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Nothing Is Secret

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<http://www.insightmag.com/main.cfm?include=detail&storyid=210844>

Good morning, Mr. McDade. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police has reason to believe that the national security of Canada has been compromised. A trojan horse, or back door, allegedly has been found in computer systems in the nation's top law-enforcement and intelligence organizations.

"Your mission, should you decide to accept it, is to establish whether this is the **PROMIS** software reportedly stolen in the early 1980s from William and Nancy Hamilton, owners of Inslaw Inc., and reportedly modified for international espionage. As always, should you or any of your associates be caught, the governments of Canada and the United States will disavow any knowledge of your actions. This recording will self-destruct in five seconds. Good luck, Sean."

Sounds like the opening taped message from an episode of the 1960s TV action series Mission Impossible. But just such a mission was offered - and accepted - by two investigators of the National Security Section of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). The Mounties then covertly entered the United States in February of last year and for nearly eight months conducted a secret investigation into the theft of the **PROMIS** software and whether and by whom it had been obtained for backdoor spying. **PROMIS** is a universal bridge to the forest of computer systems. It allows covert and undetectable surveillance, and it and its related successors are unimaginably important in the new age of communications warfare.

In this exclusive investigative series Insight tracks the Mounties and explores the mysteries pursued by the RCMP, including allegations involving a gang of characters believed to be associated with the suspected theft of **PROMIS**, swarms of spies (or the "spookloop" as the Mounties called them), the Mafia, big-time money laundering, murder, international arms smuggling and illegal drugs - to name but a few aspects of the still-secret RCMP probe.

But the keystone to this RCMP investigation is **PROMIS**, that universal bridge and monitoring system, which stands for Prosecutor's Management Information System - a breakthrough computer software program originally developed in the early 1970s by the Hamiltons for case management by U.S. prosecutors. The first version of **PROMIS** was owned by the government since the development money was provided by the Department of Justice (DOJ), but something went awry on the way to proprietary development.

For more than 15 years the story of the allegedly pirated Hamilton software, and how it may have wound up in the hands of the spy agencies of the world, has been hotly pursued by law-enforcement agencies, private detectives, journalists, congressional investigators, U.S. Customs and assorted U.S. attorneys. Even independent researchers have taken on the role of counterespionage agents in a quest to uncover the truth about this allegedly ongoing penetration of security.

But each new U.S. investigation has failed fully to determine what happened. While the Mounties encountered a similar fate, officers Sean McDade and Randy Buffam have been the most successful to date. Last May, with the assistance of Hercules, Calif., detective Sue Todd, the Mounties walked away with a package of startling evidence that many believe will solve the case of the pirated software and its reported continuing use for international espionage and a host of other illegal activities.

Insight has spent months retracing the steps of the two RCMP officers and interviewing their sources, poring over copies of documents they secured, listening to tape recordings of meetings in which they were involved and reviewing scores of reports and depositions that have been locked up for years.

The result is this first installment of a four-part investigative report about how the Mounties conducted their covert border crossings and investigation that ranged across the United States and back again before returning to Canada where they discovered their cover had been blown. By late summer of 2000 the Canadian press was reporting not only the existence of this secret national-security probe - "Project Abbreviation" - but that if the reported allegations prove true "it would be the biggest-ever breach of Canada's national security." Confusing official comments about the probe added further mystery. But

Insight has confirmed many of the details, including the fact that the investigation is continuing. And it's serious stuff.

McDade began his extended trip into international espionage early last year. It began at least on Jan. 19, 2000, with an e-mail that said: "I am looking to contact Carol (Cheri) regarding a matter that has surfaced in the past. If this e-mail account is still active, please reply and I will in turn forward a Canadian phone number and explain my position and reason for request." This communication, from e-mail account simorp (**PROMIS** spelled backward), was the first of hundreds sent during an eight-month period from "dear hunter," also known as Sean McDade. It reached Cheri Seymour, a Southern California journalist, private detective and author of a well-regarded book, Committee of the States.

