

Robert Hanssen, FBI agent who spied for Moscow, dies in prison at 79

He disclosed highly classified materials and betrayed U.S. assets -- including two who were later executed -- in one of the worst breaches in U.S. history

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FBI agent Robert P. Hanssen in an undated photo. (AP/FBI)

Robert P. Hanssen, a former FBI agent who pleaded guilty to spying for Moscow for years in one of the most devastating intelligence breaches in American history, died June 5 at the maximum-security federal prison where he was serving a life sentence. He was 79.

Mr. Hanssen was found unresponsive at about 6:55 a.m. at the U.S. Penitentiary Florence ADMAX in Florence, Colo., and received emergency medical services before he was pronounced dead, according to a news release from the Federal Bureau of Prisons. The cause of death was not immediately announced.

A veteran counterintelligence agent, Mr. Hanssen served for 25 years in the FBI before he was arrested in February 2001. By his own admission, he began selling secrets to the Soviets in 1979 and carried on his activities, with intermittent pauses, for years. In the severity of his betrayal, Mr. Hanssen was compared to Aldrich H. Ames, the CIA turncoat who pleaded guilty to espionage and other charges in 1994. Mr. Hanssen's treason, according to a government report, was "possibly the worst intelligence disaster in U.S. history."

His breaches included compromising the identity of nine double agents, two of whom were later executed in Moscow, and revelations of U.S. nuclear war preparations, including where the United States would hit the Soviets and how Washington would respond to a first strike by Moscow.

He tipped off the Soviets to the existence of a listening tunnel underneath their embassy in Washington, enabling them to feed U.S. domestic intelligence agencies useless information for years. In total, Mr. Hanssen handed over more than 6,000 pages of classified materials at "dead drop" sites in Washington and New York.

For years, he evaded counterintelligence efforts through his own experience in that field and also because of what the bureau's inspector general later said were significant internal security flaws, even after he came on the FBI radar for protocol violations. "Although Hanssen escaped detection for more than 20 years, this was not because he was a 'master spy,'" the report concluded.

"We've heard a lot from the F.B.I. about how 'we plan to do this, and we're in the process of doing that,'" Glenn A. Fine, the Justice Department inspector general, told the New York Times when the report came out in 2003. "But I believe they still have a long way to go." Mr. Hanssen's unraveling as a double agent began in earnest in December 2000 when the FBI recruited a former KGB intelligence officer who was paid millions of dollars and provided information about a mole in the U.S. intelligence community.

Among the information was a trash bag from a drop site containing partial fingerprints of the mole and a cassette tape on which the mole had complained about a payment from the Russians. The voice was unmistakably Mr. Hanssen's. The problem was that Mr. Hanssen, who was on the cusp of retirement, was detailed to the State Department, and the FBI wanted to capture him red-handed on their own turf.

Within the FBI, Mr. Hanssen was long known for mercurial behavior. He had a reputation for being physically and verbally abusive to co-workers, especially those who held lower ranks. He conveyed a loathing of authority but had a hair-trigger temper when his own commands were challenged. He was expected to ride out the last few months of his career as a liaison to State, away from headquarters.

The FBI needed to bring Mr. Hanssen back, give him access to important information and allow him to spy once more. The agency established a new cybersecurity unit and put Mr. Hanssen in charge, taking a massive risk by hoping he would be intercepted before he could sell more data to the Russians.

Eric O'Neill, a computer programmer and undercover surveillance specialist at the FBI who was then in his late 20s, was asked to help catch him. At one pivotal moment, he snatched Mr. Hanssen's encrypted PalmPilot after a senior FBI agent carried out a ruse to quickly draw Mr. Hanssen from his office. The agency found evidence of documents he had given to Russian contacts and also noted a future drop date — only three days away. (The acclaimed 2007 feature film "Breach" starred Chris Cooper as Mr. Hanssen and Ryan Phillippe as O'Neill.)

The Sunday of his capture, in February 2001, was bitterly cold. Mr. Hanssen spent much of it at his home in Vienna, Va., with his wife and children. That morning, he drove to the parish he regularly attended, St. Catherine of Siena Church in Great Falls, Va., which was known for attracting FBI Director Louis Freeh and other high-ranking government officials. Later that day, Mr. Hanssen spent time with a visiting friend, to whom he offered a lift to the airport. While the friend packed, Mr. Hanssen went to his basement and placed a stack of classified FBI documents and an encrypted computer diskette into a plastic garbage bag,

then wrapped it with tape. On the disk was a farewell letter to his handlers indicating it was his final drop.

“Dear Friends,” he wrote, “I thank you for your assistance these many years. It seems, however, that my greatest utility to you has come to an end, and it is time to seclude myself from active service ... Life is full of its ups and downs ... I will be in contact next year, same time same place.”

After dropping his friend at Washington Dulles International Airport, Mr. Hanssen made his way to Foxstone Park near his home.

He stepped from his beat-up Ford Taurus with his package wrapped in a garbage bag. He strode to the center of the park and stepped on a footbridge, scanning the area for surveillance. Seeing no one, he tucked the package in a concealed space under the bridge. Then he made his way back to the car. As he placed his key in the door, two government vans screeched to the scene and agents poured out holding weapons.

