

HISTORY This Week EP 427: The Spy who Fooled the FBI EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

NOTE: This transcript may contain errors.

Sally Helm: HISTORY This Week. May 10, 2002. I'm Sally Helm.

Robert Hanssen, wearing a dull green prison uniform, steps up to the microphone. He looks pale and hollow-eyed. He twists his hands behind his back. He knows that a lot of his former colleagues are in the courtroom today. And that he has betrayed them.

Hanssen served in the FBI for twenty-five years. For twenty-two of them, off and on, he was handing secrets to the Soviets. In return, they gave him more than a million dollars, in cash and diamonds. But Hanssen got caught.

Months before Hanssen steps up to the microphone in this courtroom, He'd pleaded guilty to fifteen counts of espionage and conspiracy. There was talk of the death sentence—after all, he was one of the most damaging spies in US history. But he's cooperated... to an extent. And so instead, he's sentenced on this day in May to life in prison.

Hanssen has the chance to make a statement. "I apologize for my behavior," he says. "I am shamed by it." He apologizes in particular to his wife and his six children, who are not in the courtroom. He says, "I have hurt so many so deeply."

The prosecution is blunt. U.S. Attorney Paul McNulty says, "Robert Hanssen was trained to catch spies; he was an expert at what it took to avoid being caught. And he was caught. And he was punished."

Today: the sordid tale of Robert Hanssen. How did he manage to steal state secrets for 22 years—from inside the FBI? Was he a criminal mastermind... or just a guy with incredible luck?

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: Washington D.C. 2001. A bombshell announcement from the FBI: They've caught a spy in their own ranks. Robert Hanssen. Journalists scramble to cover the story. One of them is veteran reporter Elaine Shannon, who had covered the FBI for 25 years.

Elaine Shannon: We all went, wow, this is big stuff, because there had been some security problems at the FBI, but nothing like this.

Sally Helm: Shannon starts calling her sources, asking about Hanssen. And she reads his own words. In the letters he sent to his handlers at the KGB, the Soviet intelligence service.

Elaine Shannon: These were flowery, and they were needy and like love letters.

Sally Helm: There's the sense of this on-again off-again romance. At one point, when his handlers get in touch, Hanssen writes: *It brought me great joy to see the signal at last.* At a moment when they seem to have abandoned him, he pleads: *At least say goodbye. It's been a long time, my dear friends. A long and lonely time.*

Elaine Shannon: This reads like a guy who wants a lover or has a lover and is trying to make up with a lover, this does not read like a guy doing a business transaction.

Sally Helm: Shannon can tell there's a complex story here, with a mysterious figure at its center. She wants to understand Hanssen's motives. Why he undermined his country, even when he knew that it would get people killed.

That won't be easy.

Elaine Shannon: I don't think anybody still understands Robert Hanssen to this day, including Robert Hanssen.

Sally Helm: But Shannon tries.

Elaine Shannon: He had a rather harsh relationship with his father.

Sally Helm: Hanssen's father, Howard, wants to toughen Robert up. Over time, that translates to physical and emotional abuse. Howard berates his young son constantly. When Robert is about 6 or 7, for reasons unknown, his father wraps him in blankets and spins him around until he throws up. So, Robert turns to a different male role model.

James Bond Archival: "I admire your luck, Mister..." "Bond... James Bond."

Sally Helm: As a kid growing up in Chicago, Hanssen obsesses over 007. He sits rapt in dark theaters, watching a suave Sean Connery outwit and outpunch his enemies. It's Hansen's dream life. But it's not his father's dream for him.

Elaine Shannon: His father wanted him not to be in law enforcement. He wanted him to be a doctor or some other white coat professional.

Sally Helm: Even though Howard Hanssen was a police officer himself. And Robert does try to get that white coat. He goes to dental school but quits before he's finished. And becomes an accountant instead. It's detail oriented. And he's good at that. But he finds it boring. And then, in 1976...

Elaine Shannon: He got hooked into the FBI.

Sally Helm: The FBI.

Elaine Shannon: They were looking for accountants, lawyers, other professionals.

Sally Helm: And Hanssen thinks, *perfect. This is my way to get the James Bond life.* Dangerous situations. Romantic locations. Top secret documents. And his resume gets him in the door.

Elaine Shannon: He looked good on paper.

Sally Helm: 31. Male. College educated. A devout Catholic who's married with three kids. To the FBI in 1976, that looks like a model agent. So, he lands the job.

