

TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY  
TEXAS RANGERS

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LEAD INVESTIGATOR:	RONALD DUFF	INVEST#:	RA201600125
SUPERVISOR:	WENDE WAKEMAN	OPENED:	04/07/2016
TITLE:	ABUSE OF OFFICIAL CAPACITY >=\$1,500<\$20K, SHELBY COUNTY, CENTER, STATE OF TEXAS	FILE STATUS:	OPEN
TYPE:	SPECIAL CRIMINAL INVESTIGATION	REGION:	COMPANY A
SUBTYPE:	LEO	SPURS URN:	CMIV20031939
CATEGORY:	INVESTIGATIVE	REVIEW DATE:	10/21/2017
SPECIAL APPROVAL:		LEGACY REF:	TR1-2
PROGRAM:	SPECIAL INVESTIGATION	CASE#:	

**INVESTIGATION SYNOPSIS**

ABUSE OF OFFICIAL CAPACITY >=\$1,500<\$20K, SHELBY county, CENTER, STATE OF TEXAS

**SUPPLEMENTAL SYNOPSES****1 04/07/2016 Report Writer:**

On 01-12-2016, Texas Ranger Travis BRAZIL initiated a cursory investigation into allegations he received concerning Shelby County Sheriff Willis BLACKWELL. Sheriff BLACKWELL had allegedly used the Shelby County Sheriff's Office (SCSO) Mobile Command Center trailer for personal use at his deer lease in Panola County. Sheriff BLACKWELL also allegedly used SCSO inmates to do cleanup work and welding jobs on his deer lease in Panola County. On 01-13-2016, Ranger BRAZIL presented his findings to Shelby County District Attorney (DA) Ken FLORENCE. On 01-22-2016, DA FLORENCE made a written request asking the Texas Rangers to investigate the allegations against Sheriff BLACKWELL. Approval to conduct the investigation was authorized by Assistant Director Texas Ranger Chief Randall PRINCE on 03-09-2016. On 03-23-2016, Texas Ranger Ron DUFF was assigned the Special Investigation involving Sheriff BLACKWELL. Ranger DUFF interviewed witnesses in this investigation as well as Sheriff BLACKWELL, who admitted to utilizing the SCSO Mobile Command Center trailer, SCSO inmates and SCSO equipment at his deer lease in Panola County. This investigation will be forwarded to the Shelby County District Attorney's Office for prosecution.

**S2 04/20/2017 Report Writer: James Hicks****04/24/2017 Approved by: Robert Smith**

On 04-20-2017, I, Texas Ranger James Hicks, assumed responsibility for this investigative file. I obtained the hard copy case file, which included attachments, from Texas Ranger Chris Perkins. I contacted the Shelby County District Attorney's Office and discovered this case was still under review by the District Attorney.

**SUPPLEMENTAL DETAILS**

1. On 01-02-2016, Texas Ranger Travis Brazil was contacted by Shelby County Sheriff's Office (SCSO) Chief Deputy Shedrick SPARKS in reference to allegations he received concerning Shelby County Sheriff Willis BLACKWELL. Chief SPARKS said Sheriff BLACKWELL reportedly used the SCSO Mobile Command Center trailer for personal use on his deer lease. Chief SPARKS also stated Sheriff BLACKWELL allegedly used Shelby County inmates to do clean up type work on the deer lease, and had the inmates do welding jobs on the deer lease. The deer lease was located in Panola County, and the trailer was not currently at the SCSO.

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2. On 01-12-2016, Ranger BRAZIL was contacted by Shelby County Judge Allison HARBISON about the allegations made against Sheriff BLACKWELL. Judge HARBISON explained the County Auditor had traveled to Sheriff BLACKWELL'S deer lease in Panola County and photographed the SCSO Mobile Command Center trailer being used on the deer lease. Judge HARBISON expressed her desire for the allegations to be investigated.

3. On 01-13-2016, Ranger BRAZIL was also contacted by the Shelby County Attorney, Gary RHOLES, about the allegations made against Sheriff BLACKWELL. RHOLES informed Ranger BRAZIL that Sheriff BLACKWELL also allegedly used the county owned utility vehicle (UTV) for personal use.

4. On 01-13-2016, Ranger BRAZIL was contacted by Shelby County District Attorney (DA) Ken FLORENCE regarding the allegations made against Sheriff BLACKWELL. Ranger BRAZIL presented his evaluation of the allegations to DA FLORENCE. DA FLORENCE requested the Texas Rangers investigate the allegations of Abuse of Official Capacity by Sheriff BLACKWELL. DA FLORENCE provided a letter stating he would seek an indictment and would prosecute any violations of Texas criminal law determined by the investigation.

