

HE LED LAWMEN ON A 1,500-MILE CHASE THROUGH SOME OF THE WEST'S MOST UNFORGIVING WILDERNESS, OUTSMARTING THEM AT EVERY TURN. NO ONE KNEW HIS IDENTITY — UNTIL NOW.

# THE BANDIT OF BALLARAT

BY JASON KERSTEN

NO GRAVESTONES STAND IN SAN BERNARDINO County's potter's field, only saw grass, weeds, and a few lonely oaks. To save money and space the lot is never watered, and bodies are buried almost shoulder to shoulder. The field is basically a natural

"I normally don't like to come here," said David Van Norman as he stood at the edge of the field on a hot afternoon last July. "If I do, it usually means I'm burying someone I can't identify. And that means there's a family out there that much further from closure." A deputy coroner with the local sheriff's office, Van Norman is 50 years old, with calm green eyes and a subdued demeanor that belies an obsessive passion for his job. As a former military interrogator, his trade has always been answers, and we're here because beneath our feet is a man who had proven to be one of the most formidable — and bizarre — challenges of his career: John Doe #39-04.

His body was recovered in a remote corner of the county in July 2004, and Van Norman initially had great hopes of identifying him. Unlike the vast majority of Does, 39-04 had come to him in pristine condition, hours after his death. He was Caucasian and appeared to be somewhere in his 40s, with wavy dark brown hair and deeply tanned skin. He stood about 5-foot-6 and was built like a greyhound, with gaunt features and dense, wiry shells of muscles.

"My first thought upon seeing his body was that this would be a very quick identification, quicker than most," said Van Norman.

Even more unusual than 39-04's well-preserved state was that to law enforcement officers in three states, he was a celebrity. They

had known him as the "Ballarat Bandit," one of the most elusive and mysterious criminals ever to roam the modern West. For 11 months, the Bandit led state and federal officers on a 1,500-mile chase through some of the most rugged and inhospitable terrain in America. They had pursued him with helicopters, planes, dogs, trackers, and entire task forces, on horseback, by car, and on foot; he had escaped them at every turn by demonstrating incredible feats of physical endurance and wilderness ingenuity. As tales of his exploits mounted, he became a folk hero, an outlaw trickster in the tradition of the Old West.

Amazingly, the Bandit's only crime was theft. He stole only materials that allowed him to thrive and hide in the wilderness. But the sheer number of his burglaries, estimated at a hundred, along with his propensity to camp near military bases, led the Department of Homeland Security to brand him a high-level national security threat — and make him a wanted man.

As the hunt escalated, the Bandit's identity became a constant source of speculation among law officers. Many were convinced he was ex-military, or an antigovernment militia activist. Others speculated that he was an escaped convict or even a highly trained terrorist.

"He was good. That is what everybody agrees on," says Ken Guthridge, a Nevada detective

storage unit, a corporeal lost and found containing the remains of about 150 people whom county officials can't identify. It's a wistful place, saturated with limbo, both for the souls beneath and the families who have no idea what became of them.

who tracked the Bandit. "Nothing was going to stand in the way of him doing what he wanted."

After struggling for more than a year to identify the body, Van Norman solved the mystery only recently. The reality of who the Ballarat Bandit was, and what his motives were, turned out to be far stranger and darker than any of the authorities who pursued him ever imagined.

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**D**EATH VALLEY HAS LONG DRAWN outsiders and soul seekers. It's one of those places everybody remembers from geography class, not so much because it is the hottest, driest, and lowest place in North America, but because its name so perfectly encapsulates those extremes. For some people, those extremities echo an intensity they carry inside, and they gravitate here, searching for God, solitude, escape. Death Valley's most infamous past resident, Charles Manson, believed in an old Native American legend that beneath the valley lay a vast underground cavern, where he and his clan would ride out Armageddon.

Nobody knows what drew the Bandit, but his first recorded sighting, by some tourists in August 2003, has an almost mythic quality to it. The group was jeeping up a secluded canyon

ILLUSTRATION BY MATT MAHURIN

when they encountered a short, gaunt man with shoulder-length hair. With him was a mangy black Lab, and how the ascetic-looking pair had gotten there was a mystery; the nearest town was 10 miles away, and walking through Death Valley in August is suicidal. The tourists called out to see if he needed help, but he ignored them. They later reported the wanderer to the Bureau of Land Management, but by the time a BLM truck arrived, both he and the dog had vanished.

The dog reappeared a few weeks later, roaming

Ballarat area. Ranchers, hunters, and gold prospectors who leased cabins from the Bureau of Land Management opened their doors and found their shelves empty. Campers discovered their clothes and food gone, while off-roaders were relieved of motorcycles and gasoline.

"He was a one-man crime wave," Jeff Hollowell, the Inyo County detective assigned to the case, later said of the thief. "In January alone he probably committed about 30 thefts."

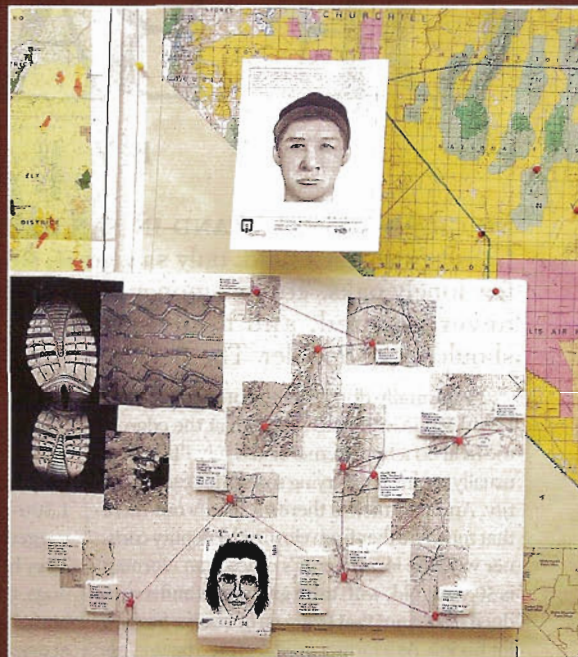
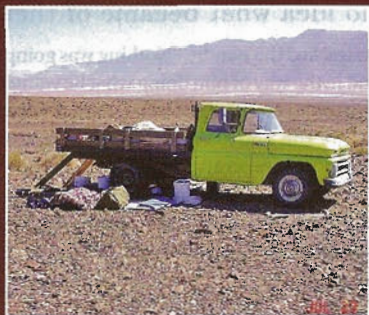
Hollowell, an easygoing 44-year-old Inyo

