

In info age, Belgian diamond heist is a throwback

February 19 2013, by Raphael Satter



Baggage carts make their way past a Helvetic Airways aircraft from which about \$50 million worth of diamonds were stolen on the tarmac of Brussels international airport Tuesday, Feb. 19, 2013. Eight armed and masked men made a hole in a security fence at the airport, drove onto the tarmac and snatched the diamonds from the hold of the Swiss-bound plane without firing a shot, authorities said Tuesday. (AP Photo/Yves Logghe)

(AP)—At a time when many robberies take place at the click of a mouse, a group of jewel thieves has shown there's still a potential payoff

for old-fashioned criminals willing to use disguises, planning and pluck to nab their loot.

Monday's theft of some \$50 million worth of diamonds from the tarmac of Brussels' international airport is a "huge blip on the radar," said retired FBI agent Bill Rehder, who spent more than three decades on Los Angeles' bank robbery squad.

"You can almost liken it to the meteor that hit in Russia," he said, referring to the space rock which exploded last week over the city of Chelyabinsk, injuring hundreds. "These things happen so infrequently, but when they do happen it's a huge story."

It's also the type of story that complicates trends that have seen many crimes—particularly those targeting banks—jump from the world of brandished weapons and ransom notes to a universe of Trojan software and password-stealing [computer programs](#).

In several [Western countries](#), robberies have fallen as banks have installed bullet-proof glass, access-control vestibules and cash boxes rigged with paint or glue. Rehder said that, in the United States, tougher sentencing for criminals and societal changes have also led to a drop in bank robberies, which shrank from 8,516 in 2001 to 5,086 in 2011.

That trend has been echoed across the Atlantic, with the British Bankers' Association recording an even more dramatic fall in the number of raids, from 232 to 66 in the same period. Europe-wide figures also show a decrease in the number of bank robberies.

Meanwhile, cybercriminals have stepped in to steal some of the money their gun-wielding colleagues have left behind.

Global figures are hard to come by, but the amounts in play can be huge.

In 2010, the FBI announced the unraveling of an online organization that had raked in roughly \$70 million through a vast network of hackers, money mules, and front companies. Dozens were arrested across the U.S., Britain, and Eastern Europe.

ATM skimming, in which criminals surreptitiously rig cash machines with card readers and cameras to harvest debit card numbers, is another threat.

Doug Johnson, the vice president of risk management at the American Bankers Association, said that while the average U.S. bank robber could expect to make out with \$3,000-4,000 from each theft, a skimmer made 10 times that amount with every successful hit.

Even as criminality mutates to fit the new realities of online finance and cashless wallets, spectacular thefts like the one in Belgium carry a special air of romance, Rehder said.

"This will catch the imagination of the public, no doubt about it," Rehder said, explaining that the use of bogus police vehicles to rob a plane right as it prepared to take off fit right in with the mystique of 1960s heist movies, released long before many of today's online criminals were born.

And security experts said that capers in the vein of "The Thomas Crown Affair" (1968) or "Ocean's Eleven" (1960)—elaborate schemes involving the surgical extraction of jewels, rare artwork, and cash—were likely to keep popping up well into the information age.

"As long as we have hard currency and value in precious stones and precious metals, we're going to have people who will try to take it," Rehder said.

Or, as Johnson put it, "it's frankly difficult to create virtual robbery of

diamonds."

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