5. On 03-09-2016, approval to conduct the investigation was authorized by Assistant Director Texas Ranger Chief Randall PRINCE.

6. On 03-23-2016, at approximately 9:58 AM, Texas Ranger Ron DUFF received an email from Texas Ranger Lieutenant Robert SMITH indicating Ranger DUFF was assigned to conduct the investigation regarding the allegations against Sheriff BLACKWELL. Contained within the email was an Interoffice Memorandum (Exhibit 1.1) prepared by Ranger BRAZIL, and a letter of intent to prosecute (Exhibit 1.2) signed by DA FLORENCE.

7. On 03-28-2016, at approximately 10:59 AM, Ranger DUFF conducted a non-custodial interview with SCSO Chief Deputy Shedrick SPARKS - W/M, DOB: 08-23-1973. The interview was conducted at the Department of Public Safety (DPS) Texas Highway Patrol (THP) office in Center. Ranger DUFF recorded the interview (Exhibit 1.3) on his State issued Olympus digital voice recorder. The interview was 28 minutes and 47 seconds in length. The following is a synopsis of the interview with SPARKS:

A. Chief SPARKS was currently the Chief Deputy for the SCSO and has been since 2013. SCSO Deputy Derek BARBEE came to Chief SPARKS and reported he had information that Sheriff BLACKWELL was possibly doing something illegal. Deputy BARBEE heard the Sheriff had taken the SCSO Mobile Command Center trailer to his deer lease, and was taking inmates to do welding at his deer lease. Chief SPARKS had no personal knowledge of this occurring. Chief SPARKS said he and Sheriff BLACKWELL had talked about taking the trailer up to Sheriff BLACKWELL'S deer lease. The trailer had been used previously at some of the local festivals. Sheriff BLACKWELL wanted to take the trailer to the deer lease for a fish fry. Chief SPARKS had knowledge that Sheriff BLACKWELL took the trailer to the deer lease in 2015. According to Chief SPARKS, the SCSO never had a meeting in 2015 at the deer lease, but the trailer remained at the deer lease.



B. Chief SPARKS was told by Sheriff BLACKWELL that he had utilized some pipe recovered by SCSO and had taken some trustees to weld on some type of bridge at the deer lease. Chief SPARKS stated SCSO Deputy Roy BAILEY had taken the trustees to the deer lease.

8. The interview of Chief SPARKS continues:

C. Chief SPARKS explained SCSO had been awarded a black Jeep in a Federal Investigation, and the Jeep was kept at Sheriff BLACKWELL'S residence. In addition, Chief SPARKS said a Mule (UTV) and a trailer to haul the UTV, which belonged to SCSO, were at Sheriff BLACKWELL'S residence. Chief SPARKS described the Mule was green colored with four seats, and the trailer was black. According to Chief SPARKS, the Jeep was kept at Sheriff BLACKWELL'S residence to keep inmates from recognizing it because they utilized the Jeep to do their undercover work. Chief SPARKS said County Auditor Clint PORTERFIELD had asked where these items were, and the previously mentioned items were brought back to SCSO.

D. Chief SPARKS reported the pipe utilized at the deer lease had been stored at the SCSO. He was not aware how the pipe arrived at the deer lease.

Refer to Exhibit 1.3 for complete details.

9. On 03-28-2016, at approximately 12:10 PM, Ranger DUFF conducted a non-custodial interview with SCSO Deputy Roy BAILEY - W/M, DOB: 04-24-1967. The interview was conducted at the DPS THP office in Center. Ranger DUFF recorded the interview (Exhibit 1.4) on his State issued Olympus digital voice recorder. The interview was 29 minutes and 16 seconds in length. The following is a synopsis of the interview with Deputy BAILEY:

A. Deputy BAILEY was currently employed as a deputy for the SCSO. Deputy BAILEY understood this investigation started because the SCSO Mobile Command Center trailer was in Panola County. Deputy BAILEY explained he had been to the deer lease in Panola County while he was both on-duty and off-duty. Deputy BAILEY said he had been to the deer lease off-duty before Sheriff BLACKWELL took office. Deputy BAILEY recalled going to the deer lease three times while on-duty.