But when he actually starts work... it's clear the resume didn't tell the whole story.

Elaine Shannon: He was not good in person. He just put people off. He was very stiff; he was not engaging.

Sally Helm: For an FBI agent, that's not good. You have to recruit informants. Question witnesses. That requires someone persuasive and congenial. But Hanssen is abrasive. He's pretty much destined for a desk job.

That's where undercover operative Eric O'Neill comes across him, at FBI headquarters in Washington, DC. He said Hanssen made a strong first impression. He was imposing. Six foot two or three.

Eric O'Neil: He sort of leaned forward as in a bit of a hunch. He could smile, but he was more likely to glare. He walked with an odd limp to his right side. And he had a very sharp tongue. If you did something wrong or you made a mistake, he would lash out right away.

Sally Helm: Again, not good. So, Hanssen gets a new assignment.

Elaine Shannon: Well, he quickly got put on a counterintelligence squad. His bosses put him there because he wasn't very good with people. But counterintelligence, a lot of it is just following people silently.

Sally Helm: So, here's Hanssen, stuck behind a monitor, tracking suspects from afar. Not a glamorous guy on a beach with a girl... just a cog in the FBI machine. And yet... he does now have access to highly classified U.S. intelligence.

Elaine Shannon: They put him in a room by himself with a computer so he could look up stuff. This was golden for a spy.

Sally Helm: He's good with computers—but at the time, that's not a highly respected skill within the FBI. Hanssen thinks, *I'm smarter than these other guys. Better than them.*

And eventually, he decides to use his skills, not as an FBI agent... but as a *double* agent. A spy... for the other guys.

In 1979, he makes his move.

Elaine Shannon: His first act of espionage was to walk into a front for Russian military intelligence. It's called the GRU.

Sally Helm: Hanssen just waltzes into a GRU front in Manhattan. He sits down with America's Cold War enemy, its rival, and offers them his services. As a spy.

Elaine Shannon says... the Soviets do not rejoice at this visit. Instead, they are immediately suspicious.

Elaine Shannon: Here's this guy with this short haircut and this cheap dark suit and this white shirt. And he's offering information. Well, they thought he was a plant. You would too. I would too. And so, they kind of blew him off.

Sally Helm: They send Hanssen away. He's kinda down about it... but he is not ready to give up. He starts writing letters to the GRU and the KGB, flattering them and pleading for their attention. Eventually,

he makes a bold proposal.

Elaine Shannon: He just offered them information about three of the most important double agents the FBI, and CIA had ever developed.

Sally Helm: Bombshell information. About people on the Soviet side who are spying for the Americans. The Soviets would trade money and even lives to know this kind of information. But Hanssen doesn't ask for much.

Elaine Shannon: He didn't bargain, he didn't say, I've got this really great stuff. What are you gonna pay me for? No, that's not enough. No, this is really golden stuff. You gotta pay me a lot more. He didn't do any of that.

Sally Helm: The Soviets are still not sure if they can trust this guy... so they take the list of names and file it away. It sits there collecting dust until the mid 1980s... when another American double agent hands them the same names. CIA operative Aldrich Ames is also spying for the Soviets. He doesn't know anything about Hanssen. And with this confirmation... the Soviets take brutal action. They recall their double agents to the USSR, interrogate them, and execute them. These are the rules of the game, so to speak. Shannon says it's virtually certain Hanssen knew that these people he'd betrayed would wind up dead.

Elaine Shannon: He killed or tried to kill his first time out. That tells me if I may make an assumption he wanted to strike out at the world. He wanted to strike out at colleagues, at bosses. He was a very angry man.

Sally Helm: After this, Robert Hanssen is on the Soviet payroll.

He's gonna start handing over more information. But of course, he has to be careful. Hanssen never meets with his KGB handlers face-to-face. And takes on a new persona.

Elaine Shannon: He used a phony name called Ramon Garcia in dealing with the KGB. Now that's a romantic spy novel kind of name, or I guess he thought it was.

Sally Helm: Hanssen has finally hit his version of the big time. He is officially a spy. But it seems that he's still not satisfied.

Elaine Shannon: This is a lonely needy man. He's searching for something, but he had all these children. He had a beautiful wife. So, what is his problem?

Sally Helm: For one thing, Hanssen had more than one double life. Elaine Shannon says that this married, apparently devout, church-going man, was also spending a lot of time at strip clubs. And even taking a stripper he met there on a trip to Hong Kong. They had an ongoing relationship.

