

The Movie *Breach*: A Personal Perspective

Brian J. Kelley

“

Nothing has been debated as vigorously as the question of why Hanssen was able to elude detection for two decades.

”

FBI Supervisory Special Agent Robert Philip Hanssen was a reprehensible traitor. Off and on for more than 20 years, he spied for the GRU (Soviet military intelligence), the KGB (Soviet state intelligence service), and the SVR (Russian intelligence service). Hanssen's espionage career came to an abrupt end when he was arrested on 18 February 2001, just after he had placed a tightly wrapped package containing highly classified intelligence documents into a dead drop under a footbridge in Foxstone Park in Vienna, Virginia.

Hanssen was certainly one of the most complex and disturbing spies of our time. An enigmatic loner, Hanssen spent most of his 25 years in the Bureau specializing in Soviet intelligence matters on assignments in New York and in Washington DC—at FBI headquarters and as the FBI's representative to the State Department. A senior agent once said of Hanssen, “I can't think of a single employee who was as disliked as Hanssen.”¹ One of the FBI's foremost authorities on technical intelligence, Hanssen understood how technical applications could be brought to bear on the Bureau's most challenging operational initiatives. Moreover, Hanssen knew how to navigate the bureaucratic labyrinths of the FBI, and, as a certified public accountant, he understood especially well how work on the Bureau's most sensitive and high-profile cases were funded.

Arguably the most damaging spy in US history, Hanssen repeatedly volunteered his services to Moscow's intelligence services, cloaking his activities in a fictitious persona (Ramon Garcia) and adamantly refusing to reveal to his handlers the identity of his genuine employer. By all accounts, Hanssen was arrogantly confident in his ability to “play the spy game” according to the rules he created and employed. He gambled that he could deceive the FBI *and* the Russians and avoid being compromised by any US agent that might have penetrated Moscow's services.

¹ I. C. Smith. *Inside: A Top G-Man Exposes Spies, Lies, and Bureaucratic Bungling Inside the FBI*. Nashville, TN: Nelson Current, 2004, 301.

All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this article are those of the author. Nothing in the article should be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of an article's factual statements and interpretations.

Many vexing questions exist about Hanssen's rationale for acting as he did for as long as he did. But nothing has been debated as vigorously as the reasons why he was able to elude detection for two decades. Attempts to confer on Hanssen the mythological status of a "master spy" (e.g., CBS's made-for-television movie *Masterspy: The Robert Hanssen Story*) are not supported by the facts of the case, and the key question remains: Why did it take so long for the FBI to catch a mole that had operated with impunity within its ranks for such a long period of time?

Breach, a fast-paced movie directed by Billy Ray, attempts to answer some of these perplexing questions. The movie covers only the last six weeks of Hanssen's two-decade-long espionage career, opening in the late fall of 2000, when Hanssen first came under the investigative microscope. According to David Wise, author of one of the best of several accounts of Hanssen's life and perfidy, a successful joint CIA-FBI initiative obtained a package containing a portion of an operational file pertaining to a mole deeply embedded in the US counterintelligence community.² In addition to the file, the package contained three other exceptional pieces of evidence: an audio tape containing two brief telephone conversations between the mole and a KGB interlocutor in 1986, copies of letters written by the mole during 1985–88, and two partial fingerprints lifted from a plastic garbage bag the mole had used to wrap a delivery to Moscow. Wise wrote that the purchase price of the package was \$7 million.

It did not take the FBI long to piece together the shards of evidence and come to a stunning conclusion: The mole was one of their own special agents. Equally shocking to the FBI was the realization that the person its investigators had firmly believed to be the mole, a senior CIA counterintelligence specialist who had been the object

of an extraordinarily invasive counterespionage investigation over the previous five years, was innocent. Despite the absence of evidence, the FBI had convinced CIA officials that it had good reason to believe that one of CIA's officers had been responsible for compromising more than 50 compartmented FBI operations against the Soviet and Russian intelligence services operating in the United States during the period 1985–2000.³

During those five years, the FBI invested a staggering amount of technical and human resources to try to obtain evidence to corroborate its suspicions against that officer. He was placed under 24-hour surveillance, his home and work spaces were covertly searched, and computers and telephones in both his home and office were put under technical surveillance. Even an elaborate "false flag" operation was run against him—it proved no guilt; the officer dutifully reported the unsolicited contact. On top of that, the officer was subjected to a ruse polygraph administered by a senior FBI polygrapher.

The results of all these efforts revealed nothing pointing to the officer's guilt. Moreover, the senior FBI agent who administered the polygraph was adamant that the examination determined without a doubt that the alleged CIA spy registered a "no deception indicated" response. With nothing to substantiate contentions that the CIA officer was a "master spy" who somehow managed numerous acts of treason without leaving behind any clues and who always stayed a step ahead of their efforts, frustrated FBI counterespionage investigators took to calling the officer the "Evil Genius."