B. According to Deputy BAILEY, he drove his county issued pickup to the deer lease to mow around the SCSO Mobile Command Center trailer and get ready for a meeting sometime in the summer of 2015. Deputy BAILEY recalled carrying two or three outside trustees with him. Deputy BAILEY also carried two riding lawn mowers, a push mower and weed eater on a trailer, all of which belonged to SCSO. Deputy BAILEY said one riding mower was a Husqvarna and the other was a Snapper. They mowed around the SCSO Mobile Command Center trailer. Deputy BAILEY described the trailer was white, and had SCSO Command Center markings on it. Deputy BAILEY said they were probably gone from SCSO for approximately three to four hours. He was instructed to perform this work by

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Sheriff BLACKWELL.

10. The interview of Deputy BAILEY continues:

C. Deputy BAILEY stated he went to the deer lease twice to mow. The third time he carried two inmates and a welding machine to tack some pipe. Deputy BAILEY described the welder as a blue Miller Bobcat welding machine. The welding machine was found in the woods at an oilfield location and was stored at SCSO. Deputy BAILEY said the welding machine was on a trailer. They welded some pipe that was already at Sheriff BLACKWELL'S deer lease on top of an existing 40 foot float. Deputy BAILEY was instructed by Sheriff BLACKWELL to take the welder and drive the inmates to the deer lease to complete this task. On this occasion, they were at the deer lease approximately two and one-half to three hours.

D. Deputy BAILEY recalled mowing the grass at Sheriff BLACKWELL'S residence sometime after Sheriff BLACKWELL had back surgery. Deputy BAILEY was instructed by Sheriff BLACKWELL to mow the grass at his residence. Deputy BAILEY utilized the same county lawn mowers and equipment as he had utilized at the deer lease. Deputy BAILEY recalled taking three inmates to mow at BLACKWELL'S residence. Deputy BAILEY observed the SCSO Mule at BLACKWELL'S residence at that time.

E. On another occasion, Deputy BAILEY went out to Sheriff BLACKWELL'S residence to pick up the seized black Jeep and get it inspected. Deputy BAILEY said it was his understanding the Jeep was kept at Sheriff BLACKWELL'S residence because it was utilized for undercover investigations.

Refer to Exhibit 1.4 for complete details.

11. On 03-28-2016, at approximately 1:42 PM, Ranger DUFF conducted a non-custodial interview with SCSO Sergeant Derek BARBEE - W/M, DOB: 04-03-1980. The interview was conducted at the DPS THP office in Center. Ranger DUFF recorded the interview (Exhibit 1.5) on his State issued Olympus digital voice recorder. The interview was 25 minutes and five seconds in length. The following is a synopsis of the interview with Sergeant BARBEE:

A. Sergeant BARBEE was currently a Patrol Sergeant for SCSO. Sergeant BARBEE stated after Sheriff BLACKWELL took office in 2013, the SCSO Mobile Command Center trailer was gone from the SCSO for extended periods of time. During the past year, the SCSO needed the trailer for the Poultry Festival. Sergeant BARBEE explained Sheriff BLACKWELL told him he would have to go get the trailer from the deer lease. Sergeant BARBEE said they had planned to have a SCSO cooking on 07-30-2015, at the deer camp in Panola County. The event was canceled and they cooked instead at Sheriff BLACKWELL'S restaurant. According to Sergeant BARBEE, the trailer went missing again after the Poultry Festival.



B. In the fall of 2015, Sergeant BARBEE noticed SCSO had a substantial amount of pipe missing that belonged to Devon Energy. The pipe was stored in the SCSO storage facility where SCSO normally kept evidence. Sergeant BARBEE said an outside trustee told him he had a long weekend welding for the Sheriff. The trustee indicated the pipe being stored at the SCSO was taken to Sheriff BLACKWELL'S deer lease and was utilized for a bridge. Sergeant BARBEE explained Deputy BAILEY had transported the trustees to the deer lease, and they used a welding machine in custody of the SCSO to do the welding.

12. The interview of Sergeant BARBEE continues:

C. Sergeant BARBEE said he observed the inmates build a hog trap at SCSO for Sheriff BLACKWELL. An inmate was also utilized to work on an ATV at the SCSO for the Shelby County Jail Administrator.

D. According to Sergeant BARBEE, Sheriff BLACKWELL utilized SCSO inmates to check his hog traps. Sheriff BLACKWELL and the inmates brought some hogs back from the deer lease and cooked the hogs at the SCSO. Sergeant BARBEE stated inmates told him the SCSO UTV and trailer were also at Sheriff BLACKWELL'S deer lease.

Refer to Exhibit 1.5 for complete details.

