

The background image shows a massive explosion in front of a multi-story hotel building. A large fireball and plume of smoke are visible. In the foreground, there is a pile of US dollar bills, including several \$100 bills, and a wooden crate labeled 'DYNAMITE' containing sticks of dynamite.

\$3 Million Or The Hotel Will Explode!

*The 1,000-Pound Bomb that
Experts Could Not Disarm*

People were stunned when a mammoth 1,000-pound bomb was suddenly discovered in a major Nevada casino. It proved to be the largest and most complex bomb ever assembled by a civilian. An accompanying extortionist's letter promised to show how to avoid disaster in exchange for \$3 million delivered in 24 hours. The letter then warned: "Do not try to move, disarm, or enter this bomb. It will explode." When bomb experts examined the device, they agreed it was real and there was no way to disarm it. What would the FBI do next?

————— *By Shimon Rosenberg*

Wednesday, August 27, 1980, 12:30 AM.

A helicopter flew over the thick forest between the mountains of eastern California. Hiding in the cargo section of the helicopter behind the two front seats was FBI Special Agent Dell Rowley. At 5' 9", Rowley felt squashed in the tight spot. The helmet and bulletproof vest he wore over his black uniform, along with the weapons he had on him only added to the discomfort.

There was no choice. The pilot was not supposed to bring anyone with him, so Rowley had to remain hidden. That aside, the co-pilot's seat was taken up by three suitcases filled with bundles of newspaper cut to resemble \$3 million worth of \$100 banknotes and weighing about what that amount of banknotes would weigh. The piles of newspaper cuttings were covered on top with around \$1,000 worth of legitimate greenbacks.

By the weak shine of a flashlight, Rowley reviewed the second note from the extortionist whose gigantic bomb lay in the second story offices of Harvey's Wagon Wheel Casino in Stateline, Nevada, around 20 miles away. A watch counted down the hours left until the gargantuan explosion was set to occur while the top bomb experts from around the country tried desperately to come up with a plan to defuse it.

The letter, printed on an electronic typewriter, contained an extremely complex set

of instructions on how the ransom had to be delivered: a helicopter, a single pilot, flight over Highway 50, switch direction above the mountains, signal with a flashing lamp, land on an open area in the middle of the woods, \$3 million in used banknotes. There must be no weapons and no additional passengers on the helicopter. The letter ended on a bizarre note: "Happy landing."

The FBI had no intention of playing along. Experience showed that the best opportunity to capture an extortionist was when he came to pick up the money.

The small chopper was not the only one in the nearby skies that night. Thousands of feet above it flew a military "Huey" carrying a team of six specially-trained SWAT men from the FBI division in Sacramento, California. It was high enough that the loud noise of its rotors could not be heard on the ground until the last second.

In his hand Rowley carried an MP5 9mm submachine gun fitted with a sound suppresser. As soon as the Bell Ranger helicopter landed, the pilot would turn off the lights and open the door. Rowley would then roll to the ground, unseen and unheard. He would then disappear to hide among the trees and use his night-vision goggles to spot the extortionists. Rowley would stop them from making their getaway, even at the cost of their own lives.

The Crazy Idea

Six months earlier.

Jimmy Birges climbs the stairs of his older brother's house in Fresno, California, and rings the bell. Nobody answers the door. Jimmy presses the bell again and again. On the fifth ring, Johnny Birges finally opens. He is clearly annoyed.

Johnny Birges is 19 years old. At 16, he left home, abandoning his strict father. He took a job in a restaurant and slept at a friend's house. Now he was working for a construction company and earning enough to rent a home that he shared with two friends.



Thousands of feet above the small helicopter, a military Huey carried six specially trained SWAT agents. (Photo from a different operation.)



The Bell Ranger helicopter has barely enough room in its cargo compartment for a person to hide inside.

The younger brother, Jimmy, was just 18, but he had a more stable employment record. He had studied in a school for gifted children and couldn't stand his undisciplined older brother. The two had not seen each other for the past three years.

"How d'ya know where I live?" Johnny asks.

"I don't need anything from you," Jimmy replies. "Big John sent me to tell you that he needs your help."

If there was one thing the two brothers shared, it was terror of their father. He was a crusty old veteran with a nasty temperament who was known as "Big John." Despite the abuse they suffered at his hands, the two still retained a psychological attachment to him and they still wanted to please him.

Johnny invites Jimmy into his house. Jimmy explains the wild brainstorm their father has. Big John has decided to squeeze \$1 million out of Harvey's Wagon Wheel Casino in Stateline, Nevada, by planting a bomb there.

The idea triggers sarcastic laughter from Johnny, and Jimmy joins in. Yet another crazy idea their father has come up with. They are sure nothing will come of it, just like all of his other wacky dreams.

Actually, this was not even the wildest stunt he had yet tried.

The Hungarian Immigrant

Janos Birges arrived penniless in America, in May 1957. He was a political refugee who fled Hungary six months earlier when Soviet tanks

rolled into Budapest to quell an uprising against the communist government.

Birges was born in 1922 to a wealthy family of landowners in central Hungary. His father was an alcoholic with no fondness for Janos. By 15, Janos left his parents' home and traveled to the capital, Budapest. He found work there in a butcher shop.

When Hungary entered World War II with Germany and sent troops to support the German effort to wage war against the Soviet Union, Janos joined the Hungarian air force and became a pilot. He later claimed having worked for US military intelligence in Austria after it became clear that the Allies were winning. In April 1948, he was arrested by the Soviet secret police in Hungary and charged with espionage. Birges' trial lasted seven minutes. He was sentenced to 25 years of hard labor in Siberia, where he spent eight years cutting down trees to clear the way for a railroad line. On several occasions he became seriously ill. He was finally freed along with thousands of German soldiers who were released from Soviet prisons. Birges returned to his homeland.



Brothers Johnny (right) and Jimmy (left) Birges, who lived in fear of their father.



Lake Tahoe, near the resort city of Stateline, Nevada.