trekking up a canyon in the Panamint Range to visit an old mine when they came across a man sitting next to a quad-runner.

Like the tourists earlier, the L.A. cops would later describe him as a short man with dark brown hair, somewhere in his 40s. Up close, they noticed that he had long cheekbones setting off his most prominent feature: piercing eyes that one witness described as "flaming blue." He was sporting camouflage pants, a jean jacket, and a John Deere baseball cap.

## Tracking one of the West's most mysterious outlaws

"He used to drive me nuts," BLM Ranger Terry Allen (top left) says of the Ballarat Bandit. "Every time I was out patrolling, I knew he was out there somewhere. It made me nervous that he could be watching me." Allen chased him on foot through Death Valley not long after suspicious campers shot a photo of him (center) sitting on a stolen quad packed with gear and a scoped rifle. His prolific thefts and evasiveness inspired manhunts in three states, where authorities set up evidence boards like the one in Nye County, Nevada, (right) where he was also a suspected terrorist. A yellow flatbed (bottom left) was one of at least 10 vehicles he stole during his 11-month spree.



the ruins of Ballarat, a ghost town near the southern edge of the national park. Once a thriving gold-mining settlement, all that remains are about two dozen adobe and tin-roof structures that the Mojave Desert is consuming at a geological pace. No one thought much of the animal's mysterious owner until January 2004, when a 60-year-old woman who runs Ballarat's only store returned from an errand to discover she'd been burglarized.

The thief had cleverly unscrewed the shop's door handles, freed the chain lock, and taken about \$4,000 worth of merchandise, including a quad-runner, a power inverter, numerous cans of food, and around 20 books and magazines geared toward desert enthusiasts.

At first, park rangers and the local sheriff's office, Inyo County, assumed it was an isolated incident, but over the next three weeks dozens more theft reports rained in from the

native, quickly realized he was facing a grade of criminal far above the local meth addicts. The man, who by now had acquired the *nom de guerre* the Ballarat Bandit, was a perfectionist who left no fingerprints and very few footprints, the latter of which indicated that he studied cabins and campsites from ridges and mountainsides, waited for people to leave, then robbed them at his leisure. Upon exiting, he hid his tracks by walking or driving over stone.

"What was strange is that these were relatively modest crimes, but he was careful as a jewel thief," says Hollowell. "He was going to great lengths to avoid detection."

Despite the Bandit's cautiousness, Death Valley is not a place where you can hide in plain sight. The inclination to chat and huddle up with another human against the landscape's silent, suffocating weight is almost reflexive, and two weeks after the Bandit's spree began he ran into not one, but four. They happened to be Los Angeles police officers, visiting the desert for a few days of camping. They were

"How you doin'?" one of the cops called out. "Hey there," replied the man.

According to Hollowell, as the conversation moved into a full desert chat, the man became evasive. He said that he was alone, camping for only a day or two — but his quad was loaded with enough tarps, sleeping bags, and food for three people. The object that caught their attention most was a .30-06 rifle resting on the seat. It was equipped with a telescopic sight.

After continuing up a nearby ridge, the cops, still suspicious, turned and snapped a digital photograph of the stranger, which they later e-mailed to the Inyo County Sheriff's Office.

"I knew he was the Bandit the moment I saw the photo," says Hollowell. "The quad matched the description of the one stolen from Ballarat, and we also had a report of a missing rifle."

The Bandit now had a face. He also had a firearm, which raised the stakes immensely. Many denizens of Death Valley are armed themselves, and the possibility that an encounter between the Bandit and a local could turn

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TERRY ALLEN COURTESY TERRY ALLEN ROBERT JOHNSTON NYE COUNTY SHERIFF POSTERS CRAIG L MORAT TRUCK COURTESY JASON KERSTEN

violent seemed very real.

"Once we had the photo we decided to actively go after him," Hollowell says. "He had a gun. And we had no idea what he was planning."



**A** HORRID WASTE OF SAND AND sage" is how the author Frank Norris described the Panamint Mountains. Roughly 2,000 square miles in area, the 11,000-foot range rises above Death Valley like a Hadean shoulder, its red slopes and arroyos offering slim sanctuary from the heat. Hundreds of mine shafts make the mountains a perfect place for a fugitive to hide and a torturous place to hunt one.

The task force organized to catch the Bandit consisted of virtually every law enforcement entity in the region: the Inyo County Sheriff's Office, the National Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the USDA Forest Service, and the California Highway Patrol — about 30 men in all. Using the report taken from the off-duty cops, BLM rangers were able to place the Bandit's camp within an area called Butte Valley; on January 21 the task force moved in.

Teams in Blazers and quads blocked the entrances to Butte Valley and the nearby canyons, while a Black Hawk carrying SWAT units hunted for the Bandit's hideout. As the chopper zeroed in, the team thrilled to the sight of a campsite.

