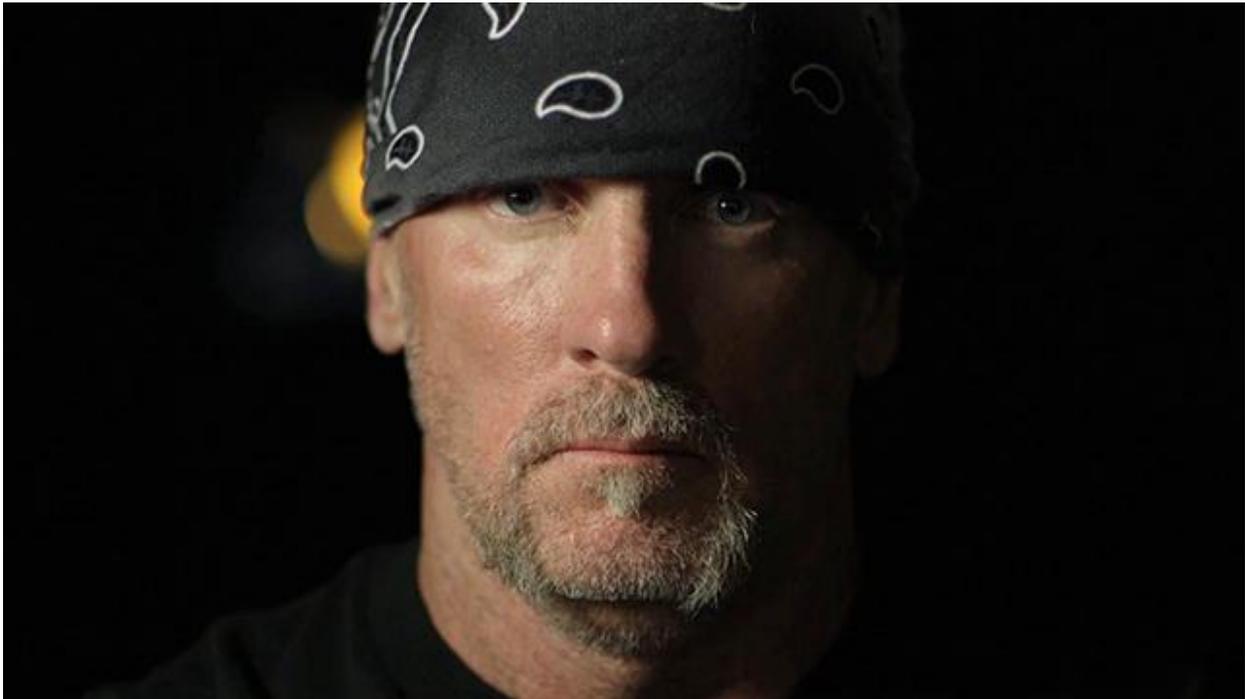


# Exclusive Interview: Jay Dobyns

After 27 years and over 500 undercover ATF operations, retired Special Agent Jay Dobyns retells his wild ride

By *Eddie Molina*



Undercover work. I can't do it, not many people can. I would stumble a hundred different ways to put myself in harm's way. Just thinking about running into a suspect from 'my undercover life' while out having breakfast with my family is stressful.

It is *not* just another assignment. It's a lifestyle that consumes you and completely takes over. Only a special kind of person can successfully navigate the dangerous waters of a long-term undercover operation. Exactly what kind of man or woman can successfully pull it off?

"Research indicates that individuals that are particularly adept at handling dangerous situations have greater control of emotions. These attributes can provide a distinct advantage under pressure, allowing certain individuals to think rationally where others might not be able to," according to Psychologist Dr. David Barker of Rutgers University.

Makes sense to me. That would explain why some people choose to climb Mt. Everest, others jump out of perfectly working airplanes and some go deep undercover (UC) inside criminal organizations.

And that's exactly what Jay Dobyns did. After graduating from the University of Arizona in 1983, it wasn't long before he ended up with a federal law enforcement agency.

"I was an All Pac-10 football player in college. I planned on playing for the NFL but when I went to the NFL combine where college prospects are tested, it wasn't long before I knew my life's goals were going to change. I was grouped with Andre Reed and Jerry Rice, who were simply better, more dynamic athletes. I knew I needed a new Plan A," said Jay.