The information contained in the acquired package, while damning to Hanssen, was only enough to support charging Hanssen with relatively minor offenses, and the FBI wanted to build an

² David Wise. *SPY: The Inside Story of How the FBI's Robert Hanssen Betrayed America*. New York: Random House, 2003. Reviewed in Hayden Peake, "The Intelligence Officer's Bookshelf," *Studies in Intelligence* 48, no. 3 (2003)

³ Many of the details of this case were published in the unclassified US Department of Justice, Office of the Inspector General report, *A Review of the FBI's Performance in Deterring, Detecting, and Investigating the Espionage Activities of Robert Philip Hanssen*, August 2003. Fuller accounts were published in Secret and Top Secret versions.

ironclad case that would lead to the death penalty. To do this, Hanssen had to be caught in flagrante in an operational activity involving his Russian intelligence handlers. Time was of the essence, as Hanssen was facing mandatory retirement in less than six months.

To buy time, the FBI concocted a plan to lure Hanssen back to FBI headquarters from his position at the State Department. Knowing Hanssen's frustration with and professional disdain for the FBI's antiquated computer systems, the FBI created a bureaucratic entity called the "Information Assurance Division," complete with a well-appointed office, and offered him a promotion to the senior executive service. The FBI also offered to waive Hanssen's mandatory retirement if he agreed to take the apparently prestigious position. Hanssen agreed to the challenge and was told that the FBI had already selected a young FBI surveillance specialist, Eric O'Neill, to be his first employee. What Hanssen did not know was that O'Neill had been assigned to report on Hanssen's activities inside their office.

Breach compellingly portrays much of the above. As the movie opens, O'Neill, played by Ryan Phillippe, is summoned to FBI Headquarters and informed that he is being reassigned from surveillance duty to an office job in the Hoover Building. Senior FBI officials inform O'Neill that he will work for a Special Agent named Robert Hanssen to monitor his questionable sexually "deviant" behavior, which O'Neill is told "could be a huge embarrassment to the Bureau."⁴

On his first day of duty, O'Neill greets a scowling Hanssen, portrayed exceptionally by Chris Cooper, who immediately establishes his authority by telling O'Neill that he can call him either "sir" or "boss." Hanssen dismissively refers to O'Neill as a "clerk," a derisive label that has had

⁴ In the commentary on the film that accompanies its CD release, O'Neill says that in reality he was told that Hanssen was the subject of a counterintelligence investigation, but he was not told of the acquisition of evidence against him.

a long history in the historically caste conscious FBI.

Although initially disdainful of the young support assistant, Hanssen soon begins to reach out to O'Neill because of their common interests in technology, computers, and Catholicism. Taking O'Neill under his wing, Hanssen squires the young officer on a tour of some of the FBI's working areas. They pass a vault with a sign reading "Restricted Access Area: Special Compartmented Information Facility" (SCIF) and as they move down the corridor have the following conversation:

Hanssen: You know what is going on behind those doors?

O'Neill: No, sir.

Hanssen: There are analysts looking for a spy inside the Intelligence Community. Highest clearances but there are no CIA officers in there. You know why?

O'Neill: No, sir.

Hanssen: Because it is a CIA officer we're trying to build a case against. Now, could the mole be someone from the Bureau and not CIA? Of course. But are we actively pursuing that possibility? Of course not. Because we are the Bureau and the Bureau knows all.

As the innocent CIA officer alluded to in that dialogue, I felt chills through my body when I saw that scene, and it triggered immediate flashbacks to that two-year period in my life, when the FBI intimated to me, my family, and friends that I would be arrested and charged with a capital crime I had not committed.

The scene and the dialogue in *Breach* were fictional, but official retrospectives on the Hanssen case suggest that the scene was a completely apt characterization of the perspective of the FBI team investigating the case. (See passage from the Department of Justice Office of the Inspector General report on the next page.)

In this brief segment, director Billy Ray perfectly captured the arrogant, snarling Hanssen flaunting his “I’ve got a secret” attitude that he inflicted on those he felt were below his intellectual station in life. As I was later to learn from many who worked with him, Hanssen’s frequent sarcastic comments

were often laced with veiled references showing utter disdain for what he believed to be the FBI’s hopeless ineptitude in the field of counterintelligence.

What the scene also revealed was that even though he was assigned to a backwater position in 1995, Hanssen knew details of the highly compartmented hunt for the alleged CIA mole. The FBI later determined that, starting in the spring of 1999, Hanssen had made thousands of unauthorized probes into the FBI’s investigative records system called the Automated Case Support System (ACS) and was preparing to reenter the spy world he had abruptly left in December 1991, after the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁵ To ensure that the FBI was not tracking him, he had taken to querying the databases for his name and home address. In one of his forays into the ACS he stumbled onto what should have been highly compartmented reporting detailing the FBI’s intensive investigation of me. His later inquiries at FBI headquarters yielded my name as the subject of the investigation.

I first met Hanssen in the early 1980s, when we worked together on some sensitive counterintelligence matters of common interest to the FBI and CIA. We once lived on the same street and took official trips together. He once visited my office at

The FBI should have seriously questioned its conclusion that the CIA suspect was a KGB spy and considered opening different lines of investigation. The squad responsible for the case, however, was so committed to the belief that the CIA suspect was a mole that it lost a measure of objectivity and failed to give adequate consideration to other possibilities. In addition, while FBI management pressed for the investigation to be completed, it did not question the factual premises underlying it. Similarly, the CIA’s SIU did not serve as an effective counterbalance to the FBI, because it was not an equal partner in the molehunt.

