



Rick Sherwood

Rick Sherwood during the Vietnam War. Robert Rackstraw briefly served under him.

## Sleuth: Colbert preparing documentary that will reveal the code-breaking process

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the night, roughly 50 miles from Astoria, never to be found but instantly a figure of fandom and folklore.

In 2016, the FBI, insisting “there isn’t anything new out there,” officially closed the case, which remains the only unsolved skyjacking in U.S. history.

Colbert’s evidence tying Rackstraw to Cooper has been strong but circumstantial — until his FOIA request compelled the FBI to release a trove of documents that included an unpublished Dec. 11, 1971, letter the agency believes Cooper himself typed and sent to the Washington Post.

Cooper had also mailed copies of the letter to the Seattle Times, Los Angeles Times and New York Times, but the FBI confiscated them before the newspapers could print them.

Though the letters were almost identical — asserting that Cooper “knew from the start that I wouldn’t be caught” — each copy came with a unique set of numbers and alphabetical letters at the bottom that looked like negligible gibberish.

After the letter’s release, a member of Colbert’s team, Rick Sherwood — an Army Security Agency veteran who joined the investigation because Rackstraw temporarily flew under him in Vietnam — realized something: The string of nonsense looked an awful lot like Army “code-speak” used during the Vietnam War to pinpoint the enemy.

### ‘Rackstraw wrote it’

With the code from the Post letter, and a recovered

code from the Los Angeles Times, Sherwood managed to decipher Cooper’s seemingly random characters — and they point to the three specialized military units (two of them top secret at the time) Rackstraw served in during the war: the Army Security Agency, the 371st Radio Research Unit and the 11th General Support Company.

“I immediately realized the team’s prime Cooper suspect was connected to all three of these hidden groups,” Sherwood said in an email to The Daily Astorian.

Colbert said there’s only one man who served in all three of these units: Rackstraw. “And that’s the smoking gun.”

“The FBI thought this was Cooper’s letter, and we can prove Rackstraw wrote it,” he said.

The steps Sherwood took to decrypt the message were divulged off the record, but Colbert and Sherwood walked The Daily Astorian through them.

“I’m not really surprised that the FBI didn’t break it, because you really gotta know the person, in a sense, that made the code because he did his own encryption,” Sherwood said, “so I did things that would relate to him, and it actually broke out that way.”

Sherwood never thought he would use his Army code knowledge again after leaving the military, “but in this particular case, it worked out pretty good,” he said.

One of Rackstraw’s Vietnam commanders working with Colbert had hastily inducted Rackstraw into the world of top-secret military units after a group of

soldiers died in action, but later booted him out for lying about his qualifications for top-secret clearance.

The team posits that Rackstraw’s “coded dispatch was directed at a very small audience: the three veterans that, according to FBI documents and witnesses, helped him escape the jump drop zone by small plane,” Colbert said in a release.

