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(Mount Clipping in Space Below)

Computer crimes

Captain Crunch—Ma Bell's

(In this article, the third of four on "Computer Criminals," you'll meet Captain Crunch, a "phone phreak" who has used his computer to cheat Ma Bell and wiretap the FBI.)

By PETER GRONER
and MICHAEL SMITH

LOMPOC — Maybe Ma Bell finally has got Captain Crunch out of her system.

Maybe he has gotten her out of his. The legendary "phone phreak" insists he has reformed, or at least he did the day in January that he was released after four months in the federal prison here.

"The feds fear me because of what they think I can do," he declared, speaking quickly, eyes darting nervously. "Like use the little computer terminal in my living room to explore secrets of the AUTOVON military defense network and perhaps start a little war.

"They think I've been messing with the worldwide ARPANET, leaving messages for computer freaks in Europe and Asia. Or that I've been checking out the FBI's national crime information center and tying up its millions of trunks. Phone phreaks have always enjoyed wiretapping the FBI.

"Now, I say it's possible to penetrate any computer linked to a telephone, reprogram it, and steal things. But I'm not saying I did this. I'm a good guy, now. I cooperated with the feds and showed them things. I tried to teach Ma Bell, too. She's the largest, leakiest computer system in the world. I can plug the leaks. But she refused my help. Ma Bell and the FBI are paranoid."

Meet Captain Crunch, also known as John Thomas Draper, 33, a hyperkinetic electronics wizard and bachelor from Mountain View, Calif. Although he was a ra-

dioman in the Air Force, Draper basically is self-taught, and his global prowess on the touchtone phone has made him an unerground hero to thousands of commonly described phone phreaks who use illegal "blue boxes" to keep their way freely through the Bell system.

Draper has been pronounced "a genius in electronics" by no less than federal probation authorities, but his prolonged adolescence has made him an anathema to all kinds of officials. Thus, last October he became the first phone phreak sent to prison.

Crunch got his handle from the famous toy whistle once given away as a treat in boxes of Cap'n Crunch cereal. He found the whistle emitted a shriek measuring 2,600 cycles per second (CPS), and when you blow 2,600 in Ma Bell's ear, wondrous things happen: Long-distance trunks obediently hiccup open; the "chunk-cheep" world of satellites, cables and computers awaits your fingers and you even get your dimes back.

When Crunch was an airman stationed in England, his friends would call and he'd "mute" their calls (make them free) with a blast from his magic whistle.

"After my discharge, I bought a Volkswagen van and roamed the California mountains exploring the Bell system from pay phones. It's a beautiful system. I computerized 'blue-boxing' with my first automated unit. That baby could burp out 10 pulses (beeps) per second. The FBI returned it after my first bust in 1972. They didn't know what it was. But it helped me learn the system."

Ah, yes, the system. Even now Crunch's eyes light up as he remembers the joys of discovery. To serious phone phreaks, the system is a gorgeous, vibrant, schematic canvas.

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'phone phreak'

"From friends I learned the inward-operator codes, the ones the operator dials. Then I learned routing codes by dialing 800 toll-free numbers to see how my calls got there. Patterns started developing. Whenever you have numbers, you have patterns."

Soon Crunch became a partyline freak. Phone phreaks periodically probe the country, seeking a broken switching station. Then several hundred call it for days, sometimes weeks, picking each other's brains, learning more secrets of the system.

Then Crunch became probably the first pioneer to blue-box a call around the world. "I called Tokyo inward, which connected me to India, which connected me to Greece, which connected me to Pretoria, South Africa, which connected me to London. The operator there connected me to New York, which sent me to a California operator who rang another phone next to my elbow. There was a 20-second delay, but I could hear myself talk. It blew my mind!"

His voice rises in ecstasy. "So then I whipped my voice around the world in two directions, going east on one phone and west on the other, sending one through satellite, the other through cable. They came back together at the same instant and rang two phones simultaneously. I picked them up and whipped my voice both ways around the world back to me!"

Like many phone phreaks, Crunch learned an easy way to tap any phone. Operators can plug in to any conversation to determine if a line is busy or broken. Crunch, who knew these inward codes, would pose as a switchman testing these lines — verification trunks, they're called — and talk an operator into plugging him in.

Once he grew impatient when a new girlfriend's line was busy for

a long time. He decided to break into the conversation and impress her. But he heard her talking — "sweet talking," as he put it . . . to another man. Crunch was crushed. As soon as she hung up, he called her and bellowed, "Linda, we're through!" and slammed the receiver down.

His world began to collapse after a revealing 1971 Esquire magazine article which outlined the alleged capabilities of phone phreaks and alarmed the federal government, not to mention the phone company.

"I laughed and I cried," Crunch recalls. "As a result of that article, 25 phone phreaks got busted. Grand'juries were convened in Seattle — headquarters of Phone Phreaks International — and many other cities.

"The article also detailed the historic 2111 conference. Thousands of phone phreaks discovered an unused Telex test board trunk in the bowels of a 4A switching machine in Vancouver, B.C. We'd blue-box our way to Vancouver, beep out 604 (the area code), then 2111, and be talking to hundreds of people. The Canadian government went bananas when they read this. I think this is where I got tapped by the feds.

"Most phone phreaks were high school kids who scared easily. I got busted and put on probation. They caught me calling Sydney, Australia, to find out what the hit tunes were."

After that, Crunch swears he was a good boy until 1976. He started learning about computers, got a job as a programmer, and went to technical school. "I built a radio monitoring station and while I'd study I'd listen to the FBI and Secret Service. It was fun during the Patty Hearst thing. I'd hear them chasing down leads . . ."

But the FBI apparently didn't like the idea that Crunch had a computer terminal in his home, a loan from his company. The FBI didn't like that at all.

"I was done in by a snitch," he says bitterly. "They grabbed a kid who used a blue-box and call-diverter to make \$50,000 in illegal calls charged to an adult he didn't like.

"The kid came to me and I yielded to temptation. He took me to a public phone, made me a \$30 blue-box call to Bethlehem, Pa., and handed me the receiver. The FBI had the public phone bugged. I was on probation. It was all they needed. The FBI thought I was a national menace. They wanted to send me away forever."

Crunch admits that when the FBI searched his apartment, they found the terminal and a National Crime Information Center, user manual but he denies breaking in to the FBI's secret files. Plea-bargaining reduced his sentence to four months in the Federal Detention Camp in Lompoc.

Crunch says he didn't mind prison. He slopped hogs (having neatly coded and named them), and lolled in the sun. First day, he tweaked a coil on his FM radio with a nail file to listen to the guard's radio calls ("Never knew when I'd need a guard," he says).

Now that he's released, he plans to start a countersurveillance and computer security business, telling people how they can debug their homes using household items like the rabbit ears on their TV sets. He thinks it's a good idea for everyone to spy on the government to keep it honest. Some experts doubt that Crunch can do all that his legend claims. To these skeptics, Captain Crunch just grins.

Next: The puzzle of computer security.