Elaine Shannon: Hanssen gave her an American Express card to keep up this Mercedes he bought her, and then got furious at her, and withdrew it when she bought a couple of little Easter dresses for her nieces.

Sally Helm: Hanssen also posted explicit stories about his wife on internet bulletin boards. A friend of Hanssen's even claims the spy also took intimate videos without her knowledge and showed him these videos.

Elaine Shannon: I know it's distasteful, but this is where Hanssen was when he wasn't spying.

Sally Helm: This phase of Hanssen's spying lasts for about 10 years. He gets very good at swiping classified information and passing it on to the Soviets through dead drops. On his KGB handlers' instructions, Hanssen would leave a signal at a prearranged spot, like a white thumbtack on a utility pole—communicating that he was ready to make a drop. Then Hanssen would print out the documents.

Elaine Shannon: Or he would use a disc. And he'd wrapped those in our ordinary black plastic garbage bag and take it to a park.

Sally Helm: He'd leave the black bag at the appointed spot. Then stick a piece of white tape on a nearby sign—his signal that he was ready for payment.

Elaine Shannon: And then they would leave money in the dead drops later.

Sally Helm: Hanssen likes how easy it is to fool his colleagues at the bureau. The deception all runs smoothly until:

News Archival: Our top story, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev has been removed from power, and there are tanks now in the streets of Moscow.

Sally Helm: The Soviet Union falls in 1991. The country that employs Hanssen as a spy... that country no longer exists. Hanssen knows this could be dangerous for him. He wonders... *Will Ramon Garcia get caught in the geopolitical fallout?*

So, Hanssen lays low—no more spying for a time. But then something happens. In 1994, the FBI arrests that other double agent—Aldrich Ames. They start to take stock of all the secrets that he's shared with the Soviets.

Elaine Shannon: The FBI and CIA started to realize there was somebody else because there were things that the Russians clearly had that they knew that Ames could not have known and could not have given up.

Sally Helm: They realize... there must be *two* moles in their midst.

So now the FBI and the CIA create a joint team to smoke out this second mole. Bad news for Hanssen. But undercover operative Eric O'Neill says... the bureau had a blind spot.

Eric O'Neil: The FBI had this bias to always assume it can't be us. We're the good guys. We wear the white hats. We're the cowboys. We're not the bad guys.

Sally Helm: So, they look down the road. At the other guys.

Eric O'Neil: The guys robbing the stagecoach. That's the CIA. Anytime there's a mole, it's gotta be in there.

Sally Helm: The FBI assumes they are looking for a turncoat CIA agent. They start to hunt for him by

analyzing who had access to the leaked information, a motive, opportunity, and means. Elaine Shannon says, they soon identify a suspect. A CIA agent named Brian Kelley.

Obviously... he's the wrong guy. But they think he looks like the right guy.

Elaine Shannon: He lived near where some dead drops were that they knew about. He had a lot of similarities, the kind of person they were looking for. They investigated him, made his life miserable, interviewed his aged mother, interviewed his children. Ultimately that was all a false lead.

Sally Helm: Is Hanssen following it? Does he know that that's happening?

Elaine Shannon: Yes. He was watching the Brian Kelly investigation and probably very happy about it.

Sally Helm: As Hanssen watches Kelley's life fall apart, he's like, *phew. I'm safe. And maybe... could I get away with spying again?*

Elaine Shannon: He got back into communication with the now Russians.

Sally Helm: After 20 years of espionage, Robert Hanssen feels unstoppable. Why shouldn't he? By all appearances, he's a respectable member of his community with a nice new job at the State Department. Where there's a whole new set of secrets to be ransacked.

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: Washington DC. The year 2000. The FBI has a new head of counterintelligence operations. His name is Neil Gallagher, and he thinks the mole team needs to move beyond analysis. That's according to Elaine Shannon.

Elaine Shannon: He had a different philosophy. He comes from the criminal investigations, and he said we cannot analyze our way out of this. Somebody knows. Whenever you have a crime, somebody knows something. You just have to keep talking to people, talk, talk, talk. People, people, people. Find the person who knows.

Sally Helm: Gallagher tells his investigators: go look for anyone who worked for the KGB in the 1980s. They might have interacted with this mole.

Elaine Shannon: There were a lot of former KGB people who were out in the wind. They were in business, they were consulting, they were mercenaries.

