

# Jimmy ‘The Gent,’ Part 2: the Lufthansa Heist

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*This column is the second of a two-part series.*

The squirrely, slightly built, bug-eyed Marty Krugman advertised his men’s only wig business via tacky ads on late-night TV in the late 1970s. When he wasn’t in his shop, he whiled away his hours hanging out with the patrons at Henry Hill’s bar, The Suite, or Jimmy “The Gent” Burke’s haunt, Robert’s Lounge.

Their chatter concerned more than the idle events of the day, as they shared a common criminal endeavor: bookmaking. And through one of Krugman’s gambling clients, Louis Werner, an idea for the biggest heist in American history was born.

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Jimmy Burke and Henry Hill were wrapping up their prison sentences and anxious to get going again on the outside. There was irony in how they found themselves in prison.



While on vacation in Tampa, thanks to the generosity of the Kennedy Airport culinary union, the pair got involved in an incident over an unpaid loan. Words turned to threats, which led to violence and culminated in the severe beating of the hapless debtor. Unfortunately for the enforcers, the debtor’s sister worked for the FBI. Prison time followed.

Once released, they quickly moved on to an idea hatched by some of Hill’s former jail mates that involved fixing Boston College basketball games during

the 1978-1979 season. Hill and Burke made a hefty profit, and the BC players in on the scam walked away with a few thousand. When a game didn’t end as expected, Burke wanted Hill to fly to Boston to inform the involved players that it would be difficult to play basketball with broken hands.

But to Burke and the mob, they were slumming. Despite Hill's lucrative drug dealings, they needed a bigger score. Hill's friend Marty Krugman delivered it.

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If Louis Werner had a criminal moniker, it would have been "Louie the Loser." Working in the high-value room for Lufthansa, he lived far above his \$15,000 a year salary, hemorrhaging money on both his new girlfriend and gambling, which found him deep in debt to the wrong people. His wife added to his distress, sleeping with his best friend, Billy Fischetti.

Knowing that \$22,000 in foreign money was coming into JFK, Werner, who had the run of the cargo area, simply stole it. Despite suspicion falling on him, his punishment was a transfer to an even more lucrative section of Lufthansa's cargo section. Meanwhile, his friend Fischetti helped him fence the stolen loot.

With the \$22,000 theft having proven so easy, and knowing both the alarm system and what was coming in every day, Werner grew bolder in ambition and greed. Plans to stage a robbery on either Labor Day or Columbus Day fell by the wayside due to the ineptness of the hastily assembled group of amateurs. A big heist required professionals.

Werner spoke to his bookie, Marty Krugman, who excitedly ran to Hill. Millions of dollars shipped back every month from Europe, where Americans vacationed or served in the military. It was all untraceable. As an added bonus, there was jewelry to be had.

Soon, Jimmy Burke, who envisioned another caper like the half-million-dollar Air France heist a decade earlier, buried his head in planning the operation using Werner's inside knowledge and his possession of keys to gain access to locked areas.

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The weekend was over. Sunday slowly bled into Monday. It was Dec. 11, 1978; 3 in the morning.

A black Ford Econoline van slowly backed up to the ramp door, where entrance was quickly gained. The small armed crew of six or so, some of their identities unknown to this day, under the leadership of the murderous Tommy DeSimone and Angelo Sepe, hit their targets with precision, knowing who to grab, where they were, their names, where to go, how not to trigger the alarms, and who had the key to the high-value vault.

Approximately 40 bundles of cash, along with sacks of jewels, were grabbed and thrown into the back of the black van, which, now overloaded with men and money, sped away. A crash car followed, tasked with taking care of any unwanted interference. It was shortly after 4; barely an hour had passed. The easy part was now over.

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When Jimmy Burke counted the money, he was shocked to discover that rather than the \$2 million he had expected, there was nearly three times that amount, plus almost \$1 million in jewelry. Quickly realizing the attention that such a huge theft would attract, he ordered everyone to keep a low profile.

Parnell "Stacks" Edwards was assigned the simple task of driving the black van to a mob-owned car yard, where the vehicle was to be destroyed. Instead, he decided to smoke some marijuana and visit his girlfriend. Parking the van in a conspicuous no-parking zone, the vehicle and the evidence inside it were quickly discovered. Fingerprints connected Stacks to the van. His reputation tied him to Robert's Lounge. The police now knew who was behind the robbery. The squeeze was on.

A week later, DeSimone and Sepe paid Stacks his last visit. Marty Krugman, after loudly demanding his cut, permanently disappeared. Cargo employees Joe "Buddha" Manri and "Frenchy" McMahon were murdered five months later, as was Paolo LiCastrì, wiping out three who committed the heist.

Car lot owner Louis Cafora, who helped plan the robbery, used his share of the stolen loot to buy his wife a gaudy pink Cadillac. Both disappeared. As did Richard Eaton, who had swindled Burke in a drug deal.

## **Epilogue**

Tommy DeSimone and Angelo Sepe, loyal to Jimmy Burke to the end, were both killed by fellow mobsters for breaching mob etiquette: DeSimone for killing two made men without authorization, and Sepe for robbing a mob-connected drug dealer.

Henry Hill, who did not participate in the actual robbery, read the tea leaves and realized he was next on the hit parade. Seeing no way out, he cooperated with the feds and was instrumental in tying Burke to the BC basketball fix and Eaton's murder.

Burke died in prison. Hill, placed in the witness protection program, flunked out and returned to New York. He went on to cooperate with Nicholas Pileggi, author of "Wiseguys," from which the highly acclaimed film "Goodfellas" was made. Hill died peacefully in 2012 at the age of 69. Neither the money nor the jewelry was ever recovered. Only one person was charged and convicted of the crime: "Louie The Loser" Werner.

*The above column is 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](mailto:rmarckantrowitz@comcast.net).*