13. On 03-29-2016, at approximately 10:10 AM, Ranger DUFF conducted a non-custodial interview with Sheriff Willis BLACKWELL - W/M, DOB: 03-08-1948. The interview was conducted at the SCSO in Center. Ranger DUFF recorded the interview (Exhibit 1.6) on his State issued Olympus digital voice recorder. The interview was 19 minutes and six seconds in length. The following is a synopsis of the interview with Sheriff BLACKWELL:

A. Sheriff BLACKWELL stated the SCSO Mobile Command Center trailer was taken to the deer lease for a SCSO fish fry and meeting. The trailer stayed at the deer lease for approximately three months. SCSO never had a meeting at the deer lease because of the weather. Sheriff BLACKWELL admitted to pulling the trailer to the deer lease with his county issued vehicle. The deer lease was located on FM 1971 in Panola County. After Sheriff BLACKWELL was elected, the SCSO had a meeting at the deer lease. According to Sheriff BLACKWELL, the trailer was not utilized for anything while it was at the deer lease. He admitted to retrieving the trailer from the deer lease and taking it to the Poultry Festival, then taking the trailer back to the deer lease.

B. Sheriff BLACKWELL stated 14 or 15 pieces of pipe was recovered for Devon Energy and was stored at the SCSO. The pipe was magnetized and could not be sold. According to Sheriff BLACKWELL, Devon Energy did not want the pipe, so they used it around the SCSO. Sheriff BLACKWELL admitted he took six or seven pipe joints to his deer lease in either September or October of 2015. He hauled the pipe to his deer lease in his personal truck and trailer. Sheriff BLACKWELL put the pipe on top of an old float he had across a creek for a bridge. The SCSO inmates tack welded the pipe onto the float. Sheriff BLACKWELL said he took the inmates to the deer lease one time and

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Deputy BAILEY took them another time. He admitted using a welding machine from SCSO that was abandoned property. Sheriff BLACKWELL admitted Deputy BAILEY utilized a County vehicle and trailer to haul the welding machine to the deer lease. Sheriff BLACKWELL explained he took the pipe to the deer lease because it was in the way at the SCSO and he had been weed eating around it for three years.

C. Sheriff BLACKWELL admitted the SCSO Mule had been at the deer lease before, and it was utilized to put corn out at the hog feeder. Sheriff BLACKWELL admitted he took SCSO inmates to the deer lease on many occasions to put out corn. He also confessed the had inmates with him at the deer lease and killed four hogs, which were brought back to the SCSO and cooked for the inmates and employees.

14. The interview of Sheriff BLACKWELL continues:

D. Sheriff BLACKWELL also admitted he kept the SCSO Mule at his residence. He kept the undercover Jeep at his residence so it would not be seen. Sheriff BLACKWELL admitted inmates came to his residence and mowed one time after he had back surgery. Deputy BAILEY brought the inmates to his residence to do the mowing.

E. Sheriff BLACKWELL consented to take Ranger DUFF to the deer lease in Panola County for the purpose of photographing the area. He also consented for Ranger DUFF to photograph the equipment at SCSO.

Refer to Exhibit 1.6 for complete details.

15. At the conclusion of the interview with Sheriff BLACKWELL, Ranger DUFF was escorted outside the SCSO by Sheriff BLACKWELL. Ranger DUFF requested Sheriff BLACKWELL show him the various items of equipment belonging to SCSO related to this investigation. Ranger DUFF took digital photographs (Exhibit 1.7) of the various items with his State issued digital camera, which included the following:

1. A Husqvarna and Snapper riding mower utilized to mow at Sheriff BLACKWELL'S deer lease and residence.

2. A black hard top Jeep, bearing Texas LP# 122-9730 (Vehicle 1.1) which had been parked at Sheriff BLACKWELL'S residence.

3. A blue Bobcat 250 Welding machine and a cutting torch rig located on a black utility trailer which was allegedly used at Sheriff BLACKWELL'S deer lease.

4. A camouflage 3010 Kawasaki Mule located on a black utility trailer bearing Texas

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LP# 901-1286 (Vehicle 1.2) which was utilized at Sheriff BLACKWELL'S deer lease and stored at his residence.

5. The SCSO Mobile Command Center trailer bearing Texas LP# 921-122 (Vehicle 1.3) which had been parked at Sheriff BLACKWELL'S deer lease.

Ranger DUFF also photographed a black SCSO Tahoe bearing Texas LP# 115-9318 (Vehicle 1.4) which was issued to Sheriff BLACKWELL and utilized to tow the SCSO Mobile Command Center trailer to Sheriff BLACKWELL'S deer lease.