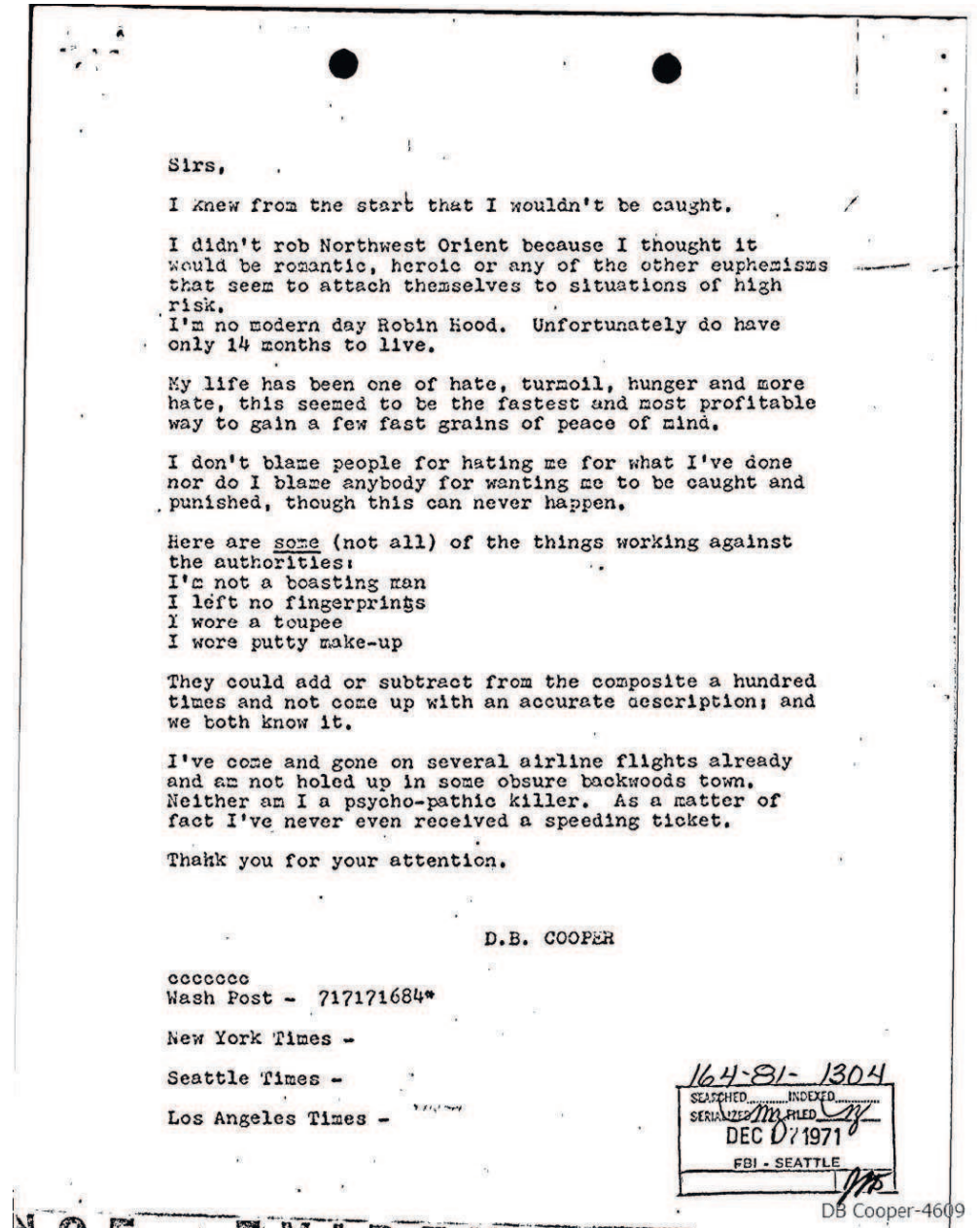
### Norman de Winter

A year and a half ago, Colbert’s search for Cooper’s identity — a task that has involved a 40-member “cold case team” with 13 retired FBI agents — became the subject of a two-part History documentary, “D.B. Cooper: Case Closed?”

The program featured North Coast residents who recounted a peculiar episode that took place in Astoria not long before Cooper’s high-flying stunt.

A young charmer who called himself “Norman de Winter” and claimed to be a well-heeled Swiss baron arrived in town. Over a couple of months, he bonded with townfolk, took their money, exploited their hospitality, offered to fly a group to his chateau in Switzerland for the holidays — and vanished. Former Astoria Mayor Willis Van Dusen reckoned the con artist had scammed about 200 people. According to Colbert’s research, de Winter resurfaced a short time later in Corvallis, before the hijacking.

Local de Winter acquaintances



Thomas Colbert

The letter sent to the Washington Post, and cc'd to other prominent publications, with a unique code at the bottom.

received letters from him after his disappearance, around the same time letters began showing up by another disappearing act: Dan Cooper (misreported as “D.B.” Cooper).

Though de Winter witnesses said in the History documentary that a contemporary photo of Rackstraw resembles de Winter, no photo of the “baron” has turned up. If Rackstraw is Cooper, that doesn’t mean either man is de Winter.

However, Colbert points to an observation made by Senior Investigator Jon Campbell of the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division: The odds of Rackstraw, de Winter and Cooper — three master criminals with aviation backgrounds — all falling within the same geographic area, all looking alike, and all seeming to appear when the others disappear is “statistically impossible.”

If Rackstraw is de Winter, a commenter speculated, the pseudonym may be a sly reference to Dick Winters, the hero of the World War II Normandy invasion who parachuted into France on D-Day. (Normandy + Winters = Norman de Winter).

Cooper scholars and the History program — in which the FBI announced the agency would reopen the case only with evidence like the money or the parachute in hand — cast doubt on the Rackstraw hypothesis.

For the show’s finale, Tina Mucklow, a flight attendant

Cooper held hostage, said, after looking at young Rackstraw’s mugshot, that he isn’t the man she met that fateful night.

Colbert and others have said that Mucklow’s trauma may have affected her memory. The new Cooper letter also mentions that the hijacker wore a toupee and putty makeup — a description consistent with that given by a fellow passenger.

### Done with D.B.

The Daily Astorian called Rackstraw, 74, for a response. Asked about Colbert’s claim that he can prove Rackstraw typed the Dec. 11 letter, Rackstraw said: “Get him to swear that everything he said is true under the penalty of perjury.” Then he hung up.

Rackstraw has repeatedly denied that he is D.B. Cooper, though he has insinuated in interviews over the years

that he very well could be. He has dismissed and criticized Colbert’s work but has yet to file a lawsuit.

Having pursued Cooper since 2011, Colbert is satisfied with the outcome of his search and is preparing to move on to other projects.

The co-author of 2016’s “The Last Master Outlaw,” Colbert feels he has reasonably established his case and plans to write a new chapter covering this potentially game-changing development. He is also preparing a documentary that will reveal the code-breaking process.

Unless Rackstraw or someone else confesses to the crime — an event of enduring mystery and fascination — Colbert said he will no longer be giving Cooper-related breaking news updates.

“I don’t see anything else to do (with D.B. Cooper),” he said. “We’re, in essence, done.”

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