"I thought we had him," says Hollowell. "If we could just spot him, there was no way he was going to outrun us." But the Bandit, perhaps alerted by the chopper's roar, was nowhere to be seen, so the team landed and began scouring the area. What they found caused them to reevaluate the man they were hunting.

His campsite was meticulously placed in a low wash, hidden from the main valley floor, and his supplies were neatly arranged — clean pots here, canned foods there, buried garbage there — everything was in perfect order.

"It had a definite military feel to it," says Hollowell. "My first thought was that the individual who camped here had a disciplined, military background."

Most alarming, they later found what the military calls "fallback positions." "He would go out and set up several satellite camps, so if one was compromised he could still have food, guns, shelter, and sleeping arrangements," says Hollowell.

Many on the task force suspected that the Bandit possessed survival skills superior to their own. "I wanted to know who he was," says Hollowell. "He had unusual gifts."

Just how unusual became apparent two weeks later, when Terry Allen and Dave Kotlarski, two BLM rangers, came across some fresh quad tracks in Goler Canyon, not far from the old Manson family hideout. Suspecting these belonged to the Bandit, the rangers followed the trail up a mountain for five miles, until they suddenly disappeared. Allen, a skilled tracker, realized that the Bandit had brushed out his tracks, an indication that he was probably very close.

Sure enough, the rangers soon spotted a campsite by a small spring, and this time he was there. Weapons drawn, they snuck forward.

"We got to within 50 feet," Allen recalls. "Then he heard us and took off."

What ensued was a foot chase through hostile terrain, as the Bandit led Allen down a parched, crumbling mountainside. Allen was fit, but over a quarter mile the Bandit constantly gained ground. Once he reached the base of the mountain, the Bandit sprinted across a plain below, making even more headway.

"I wasn't going to catch him at that point, because he was in incredible shape," Allen says. "We went back to the jeep and picked up his trail a mile and a half on, and his tracks indicated he was *still* running."

Allen radioed in a police helicopter, along with an airplane equipped with night vision sensors. The task force converged and attempted to set up a cordon — to no avail. As night fell the Bandit simply melted into the Panamints.

By now word of the Bandit's exploits was spreading not only throughout the Death Valley region, but onto the internet. Desert rats logged on to message boards and blogs, searching for updates on his latest heists. They placed bets as to when he'd be captured, theorized about his movements, and even discussed forming posses and hunting him themselves. "I will be locked, stocked, and won't hesitate at pulling the trigger," wrote one Death Valley resident.

It's uncertain if the Bandit knew he had become a minor celebrity, but he undoubtedly knew Death Valley was no longer safe. On February 23, 2004, almost two months after his first known theft, he stole a Subaru 4x4 belonging to a visiting geologist named Seth Dee, then fled the region.

"I thought we'd catch him," says Hollowell, "but instead we pushed him out."



**N**YE COUNTY, NEVADA, LIES JUST across the northern border of Death Valley, and it is so large that "county" is simply a misleading term. It is nearly as big as Costa Rica. Most of the region is eerily

empty high-desert country where mountains clad in piñon pine divide hot, broad valleys awash in olive seas of sagebrush. Isolation is Nye's greatest resource, which is why many of the nation's high-security military installations are located there.

Two weeks after the Bandit vanished from Death Valley, a Nye County rancher named Donald Jackson returned from a trip to find that his tractor battery was missing, along with some gasoline, cans of food, and, oddly, his daughter's little red wagon. Jackson could see the toy's ruts leading straight out of his backyard.

The next day Jackson and his father-in-law, Joe Fallini, began following the tracks through open country. "It was just amazing," says Fallini. "We kept expecting to find that wagon, mile after mile, but the tracks just went on. That son of a bitch must have had 120

pounds behind him, and he pulled it like it was nothing." To slow down potential trackers, the thief even added a mile of "false sign": He crossed Highway 6 and headed south, then carried the wagon and battery back to his original course west.

Jackson and Fallini, worried they would surprise the determined thief and find themselves in an altercation, broke off and called the Nye County Sheriff's Office. The next morning two deputies followed the tracks into a secluded valley near the town of Warm Springs. There they found not only the wagon but

the Subaru stolen from Death Valley. Unbeknownst to them, they had stumbled into the Bandit's new camp.

Evidently the Subaru's battery had died, so the Bandit had hiked eight miles to Jackson's ranch, stolen the tractor battery, then dragged it all the way back in the vain hope of jump-starting the car. When the deputies ran the Subaru's license plate, they learned that the suspect should be considered armed and dangerous — a warning that was amplified by a cache of no fewer than 14 rifles they found inside the car.

Guthridge, a Nye County detective based 50 miles away in the town of Tonopah, heard the report about the stolen Subaru and saw an opportunity. As far as anyone knew, the Bandit — probably out searching for another vehicle — had no idea his campsite had been discovered. A stocky, goateed ex-soldier who could go undercover as a Hell's Angel, Guthridge also knew not to send two cops against a heavily armed suspect when you can send a dozen.

"We're going to set a trap," he told the deputies, then ordered them to guard the main road in.

The valley where the Bandit was camped was ideal for an ambush. There were only two roads in, and one side of it was walled off by a

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"WHOEVER HE IS, HE KNOWS EXACTLY WHAT HE'S DOING. HE SPENDS A LOT OF TIME THINKING ABOUT HIS NEXT MOVE."  
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9,000-foot mountain — a perfect blocking device. At dawn the next morning, a five-man SWAT team and a K-9 unit moved in.

Upon reaching the campsite, the team found fresh footprints leading away: The Bandit was on the run. The tracks led straight for the mountain, meaning that he was headed into a vertical morass. The team pursued, confident that they'd bring him to bay. But they had not yet heard the stories from Death Valley.

