**Mike DeBardeleben: Serial Sexual Sadist**

The Secret Service wanted him on charges of counterfeiting. Little did the agents assigned to him know what their investigation would ultimately uncover. The chameleonic James Mitchell ("Mike") DeBardeleben II knew how to elude authorities, and he had more reasons to do so than anyone ever thought. Once he was caught, the investigators became aware that they'd been looking for him for many other crimes, from bank robbery to murder, and had not even realized it. The Secret Service had been on his trail for several years. They called him the Mall Passer, because he was quite successful at passing counterfeit bills as the real thing in various suburban malls, and he printed them himself. In his second year, traveling through 38 states, he managed to pass about $30,000 in fake bills. He'd go from store to store, buying low-priced items he didn't need, like socks, dog collars and greeting cards, in order to get change back from fake twenties in real cash. The agents tracked him and lost him on several occasions, but eventually managed to accurately predict where he'd go next. They alerted the personnel in several potential malls to watch for money that didn't look quite right, and passed out a composite drawing. According to Michaud, on April 25, 1983, DeBardeleben went into a targeted mall and bought a paperback at B. Dalton. He spent $4 and got $16 back in change. The clerk watched him go across to a toy store and make a purchase, and then the clerk alerted mall security and they tracked DeBardeleben through several stores and out to the parking lot, where they got his car make and license plate number. They also had him on videotape passing bad bills. He went from there to several other states, dropping bills as he went. Agents staked out the malls where they expected him to turn up and alerted relevant personnel. It was May 25, just one month later in Knoxville, Tennessee. The Mall Passer arrived in a car registered in two states with license plates stolen in Virginia. He went into several stores in a local mall and was recognized by store clerks, who reported him immediately. By the time he realized he was being followed, he was already caught. A search of his car turned up guns, counterfeit bills, numerous license plates, prescription drugs, a police badge, nine fake driver's licenses, and a substantial stash of pornography. That was important evidence, but what they really needed to do was locate DeBardeleben's "plant," or the place where he kept his printing press. That way they could prove that he'd counterfeited the bills himself. They went to an apartment registered in his name and a search there led to a storage space at a mini-warehouse. Using a bolt cutter to remove the padlock, they opened the door. Despite a stack of debris, it was clear at once that the printing press was not there. Yet rather than walk away in disappointment, they decided to look inside the two oversized footlockers. They soon realized they had evidence of crimes much more sinister than counterfeiting.

**A Surprise for the Secret Service**

The agents spent three hours going through the contents of the storage area. It was clear that DeBardeleben had ordered things through the mail to assist him in disguising himself as a police officer. He also had an assortment of women's phone numbers and addresses. Evidence of counterfeiting was among these items, but its significance began to pale when the agents pieced together what they found with what they knew about other crimes. One bag contained handcuffs, a dildo, shoelaces, a chain, bloody panties, and lubricant. There were also hundreds of photos of females, most of them sexually explicit, and several audiotapes. This was way out of their league. It wasn't the kind of case they usually tracked. Since 1865, the job of the Secret Service had been primarily to investigate and stop counterfeiting and fraud against the government. In 1883, the Secret Service became a distinct organization within the Treasury Department, and eleven years later it was first assigned the job of protecting the president. Eventually some agents were transferred to the Department of Justice, and that became the FBI. By 1915, they were investigating espionage. Then they also began to protect former presidents, the vice president, and their immediate families. In 1984, Congress enacted legislation that made the fraudulent use of credit and debit cards a federal violation and soon the Treasury Police Force merged with the Secret Service. According to their Web site: "The types of criminal cases we work are mainly concerned with safeguarding the nation's financial security.... We spend a lot of time investigating counterfeit money both in the United States and overseas. Additionally, we currently investigate credit card fraud, computer fraud and financial institution fraud. Even though we now rely on computers to help us, we still go out and ask questions of victims, witnesses, and suspects.... We also investigate people who make threats against the President, Vice President, or any of our protectees." Often Secret Service agents manage to break a case and confiscate counterfeit bills because numerous people are involved and someone snitches; a lone practitioner like DeBardeleben is much more difficult to stop. He'd proven to be slick and elusive, and was soon among the most wanted. Back at the Washington Field Office, agent Greg Mertz looked through the assortment of distasteful items they had found in DeBardeleben's storage locker and then listened to one of the tapes. He was utterly stunned by its contents, and it soon became evident that DeBardeleben, in the words of one expert, had a criminal history "unmatched anywhere for its sadism, its scope and his success at eluding detection." The tapes recorded intense and disgusting torture sessions with women, who begged their tormenter to either stop or kill them. They appeared to be somewhat scripted and revealed a man full of self-hatred who needed to experience pain in others or himself to get aroused. According to Michaud, many of the investigators believed that DeBardeleben was the "most dangerous felon ever at large in America." Agents Greg Mertz, Dennis Foos, and Mike Stephens went to work on a case the likes of which they'd never seen before or since.

**Uncovering Evil**

After three trials, DeBardeleben directed his own defense, claiming that the seizure of the tapes and sexual paraphernalia were not within the limits of the search warrant for counterfeit equipment. He moved to have them suppressed, which would have effectively halted the trial. However, the judge decided against suppression and that trial this one for kidnapping and assault moved forward. By the time six trials were over, all with guilty verdicts, the other jurisdictions awaiting their chance at him decided not to get into line. DeBardeleben had two life sentences on top of all the others, which amounted to 375 years. He'd be over 100 years old before he was eligible for parole. That meant that he wouldn't face charges for murder, and would not be brought to court in a death-penalty state as the agents had hoped. It appears to have been 18 years between the time he committed his first murder and when he was ultimately caught for another crime altogether. It turned out that he was wanted in nine states, and that was only for crimes that they managed to tie to him. Most of those involved in the investigation believe that he's done far more than they could uncover, both in number and degree of evil. He became the primary suspect in four murders and a likely suspect in several more, as well as the principal suspect in numerous rapes.