Sally Helm: Investigators track down an ex-KGB officer who had once worked in Washington, DC. He has information that they want. But it comes at a steep price: 7 million dollars and safe haven in the US. The government makes the deal. And the guy starts talking.

Elaine Shannon: The Russian said yeah, I dealt with someone who was giving us information. I don't have the person's name, never saw him. But there's a file in the old KGB headquarters. I think I can get it.

Sally Helm: The Russian—his name is still classified—goes to Moscow in late 2000. To the former KGB headquarters in Lubyanka Square. This is a top-secret mission whose details, to this day, have not been

released. But the gist of it is he walks into this massive building with its ornate facade... and he walks out with the goods.

The Russian stays in Moscow a little longer. But he passes the documents along to the CIA, who then forward them to Washington.

Elaine Shannon: The Russian who got this stuff left instructions—there were about five or six big manila envelopes. And one of 'em said, do not open this until I get back to the US. Can explain what's in it, don't touch it.

Sally Helm: The FBI sets that folder aside, but opens up the rest.

Elaine Shannon: There's all these writings from Ramon Garcia, these weird squirrely writings.

Sally Helm: Letters from Hanssen to his handlers that got stranger over time. They seem to portray his spiraling mental state. *"One might propose I am either insanely brave or quite insane,"* he writes. *"I'd answer neither. I'd say, insanely loyal. Take your pick. There is insanity in all the answers."*

And there's something else in the files too.

Elaine Shannon: There's a snippet of tape with a man's voice on it where the person had called the embassy, I guess, to set up a meet.

Sally Helm: When FBI analysts hear the recording, some of them are like... *I think that's Robert Hanssen.* The letters also contain some peculiar vocabulary and stylistic quirks. Again, things these agents have heard from their colleague. Robert Hanssen.

It's still just a suspicion. But it's enough to get Hanssen placed under surveillance. And the FBI takes some precautionary measures.

Elaine Shannon: The boss of the counterintelligence division said, well, we gotta get Hanssen away from our computer system.

Sally Helm: They secretly build Hanssen a fake computer system. It looks identical to the regular database but doesn't have any legitimate top-secret files. The computer also lets the FBI remotely track Hanssen's online activity.

And they tell him: *you've gotten a promotion! Come back to FBI headquarters.* This move will make it easier for them to watch him. And so will the assistant they've assigned to work with Hanssen—an assistant who's actually undercover operative Eric O'Neill. He says Hanssen was kind of abrasive right from the beginning.

Eric O'Neil: That first day he comes into the office, kind of looks at me, goes into his office without saying a word.

Sally Helm: So, the surveillance is set. And then the Russian who's working for the FBI returns to DC. And investigators open the final envelope. Inside are the tattered remnants of a black trash bag.

Elaine Shannon: The Russian says, *well, I saved this. This was around a dead drop.* That went straight to fingerprinting and they pulled up Hanssen's prints off of it.

Sally Helm: So, is that enough? Do they have them now or do they need more?

Elaine Shannon: They need more. They need to catch him in the act, preferably with a tape recorder and cameras and a lot of witnesses and show that to a jury because they can't afford a near miss.

Sally Helm: That means they need to know the time and place of his next dead drop. They have their eye on Foxstone Park, near Hanssen's home. But it's tough to watch every inch of it every minute of the day. Luckily, Eric O'Neill, working as Hanssen's assistant, notices something.

Eric O'Neil: He had a palm pilot and he freaking loved that device. It was basically a digital calendar.

Sally Helm: O'Neill is like... Hanssen is a little weird about the Palm Pilot.

Eric O'Neil: Every time he sat down at his desk like clockwork, he would remove it from his back pocket, and he would put it in his bag. And every time he stood up, he was already slipping it into his back pocket. Over and over. I watched this routine and I realized there's something special in that device.

Sally Helm: So, they all come up with a plan to get that Palm Pilot. One of Hanssen's bosses comes into his office and challenges him to a shooting match at the in-house rifle range. Hanssen can't say no to his boss. And the sudden request gets him slightly rattled.

Eric O'Neil: I watched them go down the hall and toward the elevators and look at his bag, and I realize he didn't reach down for that Palm Pilot for the first time ever.

Sally Helm: O'Neill grabs the palm pilot from Hanssen's bag and runs downstairs...

Eric O'Neil: Where there's a tech team waiting for me. They start copying all of it.

