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## The Next Page: The storied career of retired FBI agent Vince Pankoke

Long before he took on the case of Anne Frank's murder, Pankoke

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assembled a dossier of high-profile investigations, writes Torsten Ove



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Vince Pankoke could have stayed home. A police officer in the 1980s in his hometown of Richland Township in Cambria County, he liked his job and built a house with his wife, Mary Pat.



“I was fat and happy,” he said. “It was where I grew up. I knew every street.”



But fate intervened. He took the FBI test and passed. And the FBI took him all over the world.

Now in retirement at 59, he's been tapped to handle an investigation of who betrayed Anne Frank in World War II Amsterdam. Mr. Pankoke is the leader of a team of 20 researchers combing through millions of documents and soliciting tips as part of a project to solve what he calls “the ultimate cold case.” The goal is to figure out who tipped off the Gestapo to Anne Frank's hiding place. The target date to release a report is Aug. 4, 2019.

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Torsten Ove

Retired FBI agent heads international team trying to solve World War II mystery

It's fitting work because Mr. Pankoke's FBI career intersected with other famous investigations: the cocaine war in the Caribbean, Wall Street fraud, political corruption, the Kenya embassy bombing in 1998, the Branch Davidian siege in Texas in 1993 and the 9/11 terror attacks.

"I feel proud — more, honored — to have the opportunity to work some of these well-known cases," he said.

Mr. Pankoke graduated from from the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown in 1979 with a sociology degree. He joined the Richland department as a patrolman and made lasting friends in his eight years there.

A 1986 bank robbery in nearby Somerset County changed his life. He and his captain caught the robbers emerging from some woods.

During the case, an FBI agent from the local office encouraged him to join the bureau. He'd thought about it before but this time decided to take the test. He passed and joined. Among his

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regrets was not finishing his master's degree in police administration at Pitt, but an FBI career wouldn't wait.

After 13 weeks at the bureau academy, he shipped off to his first post in the wilds of Wisconsin. Stationed in a three-man office, he and his colleagues covered a third of the state, handling everything from bank jobs to fugitive hunts.

"There were more deer and bears than people," he said. He also remembers being colder than he'd ever been in his life.

One case stands out: A parental kidnapping in 1988. A divorced woman, Sharon Luecke, took up with a local pastor and fled with her two young kids to parts unknown. The father, Lindell Weathers, was devastated. The case went cold.

But Mr. Pankoke knew the mother, a nurse, eventually would need a copy of her certification to work. He had asked the licensing bureau in Wisconsin for an alert should anyone request a copy. When Sharon's mother asked for it in 1992, agents quickly tracked the Lueckes to Kingman, Ariz.

"I can't say enough about all the work the FBI and others have done on this

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case," Mr. Weathers said to the local media. "I have total appreciation for it all."

The head of the FBI, William Sessions, sent Mr. Pankoke a letter of recognition for his tenacity.

"For a number of years the father kept in touch with me and sent me pictures of the children," Mr. Pankoke said.

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FBI agents are required to rotate around the country. After four years in Wisconsin, he chose to work in Miami because of the weather: "I loved Wisconsin. ... But I said, 'I need to thaw out.'"

When he started in the FBI, he promised Mary Pat he wouldn't investigate drug cases, work undercover or join the SWAT team. She worried about his safety. In Miami, he ended up doing all three.

Assigned to the Colombian drug squad from 1992 to 2002, he traveled throughout the Caribbean to target dealers. A scrapbook shows him posing with huge loads of coke at various arrest sites.

Mr. Pankoke's squad was among the first to use the roving wiretap on cell

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phones, which allows agents to track all of an individual's phones. It's standard now.

The drug lords were too smart to be caught talking on phones, but not the lower-level dealers. "If we targeted a layer underneath, they were much more vulnerable and they would talk freely about things," he said. Then it was just a matter of securing their cooperation to roll over on the higher-ups, he said, noting, "Everybody cooperates at some point."

Among the drug organizations he helped dismantle was the North Valley Cartel in Colombia run by Diego Montoya Sanchez, for which he accepted an award on behalf of his team.

Agents sometimes wondered whether the battle against traffickers was worthwhile. No sooner would one ring be removed than another took its place.

"It's easy when you are in the middle of it for you to say, 'Are we really making a difference?'" he said. "I recommended that our guys go out with a street narcotics unit and see the end result." That end result was addiction, shattered families, a cycle of despair.

As a member of the SWAT team, Mr. Pankoke was deployed on two notable

incidents: the siege of the Branch Davidian compound in Waco and the U.S. embassy bombings in Africa.