And voila- his life would change forever.

In an exclusive interview, the Blue Magazine sat down with Jay Dobyns to get the full scoop on his 27-year career as an UC federal agent. We talked about his brushes with death, the thwarted plots of domestic terrorism and, most notably, his two-year UC operation infiltrating the Hells Angels outlaw motorcycle gang. This incredible journey was brilliantly recaptured in his NY Times bestselling book entitled No Angels.

**The Blue Magazine:** You were shot and survived a serious gunshot wound on your fourth day on the job. How did that affect your future with the ATF?

**Jay Dobyns:** With absolutely no training whatsoever, I was taken hostage and shot in the back. The bullet went through my lung and exited my chest. I was dying. Luckily, I quickly received emergency medical treatment. Liability attorneys were guaranteeing me millions of dollars if I would allow them to sue the government. I refused. All I wanted to do was get back to work and be better.

**The Blue Magazine:** That night you were shot, you were held hostage inside a vehicle with the suspect and chose to drop your car keys to lean down and give your team an opportunity to shoot. Tell us about that experience.

I can't offer heroic advice, I was scared. I decided that if I was to die, it would be while my partners had an opportunity to help me or gain retribution, not by assisting the suspect to escape only to be assassinated on my knees 20 miles down the road. My first thought was to floor it and ram us into a telephone pole. That plan would likely leave me shot, and crushed, so I decided on a simpler plan and rolled the dice.

**The Blue Magazine:** In your book there were a lot of parallels between your UC experience and that of Joe Pistone as Donnie Brasco. There were several moments in the movie that showed Donnie temporarily believing he was "one of them (mobsters)." Were there any moments you felt the same way?

Joe is a legend, a friend and a hero to me. If there was a Mt. Rushmore for UC officers, Joe's face would be the first one carved in the granite. While UC I developed close, personal relationships. There is no doubt in my mind that while in role, some of the suspects I had befriended would have stepped in front of a bullet for Jaybird (his UC role). But I *never* lost sight of who's team I was on.

**What would you tell someone considering long term UC work in regards to managing their family life?**

This is my biggest regret in life. My UC role became more than what I did, it became who I was. That is very dangerous. I am humiliated to now have to admit that I abandoned and betrayed my own wife and kids in exchange for some false, hero-worship legacy that never came true. In the end, the people who loved me the most, Gwen, Dale and Jack, I treated the shittiest. That is something I am still trying to overcome.

**During your UC operation of the Hells Angels, your book mentions the binge-drinking, drug fueled parties. How did you control your alcohol intake?**

When I drank, I did my best to stay in moderation. If I let myself get out of control, I would create a real threat to my beloved team. They could die trying to save me from my own bad decisions. That was always on my mind. Were there times when I had one too many? Yes. But I was smart enough to surround myself with amazing partners who could fix problems better than I could.

**Surely drugs were offered to you. What was your strategy to avoid doing drugs without looking like a chump?**

There are laws, policies, and ethics that say we can't. The experts learn ways to avoid those compromising situations and maintain their cover. It is a skillset that is acquired over time and with experience.



**How important are confidential informants?**

Very. Informants can often open doors quickly. With their assistance comes the issue of managing their conduct and maintaining their loyalty. I held a tight leash on them and when they broke free, they understood they were on their own. For them to trust me, I had to extend equal trust in them. Their lives were on the line just like mine was. I always respected that.



**What was one decision where you later told yourself, "I'm definitely not doing that again."**

I was in a bar trolling the Sons of Silence (SOS) biker gang in Colorado with an amazing team of UC agents. Our goal was to create a confrontation, be ordered to remove our fabricated gang clothing and leave town. It would serve as an intimidation/extortion predicate act toward a RICO case. The SOS found us in their bar! The critical threat was delivered and recorded and the case was made.

But I overstepped. They outnumbered us 5 to 1. The right move was to follow their orders. But no, I started a massive bar brawl that resulted in us being locked inside and having the dogshit beat out of us with pool cues and brass knuckles until they became bored with kicking our asses. They let us leave and I am fortunate no one was killed.