After an hour the team, sweating in full tactical gear, found itself lumbering straight up the peak, with no sign that they were gaining ground on their target. The Bandit had run right over the very mountain meant to trap him.

"He never stopped once," remembers Guthridge. "We followed him track to track, and he never put two feet together. He never

his team sat down to figure out a strategy.

"What do you think we're looking at here?" he asked. "Who is this guy?"

Guthridge had started to process evidence from the campsite in Warm Springs, and he didn't like what he had found, beginning with the 14 rifles. Many had telescopic sights, and Guthridge also found three boxes of ammunition, hundreds of spent shells, and bullet-ridden cans set up at staggered distances, indicating the Bandit had taken time to accurately sight the weapons.

Then there were the trail markers. During the chase up the mountain, the Bandit hadn't just run off wildly; he had followed a preset escape route, marked by rock piles and tree limbs. Everywhere Guthridge looked he saw the same forethought. To avoid being spotted

Rudolph had hidden out in the Appalachian wilderness for more than five years.

Another scenario was that the Bandit was a militia member who intensely disliked government authority. Because of its loose gun laws, Nevada is teeming with militias. Then there was the John Rambo theory: The cops were beginning to take it for granted that the Bandit was ex-military, probably Special Forces. Perhaps he was a troubled vet who'd switched into a combat mind-set.

As the men bandied about the scenarios in the conference room, on the wall nearby was a giant map of Nevada. Yellow zones indicated public lands, but a huge pink blotch demarked the Nellis complex, one of the world's largest military research facilities. Its most famous component is the fabled Area 51, but the majority of it contains the Nellis Air Force Bombing and Gunnery Range, the USAF's top proving ground for new weapons. Just south of that is the Nevada Test Site, where powerful explosives, including low-yield nuclear warheads, are detonated. There is also the Tonopah Test Range, a missile facility. Right next to that pink blotch was a pin that marked the spot where the Bandit had been camped. He had been hiding 10 miles from America's epicenter of military research.

Was the Bandit planning to attack or infiltrate Nellis? It was the one scenario the Nye County officials always came back to, and when they later located Ballarat on a map of California, their worries were reinforced; the town sits five miles from another huge military installation, China Lake Naval Air Weapons Station. The Bandit had gone from the shadow of one top-secret base to another, almost as if he were moving to engage a secondary target.

"We concluded this was a major security threat," says DeMeo. "We thought he was settling in Nye County because of its high sensitivity for the federal government."

Once the specter of a terrorist attack was raised, with all its post-9/11 connotations, there was no turning back. DeMeo got on the phone to the Department of Homeland Security, asking for men, machines, and money.

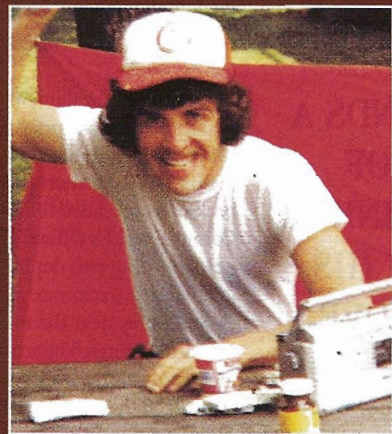
The Ballarat Bandit was now about to be pursued by the force that both ratifies and destroys the legends of the West. DeMeo had called in the cavalry.



**T**HE SAD IRONY WAS THAT THE Ballarat Bandit was not a terrorist, militia man, escaped murderer, ex-Green Beret, or a serious danger to anyone but himself. As authorities would eventually learn, his name was George Robert Johnston, and he was a husband and father of four, from Canada. He had no violent history, no military training, and his diabolical plan appears to have been to gather enough gear to grow some high-end [ *continued on page 261* ]

## The man behind the myth

"I was born a hundred years too late. I should have been in the Old West," Robbie Johnston declared to his friends as a young man (left). Johnston's wildness would mesh well with the Ballarat Bandit but collide with the role of husband and father. "He was a hard man to love, but if you loved him you couldn't help it," says his wife Tommi, pictured (center) with him and their four daughters.



stopped to rest, never sat down, nothing."

Over the next two days, trackers picked up his trail in the valley beyond several times but failed to spot him. On the third morning, a call came in that a Toyota truck owned by an oil refinery in the town of Eagle Springs had been stolen. The theft was classic Ballarat Bandit. He had hot-wired it, then cleverly used a nearby can of kerosene to dissolve the company decals from its door. When Guthridge plotted the Bandit's latest position on a map, he was dumbstruck.

He had covered 60 miles in two days.



**W**HILE THE BANDIT HAD been making his run, the nagging question of his identity was coming to a head. Tony DeMeo, the sheriff of Nye County, was so consumed by it that he drove 200 miles, from the city of Pahrump all the way to Tonopah, to set up a base of operations. In the conference room at the sheriff's substation in Tonopah, he and

from the air, the Bandit had covered up the Subaru's windows and side mirrors with garbage bags and duct tape, the latter of which he also wrapped around food boxes, pot handles, even cigarette lighters. Guthridge believed that the Bandit was using tape to make it easier to grasp objects with gloves, which he wore religiously to avoid leaving fingerprints.

"Whoever he is, he knows exactly what he's doing," Guthridge told DeMeo. "He spends a lot of time thinking about his next move."

The conversation moved to motives. In Death Valley, the Bandit had been considered a thief and a serious nuisance, possibly dangerous if cornered. But now that he was continuing his spree in another state, his actions were taking on increased gravity. In Nye County it became a given that he was up to more than just ripping off survival gear. The first scenario was that he was a fugitive, perhaps an escaped convict who was facing life in prison. It wasn't hard to look at the Bandit and see shades of Eric Robert Rudolph, the antiabortion militant responsible for the 1996 Olympic Park bombing in Atlanta.

weed out in the middle of nowhere, keep to himself, and try to forget his past, which was long and strange.

