

Gerald
Blanchard
could hack
any bank,
swipe
any jewel.

THE

GOAT

OF THE

GOAT

On the
trail of the
world's
most
ingenious
thief.

There
was no
security
system
he
couldn't
beat.

BY JOSHUA BEARMAN



ILLUSTRATION BY **JUSTIN WOOD**



The plane slowed and leveled out about a mile aboveground. Up ahead, the Viennese castle glowed like a fairy tale palace. When the pilot gave the thumbs-up, Gerald Blanchard looked down, checked his parachute straps, and jumped into the darkness. He plummeted for a second, then pulled his cord, slowing to a nice descent toward the tiled roof. It was early June 1998, and the evening wind was warm. If it kept cooperating, Blanchard would touch down directly above the room that held the Koechert Diamond Pearl. He steered his parachute toward his target. ¶ A couple of days earlier, Blanchard had appeared to be just another twentysomething on vacation with his wife and her wealthy father.



The three of them were taking a six-month grand European tour: London, Rome, Barcelona, the French Riviera, Vienna. When they stopped at the Schloss Schönbrunn, the Austrian equivalent of Versailles, his father-in-law's VIP status granted them a special preview peek at a highly prized piece from a private collection. And there it was: In a cavernous room, in an alarmed case, behind bulletproof glass, on a weight-sensitive pedestal—a delicate but dazzling 10-pointed star of diamonds fanned around one monstrous pearl. Five seconds after laying eyes on it, Blanchard knew he would try to take it.

The docent began to describe the history of the Koechert Diamond Pearl, better known as the Sisi Star—it was one of many similar pieces specially crafted for Empress Elisabeth to be worn in her magnificently long and lovely braids. Sisi, as she was affectionately known, was assassinated 100 years ago. Only two stars remain, and it has been

Like a criminal Rain Man, Gerald Blanchard possessed a savantlike ability to exploit security flaws.

75 years since the public had a glimpse of ...

Blanchard wasn't listening. He was noting the motion sensors in the corner, the type of screws on the case, the large windows nearby. To hear Blanchard tell it, he has a savantlike ability to assess security flaws, like a criminal Rain Man who involuntarily sees risk probabilities at every turn. And the numbers came up good for the star. Blanchard knew

he couldn't fence the piece, which he did hear the guide say was worth \$2 million. Still, he found the thing mesmerizing and the challenge irresistible.

He began to work immediately, videotaping every detail of the star's chamber. (He even coyly shot the NO CAMERAS sign near the jewel case.) He surreptitiously used a key to loosen the screws when the staff moved on to the next room, unlocked the windows, and determined that the motion sensors would allow him to move—albeit very slowly—inside the castle. He stopped at the souvenir shop and bought a replica of the Sisi Star to get a feel for its size. He also noted the armed guards stationed at every entrance and patrolling the halls.

But the roof was unguarded, and it so happened that one of the skills Blanchard had picked up in his already long criminal career was skydiving. He had also recently befriended a German pilot who was game for a mercenary sortie and would help Blanchard procure a parachute. Just one night after his visit to the star, Blanchard was making his descent to the roof.

Aerial approaches are a tricky business, though, and Blanchard almost overshot the castle, slowing himself just enough by skidding along a pitched gable. Sliding down the tiles, arms and legs flailing for a grip, Blanchard managed to save himself from falling four stories by grabbing a railing at the roof's edge. For a moment, he lay motionless. Then he took a deep breath, unhooked the chute, retrieved a rope from his pack, wrapped it around a marble column, and lowered himself down the side of the building.

Carefully, Blanchard entered through the window he had unlocked the previous day. He knew there was a chance of encountering guards. But the Schloss Schönbrunn was a big place, with more than 1,000 rooms. He liked the odds. If he heard guards, he figured, he would disappear behind the massive curtains.

The nearby rooms were silent as Blanchard slowly approached the display and removed the already loosened screws, carefully using a butter knife to hold in place the two long rods that would trigger the alarm system. The real trick was ensuring that the spring-loaded mechanism the star was sitting on didn't register that the weight above it had changed. Of course, he had that covered, too: He reached into his pocket and deftly replaced Elisabeth's bejeweled hairpin with the gift-store fake.