“What took you so long?” he asked, as he was handcuffed and arrested for espionage.

After initially pleading not guilty, Mr. Hanssen entered a guilty plea in July 2001 to charges of spying, attempted espionage and conspiracy to commit espionage. Mr. Hanssen’s offenses carried the possibility of the death penalty, but he received a life sentence in exchange for his guilty plea.

According to a report in The Washington Post, some officials, including future FBI director Robert S. Mueller III, took the position that Mr. Hanssen should be executed for his offenses, while others, including CIA Director George J. Tenet, argued the government had a critical need to debrief Mr. Hanssen on his betrayals.

Following his arrest, colleagues, neighbors and relatives described Mr. Hanssen as cerebral and standoffish, and they were stunned by the contradictions that were revealed about his life.

After converting to Catholicism from the Lutheran faith, Mr. Hanssen became a member of Opus Dei, a conservative Catholic lay organization. He attended daily Mass, displayed a crucifix above his desk and attended antiabortion rallies. He presented himself as a Cold Warrior who deplored communism.

But Mr. Hanssen also arranged for a friend to watch him having sex with his wife. He attended strip clubs and befriended a stripper, buying her expensive jewelry and a Mercedes-Benz. He never wanted to have sex with her, she told The Post. He wanted to bring her closer to God.

By most accounts, Mr. Hanssen lived frugally and took out mortgages on his home to help pay for his children's private Catholic schooling. He would eventually plead guilty to receiving more than \$1.4 million in cash and diamonds in return for his services.

"At this point, given the amount of money, cash and diamonds that Hanssen received, we have no question that he was motivated by greed," Assistant U.S. Attorney Randy I. Bellows, the lead prosecutor on the case, said after Mr. Hanssen's guilty plea in 2001.

Jerrold Post, a former CIA analyst who wrote a seminal paper on spy psychology, "The Anatomy of Treason," told The Post that Mr. Hanssen might have viewed the FBI as a father figure — respectful toward it, but privately aggrieved and plotting to undermine it.

Robert Philip Hanssen was born in Chicago on April 18, 1944. His father was a Chicago police officer, and his mother was a homemaker.

The family lived in Norwood Park, a neighborhood of single-family homes with tidy yards in the city's northwest edge. The community, one of the few wards that voted Republican in a staunchly Democratic city, was popular with the city's firefighters and police officers.

Bob, an only child, was subjected to verbal and physical abuse by his hot-tempered father, according to "Spy: The Inside Story of How the FBI's Robert Hanssen Betrayed America" (2002) by journalist David Wise. As punishment for perceived misbehavior, Bob's father once spun him in the air until he vomited.

His father routinely belittled him in front of friends and family.

“No matter what Bob did, it wasn’t right,” the mother of one of Bob’s friends told Wise. “I’ve never seen a father like that. He would never have a kind word to say about his only child.” Bob often retreated to his room and read. He loved spy stories, and one of his favorite books was “The Codebreakers,” a history of secret communications by David Kahn. Decades later, he reportedly wrote to his Russian handlers, “I decided on this course when I was 14 years old.”

Mr. Hanssen studied chemistry and Russian at Knox College, a small liberal arts college in Galesburg, Ill. After graduating in 1966, he enrolled in the dentistry program at Northwestern University but disliked the profession and pursued accounting, receiving a master of business administration from Northwestern in 1971. He applied to work at the National Security Agency but was turned down.

As a fallback, he joined the Chicago police department as an officer just a few months after his father retired. He investigated internal corruption and also attended a counterintelligence school, where he learned to install surveillance equipment.

Mr. Hanssen married Bonnie Wauck in 1968. They reportedly had six children. Information about survivors was not immediately available.

Mr. Hanssen joined the FBI in 1976 and was later assigned to a counterintelligence unit in the New York field office.

He was excited by the prospect of tracking Russian spies, according to journalist David A. Vise’s book “The Bureau and the Mole,” portions of which appeared in The Post.

Citing an unnamed friend, Vise reported that Mr. Hanssen told his agents, “We are going to set up this big net, and we know the directions they go generally, and we will follow them and catch them in the act.”

His fellow agents were not as hard-charging. "He set up this squad," the friend told Vise, "and well over half of the FBI guys called in from home. They didn't want to work on Sunday. The Russians got away."

Mr. Hanssen grew to resent his colleagues, who disliked him because of his dour mood. His spying probably began in 1979, authorities said, but he backed off after his wife became suspicious of his contacts with Russians. He consulted a priest about his transgressions and gave some of the money he earned to Mother Teresa's charities.

In 1985, as FBI agents were quitting in large numbers because of low pay, he approached the Soviets offering to be a double agent, prosecutors said. To his Russian handlers, he used code names such as "B" and the swaggering alias "Ramon Garcia."

Later, after being apprehended, he was asked by authorities why he had spied.

"Fear and rage," he replied. "Fear of being a failure and fear of not being able to provide for my family."