16. On 03-29-2016, at approximately 10:40 AM, Ranger DUFF and Sheriff BLACKWELL departed SCSO en route to Sheriff BLACKWELL'S deer lease in Ranger DUFF'S patrol truck. The directions to the deer lease from SCSO are as follows: Take SH 96 north 1.5 miles. Turn left on SH 87 and travel 15 miles to Timpson. Turn left on US 59 and travel .6 miles. Turn right on SH 84 and travel 7.2 miles. Turn right on FM 1971 North and travel 10.7 miles to metal gate located on the left. Ranger DUFF and Sheriff BLACKWELL arrived at approximately 11:26 AM.

17. Upon arrival, Ranger DUFF drove into the deer lease and followed directions of Sheriff BLACKWELL. Ranger DUFF was shown a creek crossing where Sheriff BLACKWELL utilized the oilfield pipe from the SCSO to weld on top of an existing semi-trailer utilized as a bridge over a creek crossing. Ranger DUFF was then shown a hog trap which Sheriff BLACKWELL baited for wild hogs. Ranger DUFF took digital photographs of both the bridge over the creek crossing and the hog trap. Ranger DUFF then drove to where Sheriff BLACKWELL had parked the SCSO Mobile Command Center trailer. An older travel trailer still parked next to where the SCSO Mobile Command Center trailer had been parked. Ranger DUFF took digital photographs (Refer to Exhibit 1.7) of this area, and of an existing camp house.

18. On 03-29-2016, at approximately 11:37 AM, Ranger DUFF and Sheriff BLACKWELL departed from the deer lease in Panola County. At approximately 12:15 PM, Ranger DUFF and Sheriff BLACKWELL arrived back at the SCSO.

19. On 03-30-2016, at approximately 10:31 AM, Ranger DUFF received an email (Exhibit 1.8) from Ranger BRAZIL containing four aerial photographs taken of Sheriff BLACKWELL'S deer lease. The SCSO Mobile Command Center trailer was depicted in the photographs. Ranger BRAZIL had taken the aerial photographs from DPS aircraft on 01-14-2016. Ranger DUFF noticed different markings had been placed on the trailer since Ranger BRAZIL took the original photographs.

20. On 04-05-2016, at approximately 10:20 AM, Ranger DUFF met with Chief SPARKS and Sheriff BLACKWELL at the SCSO. Chief SPARKS provided Ranger DUFF with SCSO Incident/Offense Report #2013020117 (Exhibit 1.9) regarding the recovered drill stem from Devon Energy, and SCSO Incident Report #2015030179 (Exhibit 1.10) regarding the recovered Miller Bobcat welding machine. Chief SPARKS also provided his notes (Exhibit 1.11) to Ranger DUFF pertaining to the allegations against Sheriff BLACKWELL. Ranger DUFF asked Chief SPARKS and Sheriff BLACKWELL when the SCSO Command

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Center trailer had been remarked. Sheriff BLACKWELL said they placed different markings on the trailer around 03-01-2016.

21. On 04-05-2016, at approximately 1:30 PM, Ranger DUFF conducted a non-custodial interview with Shelby County Attorney Gary RHOLES - W/M, DOB: 01-06-1956. The interview was conducted at RHOLES' office in Center. Ranger DUFF recorded the interview (Exhibit 1.12) on his State issued Olympus digital voice recorder. The interview was five minutes and seven seconds in length. The following is a synopsis of the interview with RHOLES:

A. RHOLES met with Sheriff BLACKWELL in the Sheriff's office regarding these allegations. Sheriff BLACKWELL told RHOLES an inmate had gone to the Panola County deer lease. RHOLES had no personal knowledge of the allegations against BLACKWELL.

B. RHOLES only knew about the allegations from what he heard from other people. RHOLES heard about the allegations from Shelby County Auditor Clint PORTERFIELD. RHOLES thought BLACKWELL talked about the allegations against him, but did not recall how BLACKWELL had phrased it.

Refer to Exhibit 1.12 for complete details.

22. This investigation will be forwarded to the Shelby County District Attorney's Office for prosecution.

**S2** 2.1 On 04-20-2017, I, Texas Ranger James Hicks, assumed responsibility for this investigative file regarding the allegations against Shelby County Sheriff Willis Blackwell (Supplement 1).

2.2 I obtained the hard copy case file, which included various attachments. The original Special Investigation was conducted by Ranger Ron Duff, who has since retired. The case file remained in the Conroe Rangers' office and was delivered to me by Texas Ranger Chris Perkins.

2.3 I contacted the Shelby County District Attorney's Office and discovered this case was still under review by the District Attorney.

## WITNESSES

1 SPARKS, Shedrick Paul - White/M - 08/23/1973

Home:

Cell:

Work:

Email:

BAILEY, Roy Herbert - White/M - 04/24/1967

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