Within minutes, the Sisi Star was in Blanchard's pocket and he was rappelling down a back wall to the garden, taking the rope with him as he slipped from the grounds. When the star was dramatically unveiled to the public the next day, Blanchard returned to watch visitors gasp at the sheer beauty of a cheap replica. And when his parachute was later found in a trash bin, no one connected it to the star, because no one yet knew it was missing. It was two weeks before anyone realized that the jewelry had disappeared.

Later, the Sisi Star rode inside the respirator of some scuba gear back to his home base in Canada, where Blanchard would assemble what prosecutors later called, for lack of a better term, the Blanchard Criminal Organization. Drawing on his encyclopedic knowledge of surveillance and electronics, Blanchard became a criminal mastermind. The star was the heist that transformed him from a successful and experienced thief into a criminal virtuoso.

"Cunning, clever, conniving, and creative," as one prosecutor would call him, Blanchard eluded the police for years. But eventually he made a mistake. And that mistake would take two officers from the modest police force of Winnipeg, Canada, on a wild ride of high tech capers across Africa, Canada, and Europe. Says Mitch McCormick, one of those Winnipeg investigators, "We had never seen anything like it."

Blanch

ard

pulled off his first heist when he was a 6-year-old living with his single mother in Winnipeg. The family couldn't afford milk, and one day, after a long stretch of dry cereal, the boy spotted some recently delivered bottles on a neighbor's porch. "I snuck over there between cars like I was on some kind of mission," he says. "And no one saw me take it." His heart was pounding, and the milk was somehow sweeter than usual. "After that," he says, "I was hooked."

Blanchard moved to Nebraska, started going by his middle name, Daniel, and became an accomplished thief. He didn't look the part—slim, short, and bespectacled, he resembled a young Bill Gates—but he certainly played it, getting into enough trouble to land in reform school. "The way I met Daniel was that he stole my classroom VCR," recalls Randy Flanagan, one of Blanchard's teachers. Flanagan thought he might be able to straighten out the soft-spoken and polite kid, so he took Blanchard under his wing in his home-mechanics class.

"He was a real natural in there," Flanagan says. Blanchard's mother remembers that even as a toddler he could take anything apart. Despite severe dyslexia and a speech impediment, Blanchard "was an absolute genius with his hands," the teacher recalls. In Flanagan's class, Blanchard learned construction, woodworking, model building, and automotive mechanics. The two bonded, and Flanagan became a father figure to Blanchard, driving him to and from school and looking out for him. "He could see that I had talent," Blanchard says. "And he wanted me to put it to good use."

Flanagan had seen many hopeless kids straighten out—"You never know when something's going to change forever for someone," he says—and he still hoped that would happen to Blanchard. "But Daniel was the type of kid who would spend more time trying to cheat on a test than it would have taken to study for it," Flanagan says with a laugh.

In fact, by early in his high school years, Blanchard had already abandoned his after-school job stocking groceries to pursue more lucrative opportunities, like fencing tens of thousands of dollars in goods stolen by department store employees he had managed to befriend. “I could just tell who would work with me,” he says. “It’s a gift, I guess.”

Blanchard began mastering the workings of myriad mechanical devices and electronics. He became obsessed with cameras and surveillance: documenting targets, his own exploits, and his huge piles of money. Befitting a young tech enthusiast, he emptied an entire RadioShack one Easter Sunday. At age 16, he bought a house with more than \$100,000 in cash. (He hired a lawyer to handle the money and sign the deal on his behalf.) When he moved in, Blanchard told his mother that the home belonged to a friend. “She looked the other way,” Blanchard says. “And I tried to keep it all from her.”

Around this time, Blanchard was arrested for theft. He did several months behind bars and was released into Flanagan’s custody after the older man vouched for him at a hearing. “He was great with our own kids,” Flanagan says. “And I still thought he might come around.” But Blanchard’s burgeoning criminal career was hard to ignore, as he often flaunted his ill-gotten gains. “I wasn’t surprised when the FBI came knocking one day,” Flanagan says. “He’d pull out a fistful of hundreds and peel one off to pay for pizza.”