Seymour became one of the most important of McDade's contacts during the Mounties' continuing investigation. Although she had agreed to remain silent about their probe until McDade filed a report with his superiors, she changed her mind when news of the probe began to leak in the Canadian press. It was then that the Southern Californian contacted Insight and offered to share what she knew about the investigation if this magazine would look into the story. And what a story it is.

A petite, attractive, unassuming middle-aged woman, Seymour looks more like a violinist in a symphony orchestra than an international sleuth. But one quickly becomes aware of the depth of her knowledge not only of the alleged theft of the **PROMIS** software, but also of other reported illegal activities and dangerous characters associated with it.

Seymour's involvement with **PROMIS** began more than a decade ago while working as an investigative reporter on an unrelated story about high-level corruption within the sheriff's department of the Central California town of Mariposa, near Yosemite National Park, where deputies reportedly were involved in illegal-drug activity. The dozen or so who were not involved repeatedly had begged the journalist to conduct an investigation. When she learned that one of the officers had taken the complaints to the state attorney general in Sacramento and within weeks was reported missing in an alleged boating accident on nearby Lake McClure, she launched her probe.

The owner of the local newspaper, the Mariposa Guide, in time contacted ABC television producer Don Thrasher and the story of the corruption within the Mariposa Sheriff's Department ran in 1991 on ABC's prime-time television news program 20/20. Seymour's investigation is chronicled in a draft manuscript called the "Last Circle," written under her pseudonym Carol Marshall but made available anonymously on the Internet in 1997. **PROMIS** then was only a sidebar to the larger story, but it was this obscure Internet posting that led RCMP investigators McDade and Buffam to Seymour's living room two years later.

According to Seymour: "Nothing [previously] came of the work I did. Even though in October of 1992 I had sent a synopsis of my work to John Cohen, lead investigator on the House Judiciary Committee, looking into the theft of **PROMIS** and its possible connections to the savage death of free-lance journalist Danny Casolaro. But by then the committee had completed its report and published its findings. It was a closed case. Nothing ever happened with the connections I was able to make among the players involved in the theft of **PROMIS** and illegal drug trafficking and money laundering." That is, until McDade sent his first cryptic e-mail.

Within a week the Mountie had arranged to meet Seymour at her home to discuss aspects of his own secret investigation and begin the laborious task of copying thousands of documents Seymour had collected from an abandoned trailer in Death Valley belonging to a man at or near the center of the **PROMIS** controversy, Michael Riconosciuto, a boy genius, entrepreneur, convicted felon - and the man who has claimed that he modified the pirated **PROMIS** software. The documents provided specific information about Riconosciuto's connections to the Cabazon Indian Reservation, where he claims to have carried out the modification, but they also painted a clear picture of the men with whom Riconosciuto associated, including mob figures, high-level government officials, intelligence and law-enforcement officers and informants - even convicted murderers.

Before McDade focused on a three-day copying frenzy, the Mountie gathered Todd, Seymour and an impartial observer invited by Seymour to corroborate the meeting around Seymour's dining-room table and began to tell a dramatic tale of government lies and international espionage.

"I sat there with my mouth wide open and my eyes practically popping out of my head - you know, that deer-in-the-headlights look," Seymour recounts. "I couldn't believe what this guy was telling us. It wasn't anything I anticipated or even was prepared to hear." She says, "McDade told us his investigation had to do with locating information on the possible sale of **PROMIS** software to the RCMP in the mid-1980s. He had found evidence in RCMP files that **PROMIS** may have been installed in the Canadian computer systems, and he said an investigation was initiated by his superiors at the RCMP."

According to Seymour, "McDade said that the details of his findings in Canada could conceivably cause a major scandal in both Canada and the United States. He said if his investigation is successful it could cause the entire Republican Party to be dismantled - that it would cease to exist in the U.S." Hyperbole, perhaps, but bizarre stuff from a professional lawman.

