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A 'Master Thief' Pleads Guilty

Man Claims Credit For 3,000 Break-Ins

By Suzanne Bilello
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A Maryland man who claims to have committed some 3,000 burglaries in the Washington area and whom police call "a master thief" was sentenced to 20 years in prison after he pleaded guilty in Arlington Circuit Court yesterday to six burglaries.

Arlington police say William Lee Offutt, 25, also known as William Lee Kidd, has told them he committed these burglaries primarily in office buildings in virtually every jurisdiction from suburban Maryland to Northern Virginia.

In an interview yesterday, Offutt said he embarked upon the crime wave to fuel a drug habit that, at times, cost him between \$400 and \$800 a day. And while he said a majority of these crimes were committed in the last three years, he's had brushes with the law since he was a rebellious child who grew up in an orphanage, a private home and juvenile detention centers throughout the state.

Arlington police said yesterday that the FBI and other jurisdictions, including the District, the city of Alexandria, and Fairfax and Prince George's counties, are investigating Offutt. Arlington Detective Frank Rich said as many as 40 indictments on burglary charges are pending against Offutt in the District.

Arlington Police spokesman Thomas Bell said that, while police officials have not been able to verify everything Offutt has said, Offutt passed a polygraph test in which he was asked if he were telling the truth about the burglaries.

Offutt, whom police say has used 20 alias, including "Billy the Kid," was born in Bethesda but lived in a Baltimore orphanage until he was 7. He then was adopted by a John L. Offutt of Gaithersburg — a family he says he ran away from 11 years ago.

A rebellious streak developed, he said, during those early years in Baltimore. "I couldn't handle authority," said Offutt, as he nervously puffed a cigar. "I've always done exactly what I've wanted to do."

Just 5 feet 3½ inches tall, only his mustache prevents him from

"coke (cocaine) and any kind of speed."

He dropped out of school after the eighth grade and said he joined the U.S. Marine Corps when he was 16 years old. A tattoo of the Marine Corps insignia is splashed on his right arm. On the left arm is another tattoo — three fading letters, DEB, the name of a girl Offutt said he met at a runaway center in the District when he was 13.

His enlistment in the Marines came after he enlisted twice in the U.S. Army — and collected enlistment bonuses of \$3,600 and \$1,200 — and then went AWOL.

His career as a criminal ended abruptly May 13 when he was arrested outside the Clarendon Motel in Arlington.

The day before a maid at the Iwo Jima Motel in Arlington had called police to say a man registered as David Richard Greenleaf was "suspicious." She told police she discovered jewelry stashed in a trash can and a handgun, according to police reports.

In the early morning hours of May 13, the Viking Insurance Co. — on North 14th Street across from the

Arlington Police Department — was burglarized. Among the items taken, said Rich, were travelers checks and a roll of uncirculated Susan B. Anthony dollars.

At 7:30 a.m., Offutt checked out of the Iwo Jima and paid his \$20 bill with travelers checks reported stolen from Viking, Rich said. By the time Arlington police arrived, however, Offutt had fled. He was eventually caught after police issued a description of Offutt to motels in the area.

Arlington police said that Offutt was convicted of possession of marijuana in Montgomery County in 1976, and has faced other drug related charges. But the Arlington burglaries are his only felony convictions, police said.

"I think he's unusual in the number of burglaries he has committed and the amount of time he's operated without getting caught," Rich said. "We've tied him to 150 burglaries in Arlington."

"He was a kind of chameleon," Bell said of Offutt's successful burglaries. "He blended in with anything."

When asked why he burglarized office buildings — many of which Offutt said were leased by the government, he said, "I enjoyed beating the government. Not so much the institution — it's the politics, man; (they're) ripping off people."

Offutt faces others charges in Arlington stemming from an incident in the county detention center June 29. He barricaded himself inside his cell and has been charged with destruction of property.

Arlington police have compared Offutt with Bernard C. Welch, the convicted murderer of Dr. Michael Halberstam, who is believed to have committed hundreds of burglaries in the Washington area.

Because of the large volume of burglaries Offutt says he has committed, lending a Welch-like mystique to the man, several members of the press clamored to speak to him following his Arlington court appearance.

And after an Arlington police official mentioned that Offutt was receptive to conversation while smoking his favorite cigarettes, one journalist showed up with two packs.

In contrast to Welch, who amassed millions of dollars in stolen property during his career and purchased a sprawling home in Great Falls, Va., Offutt lived from motel to motel in the Washington area and said he spent or gave away most of the money he made from selling stolen merchandise.

In fact, the property Arlington police recovered from Offutt's hotel room on May 13 included several hand calculators, a Japanese Samurai sword, an air pistol, a camera lens and assorted office equipment.

The way Offutt sees it, his life has been a race — a contest which he says "began as a cat and mouse game" with the police. "Either the police or drugs would have gotten me sooner or later," he said.

"I'm not proud of anything I've done ... it's regrets, all regrets."