In April 1993, Blanchard was nabbed by the cops in Council Bluffs, Iowa, for a suspected car arson and brought back to police headquarters. “They kept me in the interrogation room past midnight,” Blanchard says. “And at a certain point, I managed to sneak into the next room and slip through the tiles into the ceiling.” Undetected, he heard the cops run down the hall, thinking he’d gone out the fire escape. After waiting a couple of hours, Blanchard lowered himself down into the mostly empty station, stole a police coat, badge, radio, and revolver. After leaving a single bullet on the desk of his interrogator, he took the elevator to the main floor and strolled right past the front desk on his way out of the station. He hitchhiked at dawn back to Omaha on the back of a motorcycle, holding his purloined police

cap down in the wind. “Why are you wearing a uniform?” the driver asked. “Costume party,” Blanchard said as the sun came up. “Really fun time.”

The next day, Blanchard was re-apprehended by a SWAT team, which had to use flash grenades to extricate him from his mother’s attic. But he surprised the cops by escaping yet again, this time from the back of a police cruiser. “They got out of the car and left the keys,” Blanchard says. “There was no barrier, so I fiddled with the cuffs until I got my hands in front of me, locked the doors, slipped up front, and put it in gear.” The authorities gave chase until Blanchard swerved into a steak-house parking lot, fled on foot, and was finally recaptured.

This time, Blanchard served four years and his sentence came with a deportation order attached. In March 1997, he was released to his Canadian homeland and barred from returning to the US for five years.

“After that,” Flanagan says, “I heard from Daniel once or twice a year, thanking me for what I had done for him.” Blanchard sent pictures of himself vacationing around the world, on exclusive beaches, posing in front of Viennese castles. He said he had his own security business. “I wanted that to be true,” Flanagan says. “But I had a hunch he was more likely in the anti-security business.”



From left: Blanchard at age 8; with his then-wife and father-in-law in Vienna, 1998; Blanchard’s girlfriend enjoying his proceeds in 2006.



IN 2001, BLANCHARD WAS DRIVING around Edmonton when he saw a new branch of the Alberta Treasury bank going up. His internal algorithm calculated low risk, and he began to case the target meticulously. It had been three years since the Sisi Star theft, and it was time to try something big and new.

As the bank was being built, Blanchard frequently sneaked inside—sometimes at night, sometimes in broad daylight, disguised as a delivery person or construction worker. There’s less security before the money shows up, and that allowed Blanchard to plant various surveillance devices in the ATM room. He knew when the cash machines were installed and what kind of locks they had. He ordered the same locks online and reverse engineered them at home. Later he returned to the Alberta Treasury to disassemble, disable, and remount the locks.

The take at this bank was a modest 60 grand, but the thrill mattered more than the money anyway. Blanchard’s ambition flowered, as did his technique. As Flanagan had

observed, Blanchard always wanted to beat the system, and he was getting better at it.

Blanchard targeted a half-dozen banks over the next few years. He'd get in through the air-conditioning ductwork, at times contorting his body to fit inside really tight spaces. Other times, he would pick the locks. If there were infrared sensors, he'd use IR goggles to see the beams. Or he'd simply fool the sensor by blocking the beam with a lead film bag.

He assembled an arsenal of tools: night-vision cameras, long-range lenses, high-gain antennas that could pick up the feeds from the audio and video recorders he hid inside a bank, scanners programmed with the encryption keys for police frequencies. He always had a burglary kit on hand containing ropes, uniforms, cameras, and microphones. In the Edmonton branch of the Bank of Nova Scotia, which he hit in 2002, he installed a metal panel near the AC ducts to create a secret crawl space that he could disappear into if surprised by police.

Such evasive action was never required, however, in part because Blanchard had also memorized the mechanics of the Mas-Hamilton and La Gard locks that many banks used for their ATMs. (These are big, complicated contraptions, and when police later interrogated Blanchard, they presented him with a Mas-Hamilton lock in dozens of pieces. He stunned them by reassembling it in 40 seconds.)

