, Director Betro said. "For one thing, it's always clear who the boss is—she is," he said. "And it's also true that we're both so tired from work by the time we get home that the last thing we want to talk about is what went on at the office."

After 25 years on the job, Betro says success in his NCIS career has required a strong work ethic, attention to detail, perseverance, and patience. He's also learned how to remain flexible and open-minded and is willing to look continually at new ways of accomplishing NCIS's mission. Colleagues also say his personality is well suited for this kind of work. "Tom Betro is pretty easygoing, pretty down to earth," said NCIS Special Agent Frederick E. Barnes, "and he's also got a terrific sense of humor. He's extremely serious about meeting his responsibilities as director, but he doesn't take himself too seriously, and I think that's a real asset when it comes to managing people effectively."

But there is one frequently asked question about which Betro does not joke: Can we prevent the next 9/11 from happening? "I do think we're much better prepared now than we were back in 2001," he said. "On the other hand, I also think we need to remember that we're dealing with an adversary that's very agile, very smart, and isn't constrained by public policy the way we are. The terrorists are formidable, and they are going to remain formidable in the years up ahead."

"But you can also be sure that we're going to do everything we possibly can to stop them." 