

To: Members of the MDP Class of 2021-2022
Fr: Andy Davies

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Re: For Those of You Who Enjoy Your History Trivia!

From: *Wall Street Journal* 11/27/21 "Heists that Became the Stuff of Legend", by Amanda Foreman



FIFTY YEARS AGO, on Thanksgiving eve in 1971, millions of Americans were traveling to be with their families when an airplane passenger who would come to be known by the alias D.B. Cooper set in motion one of the most audacious heists in U.S. history. At around 3:00 pm, Cooper informed a flight attendant aboard Northwest Orient Airlines Flight #305 to Seattle that he wanted \$200,000—the equivalent of close to \$1.3 million today—and four parachutes, or else he would detonate a bomb. The authorities acceded to Cooper's demands when the plane landed in Seattle. The plane took off again, and a few hours later he slung on a parachute and jumped. He was never seen again, but in 1980 some of the money was found near the Columbia River in Washington.

One factor that distinguishes a heist from a mere theft is the degree of planning involved. One of the earliest heists on record is the abduction of Alexander the Great's body in 325 BC by Ptolemy I of Egypt. The mummified corpse in its golden sarcophagus was to be laid to rest in Macedonia, where it would have conferred enormous prestige on Perdikkas, Macedonia's regent and Ptolemy's rival. Instead of attacking the funeral train, which would have been regarded as an act of sacrilege, Ptolemy devised an elaborate plot to have it diverted to Egypt. The Macedonians never got the gold or their king back.

Another difference is that heists are spectacular. In May, 1671, an Irish adventurer named Colonel Thomas Blood tricked his way into the Tower of London and stole the

Crown Jewels. He was caught before reaching the gates and ended up imprisoned in the very place he had tried to rob. To everyone's astonishment, however, he demanded a private audience with King Charles II. To their even greater surprise, he was granted one. Blood emerged from the interview with a royal pardon and a lucrative estate in Ireland. It's speculated that the reward was hush money to hide the fact that the perpetually indebted Charles had been a party to the scheme. The stolen articles would have fetched a tidy sum, and the country would have had to replace the jewels at no cost to the king.

Museums make for extravagant targets. Vincenzo Peruggia, an Italian national who had done some handy work at the Louvre, stole Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa in 1911, but he soon found that famous artworks are hard to sell. He later claimed that he had always believed the painting should be returned to Italy. The Mona Lisa was recovered in 1913, after Peruggia tried to offload it onto the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. Unfortunately, many other museum heists remain unsolved: Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum maintains 13 empty frames to commemorate paintings stolen from it in 1990.

Nowadays, a heist can be virtual as well as real. In 2016, a cyber gang nearly succeeded in draining \$951 million from the central bank of Bangladesh. The plan had taken months to effect and would have been the largest cybercrime ever committed. But coincidentally, the fraudulent routing address contained the word "Jupiter," which was also the name of a sanctioned Iranian ship. The seemingly innocent transfers were flagged by computer systems at the New York Federal Reserve. Less than 10% actually reached the hackers.

D.B. Cooper may not have gotten away with his hoard either. But his crime became the stuff of legend.