**How did you build a reputation as a murder-for-hire (MHF) without actually killing anyone?**

Tricks of the trade. MFHs are the most serious investigations we undertake. Some people's wires become so crossed with jealousy, rage, retaliation, that they have convinced themselves they have the right to play God with someone else's life. Those cases are delicate and require urgent patience.

**What is the worst thing an UC can do to ruin a case they're building?**

Refusing to walk away. I placed so much pressure on myself to close the deal that at times I agreed to terms that no real criminal would. In reality, criminals decline deals and pass on terms, that is real life on the streets. Once my confidence rose, people began to trust and believe in me and my decisions and I became better at the walk-away.

**What was it like seeing your family during an UC operation?**

On one occasion I came home and my wife Gwen told me, "You can't just show up at this house and speak to me and the kids like we are your people on the street."

I answered, "I'm not a light switch. I can't turn this person (Jaybird) on and off. People who do what I do and treat it like a hobby get dead."

Gwen's reply, "You better install a damn dimmer switch and turn that attitude down and if you can't, don't come back until you can." That was the harsh truth of how I was treating my family.

**Any other operations that went virtually unnoticed by the media?**

My partner Louie Quinonez and I infiltrated a faction of the Aryan Brotherhood and purchased 100 improvised explosive devices over 100 days. The suspects believed the explosives were being used in debt collections and murders.

In another case, my partner Vince Cefalu and I infiltrated and disrupted a scheme to blow up three Las Vegas casinos – The Mirage, Treasure Island and Golden Nugget – using remote controlled C-4 devices. Both of those investigations, along with the Hells Angels infil are featured in Joe Pistone's Deep Undercover program on Netflix.

### What are you up to these days?

I re-connected with God. That is the most important thing for me now.

I'm not a hero. My life is full of regret, shame and embarrassment. I've lost many people from my life by my own hand, word or action. I must live with that, God forgives it.

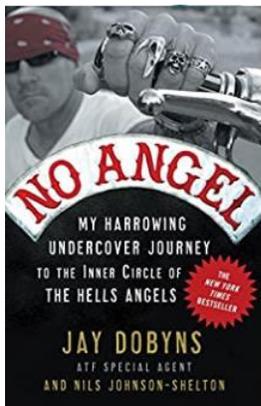
I believe this, for anyone in our profession out there, if the only time you are talking to God is when you are in trouble... you are in trouble. God is first, family, friends, others are second... and I AM THIRD. I only wish it hadn't taken 50 plus years to realize that.

### What is your opinion of law enforcement being labeled as 'part of the problem' in America?

Copland was betrayed and villainized by Obama, Holder and Lynch. They painted all lawmen and women as hateful, racist, bigoted, abusive enemies of the people. A few unfortunate and unacceptable events were used to cast disrespect and doubt over an entire profession while millions of civilian/criminal/violent police contacts were peacefully and safely resolved without fanfare.

We are the underappreciated, who go underpaid to do the unthinkable for the often ungrateful. Every day lawmen and women put their feet on the ground, drink a cup of coffee, kiss their family's goodbye with no guarantee they will ever see them again. They report to duty knowing that they will be hated, despised, ridiculed, filmed, taunted, spit on, assaulted, sometimes murdered... and THEY STILL GO!

### Is there anything our readers need to know?



UC work was the most amazing experience and time in my life but it is not for everyone. I sought out opportunities to be used, to contribute, sometimes big, sometimes small, to help an investigator and friend like Joe Slatalla.

I was a shit-talking street hustler disguised as a debt collector from your local trailer park. I knew my role. It was always my honor and privilege to do what I was capable of to advance the greater good of an investigation for the sake of justice.

*Interview complete.*

Jay Dobyns incredible journey went full circle to where he began as a young adult. He now finds himself engaged in another passionate activity, football. He is the Head Coach of Tanque Verde HS football team in Tucson, Arizona.

I can't imagine a better way to finish off a wild career; coaching and mentoring our youth to be brave, disciplined and focused on anything but crime.

Check out his other book *Catching Hell*, available on Amazon. A special thank you to Jay Dobyns for sparing his time for the Blue Magazine.

*Writer Eddie Molina specializes in leadership theory and practice but covers everything related to the law enforcement, first responder and military community. For more information go to [www.eddiemolina.com](http://www.eddiemolina.com)*