Johnston was 50 years old. That he could muster such reserves of energy and physical stamina at his age would have been surprising to anyone except those who knew him. Back in Charlottetown, the provincial capital of Prince Edward Island, where he grew up, Johnston had long been legendary for two things: his cleverness and his speed.

Even as a boy, Johnston, whom everyone called Robbie, was an unstoppable hybrid of brains and physical restlessness, a straight-A student who carried firecrackers in his pocket, just in case things got too boring.

"He was always good at hiding and moving quickly," says Woody White, a childhood friend who spent long days hunting ducks with Johnston in the island's forests. Johnston was a natural hunter, a crack shot who could spring through dense woods or across slippery rocks with ease. "He was just like a monkey, strong and wiry and swift."

Survival and wilderness tact ran in the family. Johnston's father Keith was a brigadier general in the Canadian Army. He'd stormed the beach at Normandy, then rose up in the ranks to become the highest-ranking soldier in the province. The family lived on Governors Island, a well-to-do outskirt, in a three-story home overlooking Northumberland Strait. Johnston had three brothers, all of whom were older and bigger.

Although Johnston excelled at school, by the time he was 14 academics no longer interested him. He was infatuated with velocity. "Anything that could go fast, he liked," says Allan Carr, another boyhood friend. "Cars, motorcycles, you name it. He could also take them apart and put them together; he taught himself." Whenever Johnston's parents left town, he'd hot-wire the family car, disconnect the odometer, then collect his friends for some hell-raising.

It was probably inevitable that Johnston's appetite for speed would lead him to the drug itself. Carr first became aware that Johnston was using it during a ski trip when they were about 16. After a day on the slopes, Robbie returned to their cabin without his skis. When Carr asked him where they were, he shrugged.

"Got sick of them. I traded them for this," Johnston said, producing a bag of crystal meth.

He eventually dropped out of high school, started dealing pot, and became increasingly paranoid. "He did meth sporadically for a year or two; injected it," remembers White. "Then I think he realized that it was poison. But the damage was done. There was just a little piece of him missing after that, and maybe that's the piece that sent him over the edge."

Johnston was later arrested for selling weed and spent six months in juvenile detention, but

## BANDIT

after that he appeared to go clean. He told his friends he wanted to be a race car driver, begged his parents for money to attend racing school, and went to California.

"He came back a week early from school, cursing up a storm because they wouldn't let him go fast enough," Carr recalls with a laugh. "They kicked him out because he had secretly removed the governor on his engine."

Johnston surrendered his dream of making a living behind the wheel in favor of the practical. He taught himself the drywall trade, excelled at his work, and in the early '80s he left Prince Edward Island and headed west with Allan Carr for jobs in Ontario and British Columbia. The friends itinerated from town to town, hustling projects and sleeping in the same empty homes they were building. After a long day on the job Carr would drag Johnston out to the bars to meet local girls, but Johnston was always too shy to chat them up.

"He'd stay at the bar maybe 10 minutes," says Carr. "At the end of the night I'd go back to the construction site and find him sleeping like a baby on a dusty floor. I never had a sense that something bad would happen to him. The man had no violent tendencies at all. He was scared of his own shadow, actually."



THE TASK FORCE THAT SHERIFF DEMEO marshaled couldn't have helped the natural paranoia of the man known as the Bandit. The federal government delivered officers from the Department of Fish and Game, the BLM, the FBI, even the National Guard, which lent the county a Black Hawk. Along with DeMeo's deputies, every one of whom was mobilized, about 50 men joined the Nye County effort. As they began patrolling canyons and valleys around the clock, dragging dirt roads in the hopes of snaring fresh tire tracks, and distributing wanted posters, the Bandit must have been terribly baffled. He was the most-wanted petty thief in the history of the West.

And the most stubborn. After his 60-mile trek east, the Bandit reversed course and drove the Toyota he'd stolen from the oil refinery right past the very deputies who were searching for him. His next stop was Hunts Canyon, and a ranch owned by Steve Morris, a prominent attorney for some of the biggest casinos in Las Vegas. He pried his way into the barn, hot-wired Morris's white Ford pickup, then ramped Morris's ATV onto the bed. Afterward he headed up to the ranch house and slipped through a window measuring just 10 by 14 inches.

"He filled up the truck with food staples, my gun, lights, radios, everything except liquor," Morris later said. The attorney, who was away at the time, was surprised at how orderly the Bandit had left the place. He'd even remade the bed after crashing for a few hours of rest.

Over the next three weeks the Bandit played

cat and mouse with the task force as he steadily moved north. On three occasions searchers found his campsites, but he had already left. "Sitting out there on a road, I got the weirdest feeling that he was watching me," says Captain Bill Beck, from the Nye County Sheriff's Office. "If he wanted to shoot me, he could have."

"Soon we knew we probably weren't going to be able to capture him," says DeMeo. "We decided the only thing we could do was increase patrols, give him the impression that this was not a secure area for him. The idea was to push him into a different jurisdiction."

By March 24 the Bandit had indeed crossed into the next county, Eureka, where a cattle rancher came across him camping in a field. The rancher helped him fix a flat tire on the Ford, then offered him some food and alcohol, which he gratefully accepted. According to a report the rancher later gave to the FBI, the pair found common ground in their mutual dislike of the government, and the rancher got the distinct impression that the man he would later learn was the Ballarat Bandit wasn't used to alcohol. The Bandit passed out after a couple drinks, then took off the next morning. Almost two months later, without even realizing it, he would steal a truck belonging to the rancher's son.



