

OPINION

Who killed Colonel Hogan?

LAW 'n
HISTORY

By R. Marc Kantrowitz

To his many fans, he was the epitome of an accommodating star — friendly, likeable and outgoing. With his dark brown hair just starting to gray, the 6-foot and fit Bob Crane — star of the well-received comedy “Hogan’s Heroes” — exuded a smooth-talking, glib and confident persona.

He also lived on the edges; into pornography and swinging and having sex as frequently as possible with a litany of women, married and unmarried, who wanted to be with a star, even one whose career was fading.

Open about his sexual proclivities, he gladly displayed a large photo album containing hundreds

of lurid pictures of naked women. Crane also filmed scores of his sexual encounters, many involving unsuspecting female partners. His films and photos frequently featured his friend John Carpenter, a video whiz who had introduced Crane to the coming technological age and often set up their many sexual romps and parties.

* * *

After six highly successful seasons, “Hogan’s Heroes” was cancelled in 1971. Thereafter, Crane appeared primarily in dinner theater productions, most notably “Beginners Luck,” which toured across the country for years, allowing Crane to hook up with hundreds of willing sex partners. The show ultimately landed in Scottsdale, Ariz.

After what would be his final appearance, Crane and Carpenter went to Crane’s two-bedroom furnished apartment, where Crane placed a telephone call to his estranged wife, Patti. Within minutes the two were engaged in a loud verbal battle.

Soon after he was back in his car, traveling with Carpenter to a few local watering holes. Despite it being nearly midnight, the evening was just starting for Crane, who often stayed out late and rose early. Not only did he require little sleep, when he slept he did so extremely lightly.

Crane struck out with Carolyn, whom he met that night. So did Carpenter, who had left with another woman. It was a rarity for Crane. If Carolyn had only been like the many others, fate would have been kinder.

It was now 2:30 a.m.; on Thursday, June 29, 1978, when Crane returned to his apartment alone. His killer would soon join him.

* * *

When Crane did not appear for an interview, a co-star went to his apartment. After receiving no response to her knocks, with some trepidation she turned the handle. It opened to her surprise; Crane was known to always lock the doors.

Calling his name, she wandered around the apartment before finally entering his darkened bedroom. Seeing a figure lying on the bed, she slowly approached. Then the realization of what she was looking at made her freeze: an unrecognizable face, matted blood, a slow trickle from the nose.

A dead body.

The police were called. With no homicide unit — reflecting the town’s paucity of killings — the department was unprepared for what awaited.

The victim had been brutally struck two times with some kind of heavy metal object, causing his death. A black electrical cord, which had come from another room, had been wrapped and tied in a neat bow around Crane’s neck. One end of the cord had been cleanly severed, as if cut by a sharp knife.

There were no signs of forced entry, struggle or robbery. A large black bag lay open and empty on the bed. Crane’s datebook indicated that he was supposed to take Carpenter to the airport that day at 10.

As the officers casually walked about the apartment, the phone



Actor Bob Crane of ‘Hogan’s Heroes’

rang. It was Carpenter. The police immediately focused on Carpenter, spurred on by his odd behavior.

He had rushed out of his nearby motel in an agitated state to catch a plane back to California. Wasn’t Crane, as per his datebook, supposed to drive him to the airport?

The day before the murder, Carpenter had complained that “this temper of mine that just goes berserk.” A drop of blood, similar to Crane’s, was found on the passenger door of Carpenter’s car. And Carpenter’s maid remembered a bloody pillowcase and hand towel in his room, but tossed the items in the wash along with the other laundry.

There was a host of suspects: the enraged husbands and boyfriends of the women Crane seduced, the assorted lowlifes who participated in the Crane orgies. Or perhaps it was a woman who did the deed, her gender serving as the key to his locked apartment.

What of his estranged wife, who stood to gain financially from his death?

While the suspects were many, the police always came back to Carpenter. As a friend, he easily could have gained entrance to Crane’s apartment. As for motive, a waitress overheard the two arguing shortly before, supporting other evidence of Crane’s desire to distance himself from his ribald second banana.

Without solid evidence, however, prosecutors resisted making an arrest. Thus, the case sat for years.

And then, a major break occurred. Another look at pictures of Carpenter’s car door revealed matter that was thought to be brain tissue — the smoking gun. Carpenter was arrested and charged with the murder. Sixteen years had passed.

Like much of the evidence, the photo of the brain tissue was disputed. The original substance had not been preserved.

In the end, nothing could be definitively proved. Sloppy field work added to the state’s distress. Tests were never conducted — not of semen found on Crane, not of matter discovered on his bed, not of a black hair found, and later lost, at the scene.

Not guilty.

Epilogue

Carpenter died in 1998 at the age of 70, to the end insisting upon his innocence.

Crane’s wife, Patti, who had the motive and anger to kill, also had an airtight alibi. She died in 2007 at 72, never having remarried, and is buried next to Crane in Westwood, Calif. **MLW**