

Where's the loot from biggest-ever robbery?

\$6.7 million still missing but no one's talking

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So where's the money? That's what everybody wants to know five years after the biggest cash heist in Canadian history.

York Region police say they don't know where the money is, but they do know that a bunch of guys got away with \$6.7 million in cash in the 1992 robbery at National Armoured Car in Concord.

It's a case of where's the cash, says Detective Sergeant Bill Seed.

Consider this scenario:

A discount armoured courier company is robbed at gunpoint of \$6.7 million in untraceable cash and \$1.6 million in cheques. All the clues point to an inside job.

One suspect, who later says police promised him immunity, confesses. It was planned in the food court at Yorkdale Shopping Centre, he tells them, and everyone was to get a cut. He and three other men are arrested. Then, he says, the police renege on their promise. He changes his mind and says he made up the story in a haze of prescription drugs.

Five years later - on Aug. 25, 1997 - the last charges against the four allegedly involved are withdrawn in a Newmarket court.

But the story is far from over. Today, the man who was the driving force behind the now-defunct company is weary of hints and whispers that he masterminded the scam and salted away the money.

"It's been hell", says Bill Whyte. The big Englishman - he's 6-foot-5 - and former York Region police officer controlled National Armoured, a company that moved money from stores to banks at bargain basement prices.

Some of National's customers who lost money in the robbery recouped it through their own insurance policies. Others launched an unsuccessful lawsuit against Lloyd's of London, National's insurer, which argued it didn't have to pay out because National had misrepresented its history to get coverage.

Lloyd's also argued that it wasn't liable because the robbery was an inside job.

The story of National Armoured is a cautionary tale for York Region police, who publicly learned the perils of basing an entire investigation on a confession.

Touch the facade of what some called the perfect crime and it crumbles, revealing a tale of lies and police bungling.

None of the four men charged in the crime shows any signs of wealth. They don't want to talk about the robbery.

The so-called fifth man, the flamboyant one, Whyte, is still out there, hustling armoured sports utility vehicles around the world.

In a matter unrelated to the robbery, Whyte and an employee were charged this week with theft over \$5,000 in relation to several vehicles their company is alleged to have obtained without full payment.

National Armoured was one piece of Bill Whyte's empire. He worked in a warren of offices in a two-storey industrial strip mall on Millway Ave., near Jane St. and Highway 7. In 1990, it was crowded with the businesses of family and friends as well as a dizzying series of Whyte's interconnected companies.

Whyte's father-in-law, George Fullerton, owned National Armoured Inc., which originated under a different name in the early 1980s when it was partly owned by Whyte.

John Fullerton, George's son, was National's security director. Whyte's wife Sharman, who was George's daughter, ran Prestige Plan Administrators, a Whyte-owned company that insured National's employees.

Also in the building was the Canadian Union of Restaurant and Related Employees, which represents Swiss Chalet workers. Whyte once headed the union and Frank Ragni, who had been Whyte's right-hand man for a decade, was its vice-president.

Ragni also did work for National, arranging loans and driving.

Another Whyte business, Armet Armoured Vehicles, was promoting a plan to reinforce vehicles with fibreglass from the inside so they looked as normal as the Jeep next door.

But by 1991, Whyte's empire was beginning to crumble. George Fullerton was pumping much of his life savings into National.

Though Fullerton owned the firm, Whyte was very much the man in charge.

Fullerton said he discovered too late that the company's financial records were overstated. Despite the money woes, Whyte ran a slick operation. His trucks were painted deep green and National was spelled out in rich, gold-coloured letters. His passion for things military was evident. National drivers were inspected daily for the shine on their shoes, the crease in their pants and the closeness of their shaves.

On an overcast Sunday afternoon, on Nov. 29, 1992, a van pulled up outside the company's office. At least \$6.7 million in small bills, plus \$1.6 million in cheques, was sitting in the company vault. It was money collected from dozens of companies, including Money Mart, Canadian Tire and the Liquor Control Board of Ontario. A pair of masked, gun-toting robbers tied up two drivers who were in the building. They loaded the loot into the van, and drove away.

When York Region police arrived to investigate, they discovered two key clues: the vault's time lock, which should have been set to stay locked until morning, was turned off; and the video camera that was perfectly positioned to record the crime was empty.

Security director John Fullerton was hauled into the police station. There, police said, he failed a lie-detector test, though Fullerton's lawyer disputes that. But Detective Ronald Newton developed a rapport with Fullerton, a thin man who was ill with Crohn's disease, a chronic bowel-wasting condition. One week later, on Dec. 7, Fullerton was back in an interview room with Newton.

For the next 43 minutes, Fullerton gave a detailed confession of the crime.

According to transcripts of the confession read at the Lloyd's civil trial, he told police the company was so desperate for cash it had been stealing from customers' cash bags for months. Fullerton said he and Frank Ragni had stolen about \$70,000 with Whyte's approval. Fullerton called it cash lapping and said they would return the money the next day from another customer's bag. When it became impossible to pay back the money they decided to rob National itself, he told Newton, according to transcripts.

Whyte, he said, would get the bulk of the share. Newton asked how the robbers would get their money. "Umm . . . they said they were going to wait a year or two and then slowly start

trying to create different ways to . . . put into real estate and different things", Fullerton replied. "I guess Bill would basically handle that kind of stuff". Do you have any idea where they stashed the money? Newton asked. "I haven't a clue", Fullerton replied.

