

‘Jimmy the Gent,’ Part 1

By R. Marc Kantrowitz
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It was the largest money heist in American history. It also led to the downfall of all those involved.

In the end, numerous people would be murdered, most at the hands of the one who orchestrated it: Jimmy “the Gent” Burke. As he lay dying in prison, Burke assuredly came to grips with the foolhardiness of his caper, bringing in too much money, too much heat, and too much grief.

Jimmy Conway was born on July 5, 1931, to a prostitute and a john. Abandoned at the age of 2, he was bumped from one foster home to another and was often abused. At 13, while riding in the backseat of a car, he said something that enraged his then-foster father, who turned to slap him while he was driving. The fatal accident left Jimmy fatherless again.



Shipped to yet another foster home, Jimmy finally found peace and love — so much so that he took the name of his foster parents, Burke. It was too late, though. Falling in with the wrong crowd, he chose his life’s path. He was soon passing bad checks and engaging in other criminal mischief. He was finally pinched, charged, convicted and sent to prison for five years. He never gave up his cohorts though,

earning him the respect of the mob.

When he was released from jail, where he made invaluable contacts, he was 6-foot-3 and weighed 230 pounds.

It wasn’t long before he was bookmaking and loan sharking. Word quickly spread that not paying Burke resulted in severe consequences.

He met his future wife in 1962. When her former boyfriend continued to harass her and failed to heed Burke’s order to lay off, Burke visited him with a chainsaw. The results were fatal.

Burke's marriage bore two sons, Jesse James and Frank James, and two daughters, Catherine and Robin.

One of Burke's cash cows was the John F. Kennedy Airport in Queens, where security was lax, if not non-existent, with authorities either on the take or too lazy and incompetent to care.

Adding to the favorable happenstance, many of the airport's cargo handlers and employees enjoyed blowing off steam and socializing after work at a nearby bar, Robert's Lounge. They engaged with the bar's seemingly friendly and accommodating owner, Jimmy Burke, and his equally accommodating staff who were only too happy to lay a bet or loan some money or inquire about some valuable information for a few bucks.

When a debtor fell behind in paying the usurious interest rates, accommodations were made: a pass on the debt in exchange for inside information or cooperation from the driver of valuable cargo.

Knowing what cargo was coming in and where it was going led to the Burke gang waiting outside the airport, following the truck for a short distance, and hijacking it. The daily heists soon were as common as incoming flights.

Millions of dollars of every type of merchandise — furs, dresses, liquor, watches, jewelry, clothes, stocks and bonds, and anything else that came into the world's busiest commercial airport — flowed from the airport into the clutches of Burke, who was wise enough off to pay off his partners in the local mob, starting with local boss Paul Vario of the Lucchese crime family.

Two of Burke's primary henchmen, psychopathic murderer Tommy DeSimone and the more level-headed con man Henry Hill, carried out many of the heists. Burke earned his nickname after taking the license and wallet of the driver of the truck being robbed — "We know who you are and where you live" — and returning the wallet with a smile and a \$50 or \$100 bill placed in it.

In 1967, Robert "Frenchy" McMahon, an Air France (hence his nickname) cargo supervisor, tipped off Burke and Hill that a mountain of untraceable cash was coming into Air France from Europe.

To get the key to the safe room where the cash would be stored, Frenchy took his key-holding colleague and friend to a local motel, promising a surprise. Frenchy knocked on a door and quickly left. A scantily clad and very attractive young woman answered.

The two were soon in bathrobes heading over to the steam room and an afternoon of bliss. Hill then snuck in the room, took the safe room key, had a copy made, and returned it to a clueless, none-the-wiser but highly satisfied dupe.

Later, DeSimone, Hill and McMahon entered the Air France facility, used the key to open the safe room, and casually sauntered off with \$480,000 in cash.

But an even bigger pay day awaited.

Part 2 will examine the heist that shook the world.

The above column was based primarily on a documentary on Jimmy Burke, "The Big Heist" by Anthony DeStefano, and internet sources. R. Marc Kantrowitz can be contacted at rmarckantrowitz@comcast.net.