THE SOCIAL INTERACTION WITH THE rancher was a rare allowance for Robbie Johnston. According to his friends, he could count the only people on the planet he had ever truly trusted on the fingers of both hands, and as far as the people he actually loved, he could count them on one: his wife and four daughters.

Johnston met his wife in the late 1980s at a party in Oshawa, Ontario. She was a 6-foot-2 19-year-old knockout with long black hair who was part Native American. Men, many of them Hell's Angels, were surrounding her, making ham-fisted attempts to flirt. Johnston, quiet and watchful, waited until she looked his way.

"They buggin' ya?" he asked.

"Slightly," Tommi replied. "Your eyes are Windex blue; I've never seen that before. Sit here with me."

After one of the bikers spilled a beer on Tommi, Johnston stood up, threatened to "take him out," and stared him down. Then he asked Tommi if she'd like to go for a ride. They spent six hours riding back roads, and over the next month, they fell hard. Johnston was unlike anyone Tommi had ever met. He was smart, well-traveled, and had a pocket full of money.

"Rob was intense," she says. "If he loved you, or hated you, you knew it. He protected me, made me feel small and safe. Before him, I ran with a lot of tough people who claimed they had my back; I believed it when Rob said it."

At the time, Tommi was an exotic dancer and fighting a custody battle over her young son from a previous relationship. She was worried she'd lose her boy, and Johnston had a plan.

They'd slip into the States with her son and live under the radar.

Within a few months the three had settled in Arizona, where Johnston found steady work drywalling, and Tommi, now pregnant, served as his assistant. They rented a small apartment but ended up leaving after a dispute with their neighbors over Johnston's dog. From that point forward they lived a bedouin existence, in campers or RVs, often on public lands. Tommi gave birth to their first daughter in a trailer in Arizona, their second in Florida.

For Johnston the isolation wasn't just a way to protect Tommi's son; it was part of an increasingly paranoid worldview. Though he eschewed organized religion, Johnston believed in the Book of Revelation, and was convinced the signs were nigh. When the end came, he thought, the farther away from the cities he and his family were, the safer they'd be. To bolster the outdoorsman skills he'd cultivated since childhood, he visited a survival camp in Arizona, the only formal training he ever had.

Occasionally, the isolation would cave in on Tommi, and she'd threaten to leave and take the kids back to Canada. "I was willing to tolerate Robbie's displeasure with society," Tommi says. "I even understood it. But it angered me when he wouldn't allow me to socialize. He always said it was for our own good, but I thought he was selfish."

Tommi stayed with Johnston, but after their second daughter was born, she threatened to leave for good unless they returned to Canada. Johnston moved the family to British Columbia, where he rented a log cabin in a place with a name that couldn't have been more fitting for him: Anarchist Mountain.

Johnston installed a solar-and-windmill power system, they grew their own food, and they lived well. They bought some horses and taught their girls how to ride and shoot. Then, just as they were starting to get comfortable with stability, Tommi started experiencing bouts of intense fatigue. She'd wind up in a fog on the couch for days, unable to work or care for the children.

She was diagnosed with leukemia, and their lives were again in flux. Tommi lost her appetite and her ability to sleep. When a friend gave her a joint one night, suggesting it might help, she was surprised to find that it not only helped her eat, but also fall asleep.

"I don't care if it's against the law; I'm going to grow some pot for you," Johnston told her. "What right does the government have to keep you suffering?"

He immediately went about learning to cultivate marijuana, and like everything he set his mind to, he did it obsessively and he did it well. Johnston constructed three underground greenhouses, powered the lights off the solar array, and researched strains with medicinal value. Soon he not only had enough weed growing to help his wife, but extra to sell on the side.

Tommi wasn't thrilled about Robbie using her illness to justify his new business, but at the same time she'd been the one who had pressured him to settle down. Now he was literally putting down roots.

As her battle with leukemia continued, she asked him if they could move back to Prince Edward Island. Land was cheap there, and she was hoping the proximity to Robbie's family would add stability.

Johnston hadn't seen his folks in 10 years, and they had never approved of his unconventional lifestyle, but after months of his wife's pleas, he agreed. When they finally made the move in 1993, he was so anxious that they stayed in a hotel for three days before he summoned up the nerve to step on a ferry to the island.

"He paced and muttered and fumed," remembers Tommi. "I thought if I could get him with his family again, we could have a little normalcy and maybe build a home and some sort of permanent life. Shit, was I ever wrong?"



THE COUPLE BOUGHT 80 ACRES OF LAND ON Prince Edward Island, in Roseberry, a farming community about 20 miles east of Charlottetown. The reunion with Johnston's parents, fraught with mutual tensions, had been a disaster. Johnston avoided them and focused on his career. Most of his new land was sheltered by spruce, and he threw himself into a much larger grow operation, this time outdoors. He engineered a mold-resistant strain of pot that could thrive in the island's cold, damp climate and partnered up with a friend from high school. Soon more than a thousand plants were spiking up beneath the spruce. All summer long the two men watered them by hand and picked them over for diseased leaves. When the harvest came in, Johnston's bud was a spectacular hit.

"It was an amazing breed with almost 28 percent THC at a time when the country's average was less than 10 percent," recalls Tommi.

Johnston grossed more than \$100,000 from that first crop and bought a pickup truck and a motor home, as well as computers and toys for his girls. To increase his profits, he also converted a shed on the property into a hash distillery. Inspired by his success, he even talked about eventually moving the operation indoors.

"Know where a good place to grow would be?" Tommi remembers him musing. "Death Valley. With all that solar energy, you could grow a huge crop in an abandoned mine shaft."

Over the course of three years Johnston grew successively larger crops, becoming so confident in his ability to avoid detection that once, when a police helicopter hovered above, he videotaped it, panning the camera between the copter and his spruce-sheltered pot plants.