Blanchard also learned how to turn himself into someone else. Sometimes it was just a matter of donning a yellow hard hat from Home Depot. But it could also be more involved. Eventually, Blanchard used legitimate baptism and marriage certificates—filled out with his assumed names—to obtain real driver's licenses. He would even take driving tests, apply for passports, or enroll in college classes under one of his many aliases: James Gehman, Daniel Wall, or Ron Aikins. With the help of makeup, glasses, or dyed hair, Blanchard gave James, Daniel, Ron, and the others each a different look.

Over the years, Blanchard procured and stockpiled IDs and uniforms from various security companies and even law enforcement agencies. Sometimes, just for fun and to see whether it would work, he pretended to be a reporter so he could hang out with celebrities. He created VIP passes and applied for press cards so he could go to NHL playoff games or take a spin around the Indianapolis Motor Speedway with racing legend Mario Andretti. He met the prince of Monaco at a yacht race in Monte Carlo and interviewed Christina Aguilera at one of her concerts.

That's where, in July 2000, Blanchard met Angela James. She had flowing black hair and claimed to work for Ford Models. They got along right away, and Blanchard was elated when she gave him her number. He sensed that the teenager was "down with crime"—someone he could count on for help.

Blanchard liked having a sidekick. James was a fun, outgoing party animal who had plenty of free time. She eventually began helping Blanchard on bank jobs. They'd tag-team on daylight reconnaissance, where her striking looks provided a distraction while Blanchard gathered information. At night, she'd be the lookout.

Though they were never involved romantically, James and Blanchard traveled together around the world, stopping in the Caribbean to stash his loot in offshore accounts. They camped out at resorts in Jamaica and the Turks and Caicos islands, depositing money in \$10,000 increments into some of Blanchard's 13 pseudonymously held accounts. The money in the offshore accounts was to pay for his jet-setting lifestyle. The money back in Canada would bankroll his real estate transactions. The funds sitting in Europe were there, well, in case anything happened to him.

night

on Saturday, May 15, 2004, as the northern prairie winter was finally giving way to spring, Blanchard walked up to the front door of the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce in the Mega Centre, a suburban development in Winnipeg. He quickly jimmed the lock, slipped inside, and locked the door behind him. It was a brand-new branch that was set to open for business on Monday, and Blanchard knew that the cash machines had been loaded on Friday.



After mid

Thorough as ever, Blanchard had spent many previous nights infiltrating the bank to do recon or to tamper with the locks while James acted as lookout, scanning the vicinity with binoculars and providing updates via a scrambled-band walkie-talkie. He had put a transmitter behind an electrical outlet, a pinhole video camera in a thermostat, and a cheap baby monitor behind the wall. He had even mounted handles on the drywall panels so he could remove them to enter and exit the ATM room. Blanchard had also taken detailed measurements of the room and set up a dummy version in a friend's nearby machine shop. With practice, he had

Winnipeg police officers Larry Levasseur (left) and Mitch McCormick were relentless in their pursuit of Blanchard.

gotten his ATM-cracking routine down to where he needed only 90 seconds after the alarm tripped to finish and escape with his score.

As Blanchard approached, he saw that the door to the ATM room was unlocked and wide open. Sometimes you get lucky. All he had to do was walk inside.

From here he knew the drill by heart. There were seven machines, each with four drawers. He set to work quickly, using just the right technique to spring the machines open without causing any telltale damage. Well rehearsed, Blanchard wheeled out boxes full of cash and several money counters, locked the door behind him, and headed to a van he had parked nearby.

Eight minutes after Blanchard broke into the first ATM, the Winnipeg Police Service arrived in response to the alarm. However, the officers found the doors locked and assumed the alarm had been an error. As the police pronounced the bank secure, Blanchard was zipping away with more than half a million dollars.