"Then," continues Seymour, "he said something that was just really out there. He stood in my dining room with a straight face and told us that ... more than one presidential administration will be exposed for their knowledge of the **PROMIS** software transactions. He said that high-ranking Canadian government officials may have unlawfully purchased the **PROMIS** software from high-ranking U.S. government officials in the Reagan/Bush administration, and he further stated that the RCMP has located numerous banks around the world that have been used by these U.S. officials to launder the money from the sale of the **PROMIS** software." Seymour was stunned. "First," she says, "I wondered if this guy was for real and, second, did he have something against Republicans." Just when she thought things couldn't get any weirder, "McDade detailed a December 1999 meeting at the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico attended by the heads of the intelligence divisions of the U.S. [CIA], Great Britain [MI6], Israel [Mossad] and Canada [CSIS]. McDade said the topic of the discussion was UNIQUE ELEMENTS, and that during this meeting it allegedly was revealed that all four allied

nations share computer systems and have for years. The meeting was called after a glitch was found in a British computer system that had caused the loss of historical case data."

McDade continued with this scenario by telling the astonished group: "The Israeli Mossad may have modified the original **PROMIS** modification [the first back door] so it became a two-way back door, allowing the Israelis access to top U.S. weapons secrets at Los Alamos and other classified installations. The Israelis may now possess all the nuclear secrets of the United States." According to Seymour, he concluded by saying that "the Jonathan Pollard [spy] case is insignificant by comparison to the current crisis."

This was pretty heavy stuff for a foreign law-enforcement agent to be bandying with complete strangers. And it made those present uncomfortable. Was McDade making up wild tales for some as yet unrevealed purpose or was he, in fact, reporting what he knew to be true based on information he had gleaned from his investigation?

Insight has tried repeatedly to contact McDade and his superiors to discuss the Mountie's accounts of espionage and other crimes only to be rebuffed through official channels. But in carefully assembling and independently checking disparate pieces of the McDade story line Insight was able to confirm that there was indeed a December 1999 meeting at the Los Alamos National Laboratory and the topic of the meeting was, indeed, code-named UNIQUE ELEMENTS.

Seymour never learned further details about that meeting, though she tried, alerting several U.S. senators, including Charles Robb, D-Va., Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M., and Richard Bryan, D-Nev., about what McDade had told her in February - nearly four months before the public was made aware of massive computer problems at Los Alamos (see "DOE 'Green Book' Secrets Exposed," Jan. 1). Ironically, Congress was probing such lapses, but only Bob Simon, Bingaman's staff director on the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, responded. Simon advised that he would show the letter to the senator and possibly refer "some or all of the information in the letter to Ed Curran, director of the Department of Energy's [DOE] Office of Counterintelligence."

Seymour never had any further communication from Bingaman's office, the DOE or any federal investigator seeking to discover which "foreign agent" had told her of severe computer leakage from Los Alamos long before it became public knowledge.

How McDade knew what he claimed may never be made public. But what is known can be pieced together from the many contacts he had with individuals having historical knowledge of the allegations surrounding **PROMIS** and a host of other seemingly unrelated criminal enterprises and crimes.

For instance, in January 2000 McDade contacted **PROMIS** developers and owners Bill and Nancy Hamilton, explaining what his investigation was about; what, to date, had surfaced; and what the implications might be. "McDade said my government made two untruthful statements in 1991 [the year congressional hearings were held on the theft of **PROMIS**]," Bill Hamilton tells Insight. "The first was that they [Canada] had developed the software in-house. McDade said that wasn't true, it just materialized one day out of nowhere. The second untruth was that they [the Canadian government] had investigated this. McDade said that his investigation was the first."

Hamilton further explained that "McDade believed **PROMIS** software was being used to compromise their [Canada's] national security." Needless to say, this was interesting news to Hamilton, given that it was "the second time the Canadian government has said they have our software, only to retract the admission later." The first time was in 1991, he recalls. "They contacted us to see if we had a French-language version because they said they only had the English version - which, by the way, we did not sell to them. At first we didn't take it seriously because it was before we were aware that the software was reportedly being used in intelligence. We just knew that the U.S. Department of Justice acted rather strangely, took our software and stiffed us. It never occurred to us that the software was being distributed to foreign governments," Hamilton tells Insight.

