

The Low-Tech Operator

The Crime and Corruption Committee are meeting in an Adelaide Terrace Boardroom. They have in their technician chief, who handles the video surveillance and does the phone tapping and the computer tracking.

“No go,” he says. “He doesn’t use the phone much and is quite circumspect when he does. We’ve intercepted his mail and that like-wise tells us nothing. It’s possible that he’s a cleanskin after all; certainly there is no evidential footprint for us to follow.”

They are pursuing, among others, a late 20’s journalist, a total free-lancer whose articles are always interesting and are spread over a range of media. He appears on television news programs from time to time; talking authoritatively on matters pertinent to the time. The CCC is convinced that he is a full-blown insider trader, whacking the stock market hard with rifle-shot precision. But they can’t source his sources; they just can’t so far, but are still trying.

The meeting set out follows on from a very big share buy in and sell off made by Cramphorne Holdings Pty Ltd; a company owned by their mark, David Johnston. Johnstone is clearly behind it all, but there’s just not a sniff of the communications that they think have to be involved in such a deal. The lead investigator says,

“Despite a lot of time and effort, all we have at this point in time is allegations, alleged probables, deep suspicion and a gut feeling this fellow’s as guilty as sin. We’ve had a crack at infiltrating the stock brokerage firm that did the buy in on the last deal, but all they can find out is that the deal was as with the others – handled by the one member of this one member firm.”

Here again, they have been cracking communications in and out of this firm; again they can’t find a trace of phoned, faxed, emailed or any other type of communication relevant to this deal. The sussing out of crime these days is, in the main, very electronic and is mostly done from behind a desk.

Johnston, of course, is not a behind the desk sitter; in his journo role, he is out and about, here, there and everywhere in sourcing his wide-ranging stories. He is reputedly very rich and this doesn’t do him any harm in getting access to across-the-board people of many occupations. He is often seen dining at Parliament House or the Kings Park Tennis Club.

What they don’t know of his activities is that he, indirectly, owns the flower selling stall in the Carillion Centre and the business registered to someone else in Fremantle, which occupies a neat shopfront and advertises in the Sunday Times, ‘Cash for Interesting Information’. A bright girl fronts for both of these. More traffic comes in the discreet back door of the Fremantle shop than the front. The girl has spending approval up to a set daily amount and her job is to evaluate the information and make a payment on it and arrange for more money down the track if the information is of value. Callers to the Fremantle number are foot traffic only. There is no phone connected, nor does the girl carry a cell phone and there’s no sign of a fax machine or computer.

The Fremantle set-up is closed Mondays, but open Tuesday to late Saturday. The back entry has a long covered canvas way behind it, so that a person coming in is not picked up on overhead CCTV. It’s well thought out.

Much of the information can’t be maximised, but some of it pays off big-time in journalistic grist for the mill. In re-zoning of land work that a good investor can make use of and of course, the real secrets of the business and share world come in the

door freely. Johnston is so far in front that he can pay out quite a bit without it hurting him, but gems of value keep falling into his net.

'If only I was into blackmail,' he sometimes thinks.

A middle-aged man calls at the Fremantle office. "How safe is this?" he asks. The girl switches on a box on the desk top; it quietly buzzes. "It's safe," she says.

"Okay," says the man, "I work at a bank that is planning a share raid on a smaller one. It's big, very big."

She reaches under her desk and pulls out a portable typewriter. She hands the man latex gloves. "Set it out, chapter and verse," she says, "and I'll unlock the cashbox." He does.

She expertly removes the tape and puts it in a burn bin with the gloves. She puts the lot in a neat tile fire, tosses in some firelighter and lights it up; that done, she has a read of the content. She gives him \$1,000 in \$20 notes.

"If what you have set out happens," she says, "come back for another \$99,000."

"Cash?" he asks.

She grins. "I can do it in gold if you like, ingots or Kruger rand, or even sovereigns."

She places the memo in a body belt and puts it on under her skirt. A cab always calls for her at knock off time and an hour later, she has been into the Carillion Centre to trade the memo for flowers. The same cab takes the flower seller up to a Mount Street residential block. She lives there, as does David Johnston, on the floor above her; the top floor. She takes up the memo and others with a bunch of blue Irises. David pulls out the stops on this one; it rings true and he puts the plan into action.

The following Tuesday week morning after the stock exchange starts trading; Roger Callow is sitting in his top floor office in St Georges Terrace, when a piercing electronic signal, not unlike a smoke alarm, sounds. He goes up the fire stairs to the roof, gets a big strong Red Checker Homing pigeon out of the trap, takes off the message ring on the pigeon's leg, lets him into the bigger part of the hutch and tosses in some wheat.

Back in the office, he puts the microdot message into the decoder and writes out a buy order. "Issy," he says to his girl Friday, "take this to our buyer...quick now."

The message is succinct. *'Buy CBA shares until you've spent a million. The money's here to cover it.'*

He then fills out a bank pay-into-bank for a Swiss draft he has been sitting on for days.

On his way to lunch at Black Tom's in West Perth, he stops to have a look at the trading floor in action. It's buzzing like a beehive, but CBA shares haven't gone up that much yet, but they will. The big bucks will stem from what they have bought so far. The buyer spots Roger in the glass gallery and sketches two thirds done. Roger grins and goes to lunch.

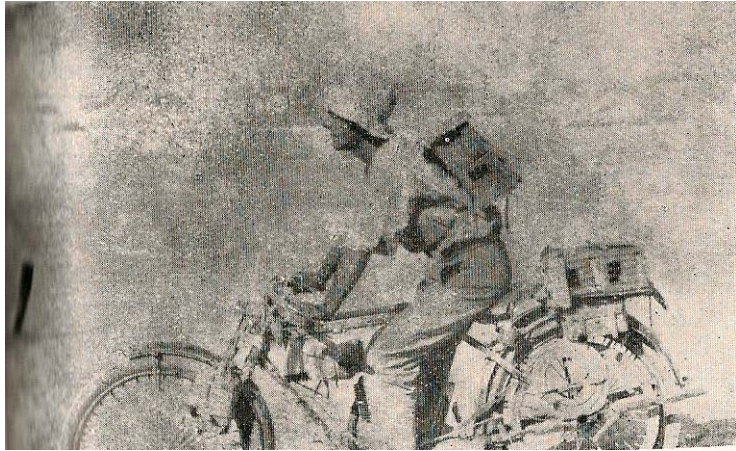
The CCC meets again. The Eastpac moguls have lit a fire under them.

"Same again," the techy says. "We've captured every call, email and fax out of Johnston's communications set-up and also that of Callow Stockbrokers. There's never been an electronic word out of them on this deal – on this big deal."

Up at his Mount Street apartment, Johnston is at his splendid neat pigeon hutch, situated among greenery in his Atrium terrace. He's feeding his pigeons expensive King Island Organic Wheat.

"You deserve the best, you handy little beggars," he quietly says.

Actually, their home hutch is in a recess on the stock broker's building roof. They are here now, ready for the next send.



Carrier pigeons are as old as time. Here is a Light-Horse Dispatch Rider with carrier pigeons in the Jordan Valley in early 1918. Photo by HJ Wickner.