The Branch Davidians, an armed cult led by David Koresh, lived in a compound near Waco. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives suspected the sect of stockpiling illegal weapons and launched a raid. A gun battle erupted that killed four ATF agents and six Davidians. The FBI took over because federal agents had been killed, leading to a 51-day siege.

Mr. Pankoke's team arrived to augment the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team. In the end, the FBI launched an attack with tear gas to try to force the Davidians out. A fire started and engulfed the complex. When it was over, 76 people were dead.

Conspiracy theorists claim that the FBI started the fire. But recording devices that the FBI hid in milk cartons and sent into the compound proved that the Davidians set it. Mr. Pankoke, whose job was to escort the Davidians to safety, said he felt helpless.

“We were heartbroken,” he said. “We had intel books with pictures and names of everyone inside. It affected everyone on the team. Everybody on the team had

families.”

He has no use for the conspiracy-minded who still blame the FBI. “I was there,” he said. “I know what happened.”

Five years later, Mr. Pankoke joined what was then the largest deployment of FBI resources in history. On Aug. 7, 1998, truck bombs blew up in front of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, killing 224 and wounding more than 4,500. Mr. Pankoke's role was to protect other agents during the investigation. The attacks were directly linked to al-Qaida and Osama bin Laden.

Mr. Pankoke's scrapbook shows him with a group of Kenyan drivers who transported him around Nairobi. But he wonders now if others in Nairobi were watching the Americans. “Looking back on it, were we as aware as we should have been?” he said. “Were we being observed as targets?”

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Three years after that, 9/11 changed America and the FBI.

In the aftermath, Mr. Pankoke and his Miami drug squad were called on to use their cell phone expertise to track the hijackers' movements. Many of them



hijackers' movements. Many of them had lived in Florida and had Florida-based cell phones. Mr. Pankoke and 11 others formed a team to identify every phone. The unit was able to determine where the hijackers had traveled and uncovered the terror cell in Hamburg, Germany, where some of them lived in the late 1990s.

"We could track their movements. We could tell who called them," said Mr. Pankoke. "We saw them direct-calling Hamburg."

The FBI was pilloried after 9/11 for failing to "connect the dots" and stop the plot. Those criticisms stung. But Mr. Pankoke said there was little to do but piece together what happened and keep it from happening again.

"Any time there's criticism you take it personally," he said. "But you have to realize that if the criticism is accurate, you have to look at what happened and you have to correct it."

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In 2002, Mr. Pankoke became part of a five-man unit that provided the "backstopping" to bolster undercover cases across the country. In many instances, the primary agent would bring his targets to Florida, where Mr. Pankoke's team wined and dined them

in vouching for the primary.

A recurring role was wealthy yacht owner. That was his job in "Operation Tennessee Waltz," a 2003 investigation of political corruption in Tennessee. Among the targets was John Ford, a flamboyant state senator.

The FBI set up a fake company, E-Cycle Management, and put out the word that it was looking for legislation to ensure exclusive government contracts. Agents lured Ford to Miami, where Mr. Pankoke's team put him up in a posh hotel, partied with him at nightclubs and took him on yacht outings. Mr. Pankoke pretended to be a wealthy businessman connected to E-Cycle.

Ford had a good time on the trip and agreed to draft legislation to help E-Cycle get a state contract in exchange for cash. "Book me. I'm on board. Whatever we need to do," he said. Agents later videotaped him stuffing cash in his pockets. He was convicted of accepting \$55,000 in bribes and went to prison.

Another big catch was Ross Mandell, the self-described "bad boy of Wall Street" likened to Gordon Gekko in the movie "Wall Street." Mandell ran Sky Capital and was accused of ripping off investors, most of them British, of some

\$140 million. Mr. Pankoke posed as a "whale," an investor flush with cash. He pretended to have money but not much brainpower. "I play dumb and rich very well," he said.

He and his FBI partner, a fast-talking former New York stockbroker, flew to New York to meet with Mandell's floor manager, taking a bottle of Johnnie Walker Blue as a gift. Over a few days, the floor manager incriminated himself, at one point even offering the agents cocaine and underage Russian prostitutes.

Confronted with his crimes, he agreed to cooperate, leading to Mandell's downfall. Mandell is serving 12 years in federal prison.

Looking back on his career, he says it was hard to leave home. But he's glad he did.

"I've experienced and traveled places and worked cases that I would never have done otherwise," he said. "I made the right decisions."

Mr. Pankoke retired in 2014. But now the Anne Frank project looms. Mr. Pankoke knows everyone is watching. Even though he's no longer with the FBI, he feels that the reputation of the bureau is still at stake.

"My peers are wishing me the best," he said.

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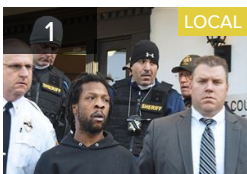


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