Tommi's fears that they'd be arrested and lose everything constantly gnawed at her. After the third season she gave him an ultimatum: If he didn't stop growing, she'd leave him.

Johnston presented her with a ring and

proposed to her properly — something he had never done — and promised he'd quit after the next harvest. They would take the cash, move to Arizona, and Johnston would set up his own drywall business. Overwhelmed, Tommi agreed, expecting to start a new life.

Instead, a pig showed up.

It had broken loose from an adjacent farm, then wandered through a hole in the fence. The pig's owner ran after it and found himself staring at what remains to this day the largest marijuana crop ever known to have existed on PEI: 3,754 plants. The neighbor called the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), which raided the farm and arrested Johnston the same day, just as he was walking out to water his crop.

The police later said that Robbie's plants were the finest they'd seen, a quality unheard of on the cold island. Had the harvest come in, it would have been worth more than \$5 million.



FOLLOWING HIS ARREST, JOHNSTON'S LIFE was uprooted as swiftly as his crop. Since the land had been in Tommi's name, she too was arrested, and the girls became wards of Child Protection Services. The RCMP seized all of their property, and Johnston was denied bail. The prosecutor threatened to charge them with enough counts to put them away for 12 years, a stiff penalty in Canada. They'd lose their kids, and Tommi's health would be at the mercy of a prison hospital. Or they could cooperate. If Johnston pleaded guilty, the province promised to drop all charges against Tommi. Johnston agreed, and in January 1998, he was sentenced to four years.

During stays at two prisons in Canada, Johnston's hyperanimated mind turned on him. Unable to sleep, he asked for sleeping pills, and, according to Tommi, medical officers at one facility prescribed a drug called Elavil; at the other, he was given Nozinan. Neither is meant to treat sleeping problems; both are powerful drugs typically used to treat mental disorders. Their respective side effects include delusions and anxiety. When Tommi got her first chance to visit Johnston, she found him almost unrecognizable.

"He used to sit in the visiting cubicle, with his eyes snaking back and forth behind me as he counted the bricks, row by row," she recalls. "I'd yell at him to stop because it was creepy."

Tommi believes the drugs damaged him. He was paroled in early 2000 and returned to his family, who were now back in British Columbia. Tommi came home one day to find him hiding in a closet, crying and pulling his beard.

"It's like I'm in a fishbowl or something," he wept. "It's like there's clear cotton around me that stops the feelings from getting to my head."

In their 13 years together, Tommi had seen her husband cry only once, but now he sobbed every day at the slightest provocation. For Tommi, who was still battling leukemia, the role rever-

sal was devastating. Johnston had always been her protector, but now she found herself rocking him back and forth through one emotional collapse after another.

The only relationship that had ever mattered to Johnston was unraveling. In late 2000 he left home, then later called to tell Tommi that he couldn't bear to see the toll his mental and emotional problems were taking on his family. He said he needed to find a way to heal himself and that he had to do it alone.

"Maybe God will take a special interest in me," he said, and explained he was heading to the States to seek the help of a faith healer. He told his daughters that he loved them, and that he would make things right and come back to them.

It was the last time they ever heard from him.



BY JUNE 2004, THE BANDIT WAS IN WASHOE County, in the far northwest corner of Nevada. When Steve Morris's Toyota got stuck in the mud, Johnston shot it full of holes, then continued on in the ATV. A rancher found the abandoned truck, and Washoe County launched its own manhunt, employing three helicopters, a SWAT team, and the National Guard.

"I tracked him on horseback," says Sergeant Russ Pedersen of the Washoe County Sheriff's Office. "He was moving 20 miles a day."

He had to have thought about home. After creeping north for three months he was now only two states away from his wife and children in BC. All he had to do was keep bearing north. Instead, after five months and as many manhunts, the Bandit did something nobody believed he'd do: After stealing an old Chevy flatbed in the town of Winnemucca, he made a beeline south — straight back to Death Valley.

Dave Brenner, a BLM ranger there, was driving through the park on his day off, on July 22, when he spotted the yellow Chevy a few hundred yards off the road into Johnson Canyon. Brenner had never forgotten about the Bandit. He'd participated in the first two manhunts and heard that the thief was still at large somewhere up in Nevada. He figured it wouldn't hurt to check out the truck, especially on a day when the temperature was expected to reach 120.

A blanket and cooking gear lay next to the cab; two wood planks propped off the flatbed suggested that the owner was off riding a quadrunner. As Brenner inspected the truck closer, his eyes fell on something hidden beneath it: a group of white five-gallon buckets. Kneeling down, he was surprised to see baby marijuana plants, seven seedlings in all. Hyperalert now, the ranger searched the cab, and turned up a .22 rifle and some credit cards. As he read the name on the card, Seth Dee, something clicked. Dee had reported a Subaru stolen back in February. And the Ballarat Bandit had been the suspect.

Brenner disabled the Chevy's engine, then tried to radio for backup. Unable to get reception, he drove out of the canyon, wasting valuable



minutes. By the time he returned, a fresh quad trail told him that the Bandit had come back, seen Brenner's tracks, and fled.

Once again, the chase was on. The BLM initiated an area-wide alert, and Brenner began cutting the Bandit's tracks. He immediately noticed a change in his pattern. Normally he favored the high ground, but this time, instead of breaking for the Panamints, he blazed off to the southeast, right into the valley and its crucifying heat. Maybe he was hoping to steal a car, or he simply hadn't had time to plan an escape, but he was now overextended, reacting instead of following one of his meticulous strategies.

The Bandit pushed on for 70 miles, clear across the valley floor and right over Death Valley's eastern boundary, the Amargosa Range. He had just crossed into San Bernardino County the following morning when the quad's engine sputtered to a stop. He was out of gas.

