

Detective's interrogation theatrics legendary

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During an interrogation in March 1979, Metro police detectives Robert Moore and Larry Flair knew they had their killer.

But the suspect, Carl Gary Crite, wasn't talking. He was cool, showing no signs of cracking.

The crimes were several violent robberies at area automated teller machines. One victim had been killed.

Flair suddenly had an idea. He walked out of the interrogation room and grabbed another detective's ATM card. Using an inkpad, Flair stamped his own thumbprint in black across the card.

He walked back to the room, carrying a white envelope that held a printout of Crite's arrest record and a Tennessee crime lab report. It also contained the doctored bank card.

None of the items had any connection to his case, but Crite didn't know that.

Flair threw the bank card on the table and handed the documents to his partner. The card twirled on the table, the thumbprint clearly visible.

"Well, fingerprints certainly don't lie. That's a fact," Moore told Crite, feeding off Flair's sudden ingenuity.

Crite lowered his head.

Then, Moore showed him a piece of paper. It was his criminal history.

"This is you, isn't it?" Moore asked. Crite's knees started knocking. The whole table began to shake.



LARRY MCCORMACK / STAFF

Recently retired Metro police detective Larry Flair's interrogation room methods have become legend in some Nashville law enforcement circles. Though some have criticized Flair's use of deceptive tactics to obtain confessions, legal experts have defended his tactics as permissible under existing laws.

"You got me, Flair," said a broken Crite, looking up.

Next came his confession to the March 1979 shooting death of Harold Tarpley, 34, a Vanderbilt University research assistant.

That led to Crite's conviction for second-degree murder and armed robbery, landing him sentences of 12 and 10 years in prison.

The story, Flair said, is one of his greatest hits with Metro police.

Flair, who recently retired, estimates he personally investigated 450-500 killings in his career as a homicide detective.

He stopped working homicides in 1998 because of burnout and was assigned to a task force of the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

"You see 450 homicides, you just almost become numb," he said. "It's just more of a number when it gets to that point. It was just time to move on."

After joining the department in 1971 as a police dispatcher, he was among the first six detectives assigned in 1979 to the department's new murder squad, set up to solve several slayings that were proving especially difficult. The Crite case was particularly troubling.

Flair's theatrics with the bank card did not go unnoticed.

In some Nashville legal and law enforcement circles, Flair's use of deceit in the Crite case stands as a textbook example of the boundaries detectives can push to obtain confessions.

But the trick ignited a firestorm of criticism from Crite's public defense attorney, Walter Kurtz, who now serves as a Davidson County circuit judge.

Kurtz argued that Crite's admission of guilt was obtained through trickery and should be thrown out.

"The technique was successful, for after the conversation about the false evidence, the defendant (Crite), who had previously been cool and calm began to sweat, was nervous and even began to cry," Kurtz wrote, according to a *Tennessean* article at the time.

The Crite case was upheld through the appeals process.

Moore, now a detective sergeant, said the trickery in the interrogation room was a "magical moment," when an unusual tactic led to the capture of a killer.

He said Flair's time on the force was one of incredible service.

"He never sought to be the front runner and didn't care who got credit for what," Moore said in a recent interview. "He could make things happen, and it didn't matter. He would be willing to go that extra mile and help anybody get what they needed to bring a case to successful prosecution."

David Raybin, a Nashville lawyer, said the Crite case highlights the career of a storied Metro police detective.

"Courts permit trickery to gain a confession. That's permissible. And it's standard police practice," Raybin said.

"Sometimes it's successful, sometimes it isn't. Sometimes it's very creative," he said. "I think that this case, where he did that, it's classic Larry. It's just classic Larry."