The following morning was a puzzler for authorities. There were no indications of damage to the door, no fingerprints, and no surveillance recordings—Blanchard had stolen the hard drives that stored footage from the bank's cameras. Moreover, Blanchard's own surveillance equipment was still transmitting from inside the ATM room, so before he skipped



town, he could listen in on investigators. He knew their names; he knew their leads. He would call both the bank manager's cell phone and the police, posing as an anonymous informant who had been involved in the heist and was swindled out of his share. It was the contractors, he'd say. Or the Brinks guy. Or the maintenance people. His tips were especially convincing because he had a piece of inside information: One of the bank's ATMs was left untouched. Blanchard had done that on purpose to make it easier to sow confusion.

With the cops outmatched and chasing red herrings, the Winnipeg bank job looked like a perfect crime. Then officials got a call from a vigilant employee at a nearby Walmart, which shared a large parking lot with the bank. He had been annoyed at people leaving cars there, so he took it upon himself to scan the lot. On the night of the break-in, he spotted a blue Dodge Caravan next to the bank. Seeing a dolly and other odd equipment inside, he took down the license plate number. Police ran it. The vehicle had been rented from Avis by one Gerald Daniel Blanchard.

BLANCHARD'S USE of his real name was as careless as the fingerprints police found inside the getaway van recovered by the rental company. Soon the cops were on his tail.

Because of the heist's sophistication, the investigation fell to Winnipeg's Major Crimes unit. But Blanchard—now divorced and living with his girlfriend, Lynette Tien—learned that he had become a suspect, so he stayed out of their sights. Two years passed, and many of the investigators who had dealt with the initial leads retired or were transferred.

The case went cold until early 2006, when Mitch McCormick, a veteran officer in his fifties, started working on major crimes and decided to take a look at the unsolved robbery. Intrigued, he called his longtime colleague Larry Levasseur, a wiretap ace who had just been transferred to the Commercial Crimes division.

In Blanchard's many years of crime, guns had never been involved. But the Marriott suites soon turned into a hostage situation.

One night in early February, McCormick and Levasseur sat down at the King's Head bar, a favorite local police haunt. Levasseur went through several pints of amber ale, and McCormick had his usual double rye and a Coke tall. McCormick filled him in on the Blanchard leads and gave him the case file to take home.

The two were interested, but McCormick's boss was skeptical. Why spend money chasing a criminal who was committing most of his crimes outside their jurisdiction? Eventually, though, the two stubborn cops made such a fuss that the department brass relented. "But we got no resources and had to put together a task force out of thin air," McCormick says. "It was like the set of *Barney Miller*. We knew it was bad when we had to buy our own Post-its."

They quickly started filling up those Post-its and arranging them on a corkboard, mapping Blanchard's sprawling network. The case was overwhelming, but they eventually unraveled his tangle of 32 false names. Their preliminary checks also showed that Blanchard was a person of interest in many crimes, including the unsolved theft of the Sisi Star nearly 10 years earlier. They assembled roughly 275 pages of documentation, enough to persuade a judge to let them tap Blanchard's 18 phones. Now they were in business. They were taking a professional flier on this case. They dubbed their investigation Project Kite.

USUALLY WIRETAPS are a waiting game; cops will listen to secretive organized crime syndicates for years, hoping for one little slip. But Blanchard was surprisingly loose-lipped. The second weekend the wires went live, McCormick and Levasseur heard him direct-

ing a team of underlings in a product-return fraud at a Best Buy. More scams followed. They heard him wheeling and dealing in real estate. They listened in as he planned his next bank job. They learned about a vast network of sophisticated crime. For a smart criminal, McCormick and Levasseur thought, this guy sure did talk a lot.

Then, on November 16, 2006, Blanchard got a particularly intriguing call.

"Hello, Danny," a man with a thick British accent said. "Are you ready? I have a job for you. How soon can you get to Cairo?"

McCormick and Levasseur listened with astonishment as Blanchard immediately set about recruiting his own small team to meet up with another group in Egypt. Blanchard referred to his contact as the Boss—he couldn't pronounce his real name—and explained to his cohorts that there was money to be made with this guy.

James was in. But her parents were in town visiting, and her mother didn't want her to go. James put her mom on the phone so Blanchard could talk the woman into giving her daughter permission to join him in a criminal escapade across the globe. "We're going to make a lot of money," he said. "But don't worry. Everything will be fine."