Sally Helm: They're still copying it when O'Neill gets a message saying that Hanssen is on his way back to his desk. He waits until the last second to grab the Palm Pilot... then he runs back up three flights of stairs to the office he shares with Hanssen.

Eric O'Neil: I knelt down in front of his bag, and zipped up all four pockets, ran back to my desk and put on the best poker face I've ever had in my life.

Sally Helm: Mission accomplished. When the tech team unencrypts the palm pilot, they find what they've been looking for: a calendar event that says a drop will be made at Foxstone Park on February 18.

On that day, the FBI tails Hanssen as he drops a friend at the airport and makes his way to the park. At 4:34pm he gets out of his car and goes through the usual routine.

Eric O'Neil: He pulls a package out of his sport coat wrapped in trash bags and packing tape, slips off the bridge and slides it into the superstructure, gets back on that bridge and clicks his shoes together to knock the dirt off and smiles to himself.

Sally Helm: But as he leaves the park...

Eric O'Neil: Two vans screech to a halt panel doors open. FBI agents jump out, point their guns at him. He says *the guns are not necessary*.

Sally Helm: Hanssen is caught red-handed. But if he's alarmed, he doesn't show it.

Eric O'Neil: He has that telltale Hansen smirk and he says, *what took you so long?*

Sally Helm: People are stunned by the arrest. *Bob Hanssen? The weird, quiet, super-religious guy? Bob Hanssen sold 20 years' worth of classified information?*

The FBI gets to work figuring out the damage. But only Hanssen can really give them the full extent of what the Soviets know. So, the FBI and the Justice Department make him an offer:

Elaine Shannon: If he came clean and told him everything he'd done, then they would take the death penalty off the table. And he agreed to cooperate.

Sally Helm: In July 2001, Hanssen pleads guilty to 15 counts of espionage. He'd handed over not just the names of those agents, but also thousands of pages of classified documents. He'd passed on military secrets and information that allowed the Soviets to thwart major U.S. spy operations, wasting hundreds of millions of tax dollars. Hanssen owns up to all of that. But it still might not be everything.

Elaine Shannon: Hanssen developed lapses of memory that they found very disconcerting.

Sally Helm: And when investigators ask him the central question, *why did you do it?* He refuses to answer. He just lets them wonder.

And the government makes him pay a price.

Elaine Shannon: So, they didn't give him what he wanted most, which was minimum security prison, a chance to visit a lot with his family. Instead, they put him in supermax.

Sally Helm: The supermax prison in Florence, Colorado. Where he is to this day.

Elaine Shannon: He sure took the luster off the FBI. He showed that the FBI's internal security procedures were very lacking, and he embarrassed a proud institution.

Sally Helm: Elaine Shannon says the FBI has fortified their computer systems and beefed-up internal security. They concede that they were naive about their employees' capacity to hurt them. And especially naive about Robert Hanssen.

Elaine Shannon: They thought he was very faithful to his wife. By the way, he wasn't. They thought he was faithful to the bureau, by the way he wasn't. They just totally misjudged his character.

Sally Helm: In a way, Hanssen's attempt to be James Bond helped diminish that style of espionage altogether. Spies today aren't speeding through the streets of Rome on vespas. They're not rappelling through laser fields. At least not as often as before. Instead, they're largely following the Hanssen model: sitting, watching, and waiting to exploit a weakness, all from behind a screen.

[CREDITS]

Sally Helm: Thanks for listening to History This Week. For moments throughout history that are also worth watching, check your local TV listings to find out what's on the History Channel today.

If you want to hear more about CIA spy Aldrich Ames, you can listen to our season one episode “A Mole in the CIA.”

If you want to get in touch, please shoot us an email at our email address, HistoryThisWeek@History.com, or you can leave us a voicemail at 212-351-0410.

Special thanks to our guests: Elaine Shannon, author of *The Spy Next Door: The Extraordinary Secret Life of Robert Philip Hanssen, the Most Damaging FBI Agent in U.S. History* and Eric O'Neill, National Security Strategist for VMWare Carbon Black, founding partner of Georgetown Group, and author of *Gray Day: My Undercover Mission to Expose America's First Cyber Spy*.

This episode was produced by Corinne Wallace with help from Emma Fredericks. Sound designed by Brian Flood, and story edited by Jim O'Grady. Our senior producer is Ben Dickstein. HISTORY This Week is also produced by Julia Press, Chloe Weiner, and me, Sally Helm. Our supervising producer is McCamey Lynn, and our executive producer is Jessie Katz.

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