According to the transcripts, he identified four others involved in the crime: Ragni, Ragni's brother-in-law Nick Camardi, National driver Nicolae (Mike) Mazare, and a man he knew only as "Cosmo" .

Fullerton said Ragni told him he had consulted with Whyte on the robbery. Fullerton had no direct knowledge of any involvement by Whyte. Police moved quickly. Based on information from Fullerton's confession and a statement from Mazare, they arrested those two, Ragni and Camardi. Cosmo was never identified.

Whyte was not charged because police had no evidence against him. Robbery charges against all four were discharged at preliminary hearings in September, 1996, due to lack of evidence.

John Fullerton and Mazare were charged with obstructing justice because they refused to testify against the others at the preliminary hearing.

By this time, Fullerton was claiming he concocted the confession while taking drugs for Crohn's disease.

He also said Detective Newton had promised him immunity, a new identity and \$400,000 to start a new life, but had reneged on the deal. He secretly taped his conversations with Newton to get evidence of the promises.

Fullerton's story didn't win over Mr. Justice Robert Sharpe, who heard the Lloyd's civil suit.

In his written judgment last November, Justice Sharpe said Fullerton's change of heart, specifically his denial of cash lapping, was wholly unconvincing.

I find it impossible to reconcile his assertion that he forgets everything with the claim that he knows what he told the police was untrue, Sharpe said.

He also ruled there wasn't enough evidence to conclude that the robbery was an inside job although the circumstances gave rise to grave suspicion.

Of Whyte's role as alleged mastermind, Sharpe concluded: There is no admissible evidence linking Whyte to the robbery.

Today, nobody is accused of the crime. Nobody, at least no one who talks to police, has any idea where the money is. The cash hasn't been found, the cheques were never cashed.

If a book were written about the heist (Whyte and John Fullerton are considering it) it is the Whyte character who would win the larger-than-life role.

Whyte now has a Web site advertising his vehicles: Chevy Suburbans, Land Rovers and Mercedes-Benzes with the innards of a tank.

"We will make your world safer", claims www.aavi.com According to the Web page, his empire has expanded south from Concord to Florida and across oceans to Russia, Bulgaria, Germany, Switzerland, Panama, Mexico, the Philippines, Africa, China and Taiwan. Armet vehicles' windows are capable of resisting forced entry, fire bombing, flying road debris and other projectiles, providing you and your loved ones security in a volatile world, the site says.

Though Whyte spends a lot of time out of the country, his headquarters are still in the Concord office where the robbery took place.

Armet's name is nowhere to be found outside the office. A tiny sign on the door offers the names Prestige Planning Administration and Cossack Marketing. The outside office windows are mirrored; an intercom is the only connection to those inside. On a recent visit, Whyte himself swung open the door and invited two reporters inside.

He is built like the trucks that he armours, almost 6-feet-5 and nearly 300 pounds. At 52, he's thickening around the middle, but most of his bulk is packed into muscle.

Whyte smiled and offered coffee. Dark roast was served in white china.

His collection of soldiers' helmets from Chechnya, Korea, China and Nazi Germany were displayed in the boardroom's wall cabinet.

He gazed lovingly at the helmets and shrugged. This is what I do, he said softly.

Whyte said he wanted to tell his side of the story but wanted his lawyer's advice first.

His lawyer, James Lockyer, advised him not to speak to The Star. This week, York Region police charged Whyte and Armet employee Alan A. Wood, 38, of Oakville, with theft over \$5,000 by conversion.

Police allege that Armet failed to pay \$500,000 on 17 vehicles purchased from Applewood Holdings Inc. of Mississauga. Police say the vehicles were outfitted with armour and exported overseas.

Fullerton admits Bulgaria trip but says it was a vacation. In the meantime, the four men charged in the robbery show no signs of wealth.

John Fullerton, according to his lawyer, is looking for a job in the security industry and lives with his parents in a Scarborough townhouse.

Fullerton recently visited Sofia, Bulgaria, where Whyte has an office for his armoured cars.

Fullerton admits travelling to Bulgaria, but says it was strictly a vacation.

Fullerton's charge of obstructing justice was withdrawn in August for lack of evidence.

Mike Mazare's obstruction charges were also withdrawn. Today, his brother Mark says the family has lost touch with him.

Mark Mazare says they lived together until a disagreement over money two years ago. Mark says his brother is living in Florida, working for Whyte's armoured truck company in Largo. "He doesn't own a thing", says Mark. He just owes me money.

Frank Ragni still works as a union officer for Swiss Chalet. He drives every day from his home in Vaughan to the union office in Mississauga. Ragni lives in a \$380,000 subdivision home. He bought the house in September, 1990.

He paid \$145,000 in cash and took out \$235,000 in mortgages. The title of his home was transferred to his wife's name in 1994.

Ragni refused The Star's request for an interview.

Nick Camardi owns Bowes Steel Inc. in Downsview. Camardi was hostile to an interview request. I'm just trying to get on with my life and put this behind me, he said, his voice rising. "I don't want any of this in the paper. Do you know what I mean?" Camardi certainly doesn't appear to have benefited from the crime. The 32-year-old just bought a Maple home that is nearly all mortgage.

He took out a mortgage of \$286,250 on a \$320,635 home in a treeless new subdivision.

"This ruined my life", Camardi says. I have no idea what happened to the money.

John Struthers, John Fullerton's lawyer, has a pretty good guess. "Any \$20 bill from the robbery could be in your pocket or mine", he says.