Several of his regular guys couldn't make it, so Blanchard called his neighbor, a Congolese immigrant named Balume Kashongwe. When Blanchard explained the job, Kashongwe volunteered right away. With his team assembled, Blanchard thought, "This is going to be easy. What could go wrong?" Just a few hours after the Boss' call, Blanchard, Kashongwe, and James were in the air, en route to Cairo.

BLANCHARD HAD FIRST met the Boss a few months earlier in London at an electronics store. He could tell they were kindred spirits by a glance at the Boss' purchases: eight DVR recorders. Blanchard knew you didn't buy a load like that for anything but surveillance. The two struck up a conversation.

Later that day, a car arrived to take Blanchard to a London café, where the Boss and a dozen Kurdish henchmen, most from northern Iraq, were waiting in the basement, smoking hookahs. The Boss filled Blanchard in on his operation, which spanned Europe and the Middle East and included various criminal activities, including counterfeiting and fraud. The latest endeavor was called skimming: glean- | CONTINUED ON PAGE 108



Art of the Steal

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 106

ing active debit and credit card numbers by patching into the ISDN lines that companies use to process payments. The group manufactured counterfeit cards magnetized and embossed with the stolen numbers and then used them to withdraw the maximum daily limits before the fraud was reported. It was a lucrative venture for the Boss' network, which funneled a portion of its take to Kurdish separatists in Iraq.

Living up to his new nickname, the Boss gave Blanchard a trial job: taking 25 cards to Canada to retrieve cash. Blanchard returned to London with \$60,000, and the Boss was pleased. He found the younger man charming and steady as well. "We have something big coming," he told Blanchard over dinner at a Kurdish restaurant. "I'll keep you posted."

With that job now at hand, Blanchard's crew arrived in Egypt and checked into the Cairo Marriott Hotel & Omar Khayyam Casino, settling into a couple of suites with sweeping views of the Nile. The next day, three men Blanchard remembered from the London café showed up. They brought roughly 1,000 pirated cards, which the group immediately started using in teams of two. Kashongwe and the Kurds from London blended in easily. Blanchard and James bought burkas in the souk as disguises. The Boss directed operations from London.

They went from ATM to ATM for 12 hours a day, withdrawing Egyptian pounds and stuffing the bills into backpacks and suitcases. Blanchard and James folded their cash into pouches hidden beneath the burkas. And as usual, Blanchard filmed the entire adventure: the wandering through Cairo's Byzantine streets, the downtime in the city, the money pouring in.

Back in their bare-bones Winnipeg office, McCormick and Levasseur were monitoring their target's email accounts and calls back to Tien, who was managing travel arrangements and other administrative details from

Blanchard's condo in Vancouver. The Canadian cops were stunned. They never imagined they'd come across anything this big. They learned about the loot piling up 4 feet high in the suites at the Marriott. And then they learned that everything had gone to hell.

In the course of a week, the team collected the equivalent of more than \$2 million. But the individual ATM payouts were small, so after a couple of days Blanchard sent Kashongwe south to Nairobi, Kenya, with 50 cards to find more-generous machines. Kashongwe had no cell phone, though, and he went suspiciously incommunicado. Soon it became clear that Kashongwe was AWOL. Blanchard wasn't happy. And neither was the Boss.

Blanchard was in over his head. In his many years of crime, guns had never been involved. The Boss, however, seemed inclined to change that. Blanchard promised to track down Kashongwe. "Good," the Boss said. "Otherwise, we'll find him. And he won't be happy when we do."

McCormick and Levasseur listened to the calls in and out of Cairo as temperatures rose. They could hear Blanchard calling Tien back in Vancouver, trying desperately to reach Kashongwe. He called Kashongwe's sister in Brussels and his brother in Ottawa. He sounded frantic at times. But Blanchard had no luck; Kashongwe had vanished.

Things took another turn for the worse when the Boss told Blanchard he couldn't leave Cairo until the missing cards were accounted for. Two more men arrived to "keep an eye on things." The Marriott suites had turned into a hostage scene.