"When they [Canada] followed up their call with a letter saying **PROMIS** software is used in a number of their departments - 900 locations in the RCMP, to be exact - Nancy and I said 'Hey, wait a minute.'"

Of course, laughs Hamilton, "when one of our newspapers in the U.S. got hold of that information and printed it, the Canadians retracted and apologized for a mistake. They now said the RCMP never had the software."

It is important to note that the alleged theft of **PROMIS** software was well investigated. However, no investigation by any governmental body, including the U.S. House Judiciary Committee, which made public its findings in September 1992, the Report of Special Counsel Nicholas J. Bua to the Attorney General of the United States Regarding the Allegations of Inslaw, Inc., completed in March 1993, nor the Justice Department's Review of the Bua Report, which was published in September 1993, confirmed that any agency or entity of Canada had obtained and used an illegal copy of the Hamiltons' **PROMIS** software.

A Justice report commissioned by Attorney General Janet Reno concluded the same but did confirm that a system called **PROMIS** was being used by Canadian agencies but claimed that this system was totally different - it was just a coincidence that the two software programs had the same unusual name and spelling.

So what happened over the course of 10 years to lead the RCMP's top national-security investigators to probe the matter anew and to do so with such secrecy throughout the United States and Canada? Why would McDade, by all accounts a seasoned and well-respected Mountie, tell whopping tales to so many people, including not only Bill Hamilton but strangers Seymour, Todd and others?

The answers may be found in the pattern of people who were questioned by the Mounties. The information for which they were asked and which they reportedly provided, may reveal that the alleged theft of the breakthrough **PROMIS** software was not, in fact, the focus of the investigation, but was secondary to how the software has come to be used.

In August 2000, McDade told the Toronto Star's Valerie Lawton and Allan Thompson, "There are issues that I am not able to talk about and have nothing to do with what you're probably making inquiries about," which centered on **PROMIS**. Was the Mountie revealing that his investigation had reached the level he had unguardedly revealed to Seymour and friends?

Surprisingly, McDade did not focus his investigation on interviews with government officials who were involved with the **PROMIS** software. Rather he focused on people who claimed to have knowledge of the purported theft, many of whom also have been connected to other illegal activities, including drug trafficking and money laundering. And Michael Riconosciuto was at the top of McDade's list.

With the help of Detective Todd, who had facilitated the Mounties' meetings with the hope of also obtaining information about the 1997 execution-style double homicide of Neil Abernathy and his 12-year-old son, Benden, McDade was given access to Riconosciuto and people and information that even few law-enforcement officers in the United States have secured. In fact, the assistance the Mountie received secretly from U.S. authorities was stunning and included access to information from highly confidential FBI internal files and case jackets (including the names of confidential witnesses and wiretapping information), U.S. Bureau of Prisons files, local law-enforcement reports and reportedly even classified U.S. intelligence data.

It was with this kind of help that McDade was able to walk away with what many believe to be key material evidence in the **PROMIS** software legal case - material evidence of which only Riconosciuto had knowledge. After extensive interviews with Riconosciuto in a federal penitentiary in Florida, McDade in May 2000 made a \$1,500 payment on a defaulted storage unit in Vallejo, Calif., that belonged to Riconosciuto. Poring through floor-to-ceiling boxes, McDade hit pay dirt when he found six RL02 magnetic tapes that Riconosciuto said were the **PROMIS** modification updates - the boot-up system for **PROMIS** he claimed to have created.

Coupling those storage-unit files with the thousands of pages of documents Seymour had obtained some years earlier from an abandoned trailer Riconosciuto had rented in the desert, McDade walked away with the whole kit and caboodle without so much as a peep out of U.S. law-enforcement or