Patrick Shields, a BLM ranger who was patrolling state Route 127 that Sunday, later spotted a man lying by a call box with a red gas can alongside him. Shields figured he was either a hitchhiker or waylaid motorist. He drove for another 30 miles but couldn't shake the image of the man out of his head, so he turned around and sped back to the call box. The man was no longer there, but Shields found his boot prints, which matched ones that Brenner had described.

"That's gotta be him," Brenner told Shields over the cell phone. "He's got nowhere to go!"

Brenner called in a search plane and backup, and just after 2 PM it spotted what looked to be a tent, about 300 yards off Route 127. It was lying in a desert wash, about 15 feet below ground level. When everyone had assembled, five rangers, including Brenner, were creeping toward the campsite, their AR-15 rifles raised in front of them.

"We were feeling it was going to be a gunfight, or another footrace," said Barry Nelson, the BLM ranger in command that day.

Brenner hooked north to get a better look at the site and spotted the Bandit. He was sitting under a tarp that he'd hung off the quad as a makeshift shade. Although the plane was harrying overhead, buzzing in the heat as it circled, the Bandit was motionless. The rest of the rangers closed to within 30 feet. Once they were all in position, Shields gave a shout.

"Police!"

At the same moment, Brenner spied a .22 rifle sitting by the Bandit's side.

"He's got a gun!" he yelled.

A second later came a muffled rifle crack. The rangers hugged the sage, preparing to return fire, but all that followed from the campsite was an exhausted silence. After a minute with no movement coming from the wash, Brenner ran in and suddenly found himself standing above the Ballarat Bandit.

Johnston was lying naked on his back, his blue eyes open to the sky and his body as still

as the afternoon desert. Beside him lay the rifle and a red stain pooling beneath his head.



EVEN AFTER HIS DEATH, THERE WAS CHASE left in the Ballarat Bandit. Standing above Johnston's unmarked grave, David Van Norman told the story of his own pursuit to give John Doe #39-04 a name.

"I knew he had done extraordinary things, but I never really thought of him as the Bandit," said the coroner. "I thought of him as a person who needed me to help him get back home."

Because of the good condition of the body, Van Norman had every possible identification tool available: dental work, DNA samples, and fingerprints. The vast majority of John Does are identified by prints, thanks to a system created in 1999 called the Integrated Automated Fingerprint Identification System (IAFIS), the largest fingerprint database in the world.

When the IAFIS results came back negative, Van Norman was puzzled but not discouraged. Other federal biometric tools were available, but as all the searches also came back negative, the coroner grew increasingly perplexed. As the weeks turned into months, then a year, Van Norman was forced to transfer him from refrigeration to potter's field.

Even after burying the Bandit, Van Norman continued the search. As a last, desperate move he e-mailed digital photos of his face and tattoo to law enforcement offices and media outlets across the West. Last April, he received an anonymous single-line e-mail: *Who talks like an American, but isn't one? Try Canada.*

Van Norman had in fact already tried sending the Bandit's fingerprints to Canada, via Interpol, but he'd never heard back. He now sent the prints directly to the RCMP, and almost four months later, the Canadians called him with a match. After nearly two years of speculation, the solution to the mystery of the Bandit's identity had literally been right on the man's fingertips.

"I felt tremendous relief, instantly followed by dread," Van Norman says of the moment he learned that the Bandit was Robbie Johnston. "Once you identify someone, you have to tell his family. Your good news becomes their bad news." Van Norman tracked down Johnston's mom in Charlotetown (his father died in 1997). The coroner won't divulge conversations with a deceased's family, and Johnston's mother, now 85, declined interview requests. But once told the news, she neglected to inform Tommi and the girls, who found out about Johnston's death in the most heartbreaking way imaginable.

In August 2006, Johnston's second youngest daughter, 16-year-old Katherin, who hadn't seen her father in six years, was searching online for a diary her mother had kept when Johnston was in prison — just as the first stories detailing Van Norman's successful ID of the Bandit were emerging. That night Katherin ran to her mother in tears, with printouts of the articles in her hands. Some included a

postmortem photo of her father's face.

Tommi Johnston pored over the pages in disbelief. She figured Johnston had sought refuge in the wilderness, but the Ballarat Bandit didn't mesh with the man she loved, who had never stolen from anyone. Even more shocking was the idea that he had taken his own life.

"It took me a while to believe that he wasn't killed by a bunch of pissed-off, embarrassed lawmen," she says. "Only after intense questioning of the coroner do I believe there is a possibility that Rob shot himself."

As for the lawmen, the revelation that the Bandit was not a terrorist but a misguided Canadian pot farmer filled many of them with a kind of ambiguous regret and sadness. "I don't think anyone could have done anything different," DeMeo, the Nye County sheriff, said recently. "To ignore him would have been irresponsible and unsafe."

"I just wish I could have talked to him, learned how and why he did the things he did," said Detective Guthridge. "Why did he put himself through all that trouble? For what?"

No one may ever know what Johnston was actually orchestrating in the desert. Tommi's theory is that he had been attempting to start a marijuana-growing operation in an abandoned mine, just as he had once proposed. Somehow his plans unraveled and he fell into theft to keep the dream afloat. Stubborn to the end, he had returned to Death Valley with new pot plants in the hopes of jump-starting a crop, but by then his profile had become too big.

Tragically, in his own intractable way, Johnston may indeed have been trying to come home.

"He always had to do things the hard way, the manly way," says Tommi. "Never walk if you can run. The girls and I always figured he wouldn't come back unless he had a ton of money. You had to know him to know that how much he had to offer was as important to him as what he could offer. It didn't take long for me to stop waiting, but the girls hoped. He promised them he'd make it right and return. But he didn't." ❧

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