But Blanchard's natural charm worked on the Boss, too. He took full responsibility, promised to personally pay back Kashongwe's share, and calmly argued that James didn't have anything to do with the double cross. The Boss eventually told his men to let James go. Then he agreed to let Blanchard travel to London to smooth things out in person. "I'm pretty honest about that kind of thing," Blanchard says. "And the Boss could see that I was taking responsibility for my guy."

The two decided to set aside the Kashongwe problem in the interest of business. The Boss' men would meet Blanchard back in Canada with a new batch of cards. "After all," Blanchard says, "why fight when there was more money to be made?"

On December 3, 2006, Blanchard landed in Vancouver, where he immediately rented a car and drove straight to a branch of the Bank of Nova Scotia, 65 miles east in Chilliwack. He'd started prepping to burglarize the bank before his trip. The Kashongwe fiasco ended up nearly costing Blanchard money, and now he was after a sizable payday. Chilliwack was good for \$800,000, he figured, and he would work through the holidays to get it done.

McCormick and Levasseur had both been on duty during the holidays before, but never had a case so consumed them. They were spending 18-hour days in their makeshift headquarters or at the King's Head, poring over transcripts and evidence. They got no overtime pay. The strain grew, as did the pressure from higher-ups.

Lucky for them, Blanchard's disarray was compounding his mistakes. As soon as he touched down, McCormick and Levasseur picked up Blanchard live, discussing Cairo, his next bank, and the potential whereabouts of Kashongwe. While Blanchard was en route to Chilliwack, they listened to him and the Boss discuss details about the arrival of a team in Montreal the next day.

McCormick and Levasseur called officials at the Montreal airport with names and flight information. As the targets strode through the airport, the cops swarmed in. The team was detained, and police seized dozens of blank credit cards, a card writer, and computers overflowing with evidence that filled in the blanks on the Cairo operation. To top it off, the hard drives also contained some of Blanchard's comprehensive amateur crime video of that job. Now the police could not only hear him talking about crimes, they could see him committing them.

The Boss phoned the very next day, panicked. But the call caught Blanchard at an inopportune moment. "I can't talk right now," Blanchard whispered. "I'm doing my thing inside the bank right now." It was 12:30 am, and Blanchard was crawling through the bank's ductwork.

"Listen, my guys got arrested in the airport, and I need to find out why," the Boss said. Blanchard was making his way painstakingly through the air vents, en route to the ATM room. His earpiece was taped in and the phone was on auto-answer, in case he got a call that the police were nearby. "What's going on with my guys in Montreal?"

the Boss demanded. "They got pulled in!"

"I have no idea," Blanchard said softly. "But it's too much of a coincidence that customs knew. The phones must be tapped."

The Boss pressed on, asking for news about Kashongwe, but Blanchard interrupted. "I'm looking down. There's a security guard down there right now," he breathed. He was deep into the building, making it hard to shimmy his way out in case he needed an emergency escape. "I have too much invested in this job," he said. "I have to go."

"We need to fix this, Danny," the Boss said.

As Blanchard whispered back, McCormick and Levasseur were triangulating the call's location. Now they knew Blanchard was targeting Chilliwack's Bank of Nova Scotia. In late January, investigators from Toronto, Edmonton, and Vancouver as well as provincial police and the Mounties had joined McCormick and Levasseur's small operation. "Project Kite was ready to be reeled in," McCormick says.

At 4 am on January 23, 2007, more than a dozen SWAT team members swarmed Blanchard's Vancouver condo, where they found Blanchard and Tien. Several other search warrants were executed simultaneously across Canada, turning up half a dozen accomplices, including Angela James and Blanchard's cousin Dale Fedoruk.

Blanchard was busted. At his various residences and storage facilities, police confiscated 10 pallets of material: 60,000 documents, cash in various currencies, smoke bombs, firearms, and 300 electronic devices, including commercial card printers, card readers, and all manner of surveillance equipment. In his condo, police discovered a hidden room stocked with burglary kits and well-organized, itemized documentation of all Blanchard's fake identities. He was initially charged with 41 crimes, ranging from fraud to possession of instruments for forging credit cards.

