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Body

A former anti-drug agent for the **Manatee** County **Sheriff's** Office pleaded guilty Tuesday to federal criminal charges, the third former deputy since November to admit to criminal acts.

Thomas C. **Wooten**, who worked in the **sheriff's** Delta Division for a little more than a year, faces up to 25 years in federal prison and \$ 750,000 in fines. He pleaded guilty to conspiracy, two counts of witness tampering and one count of failing to report criminal conduct.

"It's sad, but not unexpected," said Dave Bristow, a spokesman for the **Sheriff's** Office. "A lot of people here knew and liked Tommy."

Wooten admitted he met with three Delta agents in an effort to cover up a variety of criminal acts by the four men, including planting evidence and stealing money from suspects.

The meetings were secretly taped by former Special Agent Paul D. Maass, who is cooperating with an ongoing federal investigation into the street-level drug eradication unit.

The identity of the other two agents in the meeting has not been made public. Executive Assistant U.S. Attorney Monte Richardson declined to comment.

Maass pleaded guilty in November to civil rights violations. He faces a maximum of 51 years in federal prison and up to \$ 1 million in fines.

Wayne Wyckoff, a former Delta sergeant, faces a maximum of four years in federal prison. He pleaded guilty in November to stealing \$ 100 from a suspected drug dealer to replace lost law enforcement funds.

A fourth ex-deputy, Christopher L. Moore, faces federal mail fraud, arson and perjury charges for an incident unrelated to the actions of the Delta Division.

Wooten admitted taking part in a conspiracy to file false reports about arrests, to commit perjury and coerce others into doing so, and to lie to investigators from the **sheriff's** office as well as from the FBI, according to court records.

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"It was a further part of the said conspiracy . . . that they would not report each other's crimes (i.e. become a 'rat') . . .," according to **Wooten**'s plea agreement.

To that end, **Wooten** lied to **sheriff**'s investigators during an internal affairs investigation in the spring and summer of 1998. The plea agreement cites six occasions in the summer of 1998 when **Wooten** lied to internal investigators about the arrest of Darren "Perry" Wade, who accused Delta agents of pistol-whipping and robbing him. Wade was suspected of being a drug dealer.

That investigation resulted in state prosecutors charging Maass and Wilson with criminal offenses. It also led to **Wooten**'s and Wyckoff's resignations and the reassignment of other Delta members.

Prosecutors wound up dropping 127 charges in 72 cases involving 67 defendants arrested by Delta agents.

"Hopefully, we're going to get this over with quickly," Bristow said.

More information

For more information about the Delta Division investigation, log on to the Herald-Tribune's Web site, www.newscoast.com, and follow the link in the story.

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