



**International Association
of Marine Investigators**
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Boat U.S. Investigator of the Year Award

2016



I got away with it!

That's probably what Brian Wical was thinking when the check arrived in the mail to pay for his stolen 2008 20-foot Stratas. He probably did a happy dance. He had wanted to be out from under the boat because he owed a lot of money on it, and he and his wife were building a new house. He needed to get his debt-to-income ratio in line if he were going to get the financing he needed. When he couldn't sell the boat, he had a big idea – why not make it look as if the boat had been stolen?

This was Florida, after all, where boat thefts are an everyday occurrence. His flashy fishing boat was equipped with a 2008 225-hp Evinrude, a trolling motor, multiple fish finders, two power poles, and a number of expensive rods and reels – an almost irresistible target. And he knew, better than most, how, when, and where boats got stolen – because Brian Wical was a police officer.

For some reason, he decided he needed a buddy. Maybe he wanted someone else to drive the boat away from his property in case the getaway car was seen. Or maybe he needed (im)moral support. Whatever the case, he talked a fellow police officer out on disability, James Hartman, into assisting him.

When the police and the surveyor investigated his claim, he told them he had planned an early morning fishing trip. Rather than hooking up in the back of the yard behind the fence that normally sheltered the boat in the dark, he moved it out onto the driveway the night before. He left the boat at 8:00 that night, and the next morning, on September 30, 2013, he went out to find it gone and reported the “theft” to the police department and to his insurance company.

The boat was found stripped of its valuables and torched in a neighboring town a few weeks later, and Wical identified it as his. The insurance company did its due diligence, but no red flags popped. The investigation didn’t turn up any clues. None of the neighbors had seen anything. Wical was a good guy. He did not have a criminal record. His only insurance claim had been for hail damage on his house. He had been a police officer for more than a decade.

Did Wical sweat a little? It did take the insurance company just over three months to pay out. There must have been one or two uncomfortable nights in that time. But the claim was paid in January of 2014. That’s when Wical probably did his happy dance.

Little did he know, his plan was already well on the way to unraveling. On October 16, 2013, just two weeks after the “theft,” the Palm Bay Police Department had received an anonymous tip that Wical and Hartman had orchestrated the fraud. The tipster recommended they check the two police officers’ cellular phone records and text messages for evidence of the crimes. As a result of the tip, a criminal investigation was launched into the allegations. Given the sensitivity of the investigation and Wical’s status as an active police officer, the Palm Bay Police Department requested assistance from the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE).

FDLE contacted the SIU department at Boat U.S., who responded to the request for all of the records from the claim. After a good deal of investigation and research work by Criminal Intelligence Analyst Kerri Plaza, the FDLE agents were ready to approach Hartman. On February 20, 2014, Special Agents Bradley Lewis and Ryan Bliss interviewed Hartman and presented the evidence they had gathered during the course of the criminal investigation. Hartman admitted that a week or two before the incident, Wical contacted him and asked him to help “get rid of the boat” by arson. Hartman agreed to testify against Wical. As far as Wical was concerned, his plan had gone off without a hitch. So it must have come as a rude awakening when, on March 14, 2014, he and Hartman were arrested by Special Agent Lewis.

On May 16, 2014, James Hartman pled guilty to Burning to Defraud an Insurer and was sentenced to five years’ probation and required to testify against Wical. On August 14, 2014, Brian Wical pled guilty to submitting a False Fraudulent Insurance Claim in excess of \$20,000 and was sentenced to ten years of probation, and ordered to surrender his law enforcement certification. He was also required to pay \$45,067 in restitution to Boat U.S., and he has been making monthly payments since.

FDLE provided the opportunity for an insurer to make a case against a fraudulent insured, and working with that insured in the best IAMI tradition, justice was done. In recognition of their efforts in this and many other cases, the Investigator of the Year Award goes to FDLE. Lee Stewart, who now works SIU for Boat U.S. but was formally with FDLE, will accept the awards on FDLE’s behalf:

Criminal Intelligence Analyst II Kerri Plaza – FDLE

Special Agent Bradley Lewis – FDLE

Special Agent Ryan Bliss – FDLE