The Boss called Blanchard in jail on the prison phone. "Why you, Danny?" he asked. "Why would little Winnipeg go to all that trouble? You must have upset the establishment. It's like we say in England: You fuck with the Queen, and they fuck with you."

As McCormick and Levasseur listened in, Blanchard said it wasn't the establishment, or the Queen. "It was these Keystone Kops out here in Winnipeg."

Blanchard says that he could have escaped from jail again, but there was no point. The police had all the evidence, including 120 video- and audiotapes detailing everything. They'd just find him again, and he was tired of running anyhow.

Blanchard refused to make statements about any of his associates, but he eventually decided to cooperate with authorities about his own case. "He's a flamboyant guy," McCormick says. "And an extrovert, recording everything. Some part of him just wanted to tell his story." He had another incentive, too: Revealing his methods, which would help the banking industry improve its security practices, could earn him a lighter prison sentence.

The first day that Levasseur sat down with Blanchard in Vancouver, the investigator felt like he "was talking to a wall." But in later interviews, Blanchard became more courteous and helpful. Finally, after some negotiations through his lawyer, Blanchard offered to take them to the Sisi Star. "It's right here in my grandmother's basement in Winnipeg," he said. Blanchard had tried to steer clear of his family since his arrest; he didn't want to embarrass them further. But now he had to call. "I need to come to the house," he said. "And I'm bringing the police."

Blanchard, in handcuffs and leg shackles, hugged his grandmother at the door and took McCormick and Levasseur directly into the basement. He disappeared into a crawl space with Levasseur. It was quiet except for the sound of them grappling with the insulation. Eventually, Levasseur removed a square of Styrofoam and pulled out the star.

They brought it out into the light, where the detectives marveled at the beauty of the piece. They'd never seen anything like it. That kicked off nearly a month of debriefing. The cops had gotten some stuff right, but Blanchard set them straight on the rest. "Never in policing does the bad guy tell you, 'Here's how I did it, down to the last detail,'" McCormick says. "And that's what he did."

After spending so much time chasing Blanchard—and then talking to him—McCormick and Levasseur developed a grudging regard for his abilities. And Blanchard grew to admire their relentless investigation. Like a cornered hacker who trades his black hat for white, Blanchard took on a new challenge: working the system from the inside. He provided such good information that McCormick and Levasseur


were able to put together an eight-hour presentation for law enforcement and banking professionals. "When those guys hear what Blanchard told us," McCormick says, "you can hear their assholes pucker shut."

Blanchard's full participation came under consideration when he pled guilty to 16 charges on November 7, 2007. He agreed to sell his four condos and pay restitution to the Canadian government. And he was willing to take a longer sentence for himself in exchange for leniency toward his coaccused, whom he refused to testify against. None of his partners served jail time.

Blanchard also surprised the court by having his lawyer issue an unusual statement: an expression of gratitude for being arrested. "My client wishes to recognize that this huge lie that he had been living could now finally fall apart." It added that Blanchard was looking forward to moving on. "He recognizes that the men and women of the Winnipeg Police Service made that all possible."

Instead of the maximum of 164 years, Blanchard got eight. And then last summer, after serving less than two, he was released into carefully guarded probation. He now lives in a Vancouver halfway house, where he is prohibited from going anywhere near certain types of surveillance equipment and talking to any of his former associates. One of the people he *can* call is Randy Flanagan, his old mentor from high school.

"He filled me in about the past 10 years," Flanagan says. "I was surprised, but not that surprised, about what our little former son had been up to." Blanchard told Flanagan he wanted to turn his life around. Working with McCormick and Levasseur had convinced him that he could become a consultant to the banks. "Who knows?" Flanagan says. "Maybe he will get that security business he talked about off the ground after all."

The judge had a similar thought during Blanchard's plea hearing. The banks "should hire him and pay him a million dollars a year," he said. And right before sentencing, the judge turned directly to Blanchard. "I think that you have a great future ahead of you if you wish to pursue an honest style of life," he said. "Although I'm not prepared to sign a letter of reference." 

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JOSHUAH BEARMAN (joshuah_bearman@hotmail.com) wrote about rescuing American hostages from Iran in issue 15.05.