—DOJ IG Report, 2003.

CIA, when he was negotiating the placement on my staff of one of his senior analysts. I was told he was shocked to learn that the FBI believed I was a master spy. Ironically, he downloaded relevant investigative reports on me from the ACS and included them as part of his initial communication with the SVR

when he alerted them that “Ramon Garcia” was back in the game.⁶ For more than a year and a half, Hanssen passed copies of the FBI’s investigative reports on me to the SVR via his customary dead drops. (He would later claim that he was trying to “save” me.)

People who have lived events that are about to be portrayed in films have every reason to worry about what the films will contain. I was no different. Some months before the film was finished, a contact in Hollywood sent me a copy of the original screen play. I felt it was appallingly poorly written, and in my mind, the movie had the makings of a disaster as bad as the much ballyhooed *The Good Shepherd*, which promised much but delivered little.⁷ With some trepidation, I attended a pre-launch showing of *Breach* as the guest of a media acquaintance. I fully expected the movie to sacrifice reality to a skewed Tinsel Town vision of real life. To my great surprise, 20 minutes into the movie, I realized I was very wrong.

After the showing, I was introduced to Director Ray, who was interested in my opinion of his production. He was pleased to hear my positive response. After I remarked on the SCIF scene, he told me he knew the basic outline of my story but could write no more about me than was con-

⁵ US Department of Justice, Commission for Review of FBI Security Programs (Webster Commission), *A Review of FBI Security Programs*, 31 Mar 2002.

⁶ USDOJ, IG Report, 15.

⁷ See David Robarge et al., “Intelligence in Recent Public Media, *The Good Shepherd*,” *Studies in Intelligence* 51, no. 1 (2007).

tained in the scene: “I could only make a passing reference to your case due to time and story line restrictions. What happened to you was so powerful that it would have overwhelmed the story if I tried to bring your case into the film any more than I did.” I told Ray that I fully understood and completely agreed.

He asked me if there were any noticeable mistakes in the movie. I laughed and told him the first mistake I saw was when the movie opened with a clip of the press conference at which Attorney General John Ashcroft announced Hanssen’s arrest. I pointed out that the crawler used to show the date of the press conference was off by a day. Ray looked crestfallen and told me he realized the mistake just hours before final production and said it had been too late to make a correction. He said he would ensure the correct date was used on the DVD version—and he did.

I also mentioned scenes in the movie involving Hanssen’s sexual behavior. The movie suggested that some of his activities were discovered before his arrest, but in reality investigators did not learn of them until after Hanssen’s arrest. These included Hanssen’s bizarre one-year relationship with an “exotic dancer,” his clandestine filming of his love-making with his unsuspecting wife, and, finally, his posting on the Internet of soft porn stories in his true name. Ray acknowledged that the information came after Hanssen’s arrest, but in this case he claimed literary license to make sure he captured this aspect of the man.

Later, Ray and I were to have several discussions and E-mail exchanges about scenes that struck me as particularly compelling. One such scene involved dialogue in which O’Neill’s supervisor unburdened herself to him, saying:

A task force was formed to find out who was giving them [KGB officers who had been recruited by the FBI] up. We had our best analysts pouring over data for years trying to find the mole but we could never quite identify him. Guess who we put in charge of the task force? He was smarter than all of us.

I can live with that part, but the idea that my entire career had been a waste of time is the part I hate. Everything I’ve done since I got to this office, everything we were paid to do, he was undoing it. We all could have just stayed home.

That commentary sums up the feelings of intelligence officials who must come to grips with the knowledge that someone very close to them has become a traitor. Colleagues who worked with traitors such as Rick Ames, Jim Nicholson, Earl Pitts, and Ana Montes all had the same sick feeling upon learning that someone they trusted had breached their trust.

In a closing scene, Hanssen has a discussion with a senior FBI official as he is being transported to jail after his arrest:

Can you imagine sitting in a room with a bunch of your colleagues, everyone trying to guess the identity of a mole and all the while it is you they’re after. It must be very satisfying, don’t you think?

The scene was fiction, but it, too, was very believable and haunting. No one should feel sorry for the likes of Hanssen, who caused the deaths of several Soviet intelligence officers. We must be reminded of two comments in Hanssen’s sentencing memorandum:

Even though Aldrich Ames compromised each of them [executed Soviet Intelligence officers], and thus shares responsibility for their executions, this in no way mitigates or diminishes the magnitude of Hanssen’s crimes. Their blood is on his hands.... That we did not lose the Cold War ought blind no one to the fact that Robert Philip Hanssen, for his own selfish and corrupt reasons, placed every American citizen in harm’s way.⁸

Breach is not a perfect movie but it hammers home how precious our freedoms are and how vulnerable we are to potential traitors within.

⁸ www.fas.org/irp/ops/ci/hanssen_senmemo.pdf, 10 May 2002.



