

# Hacker Feels US Navy Has Spaceships, Crews In Space

7-15-5

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"Like where?" I ask.

"The US Space Command," he says.

"What was the most exciting thing you saw?"

"I found a list of officers' names," he says, "under the heading 'Non-Terrestrial Officers'. It doesn't mean little green men. What I think it means is not Earth-based. I found a list of 'fleet-to-fleet transfers', and a list of ship names. I looked them up. They weren't US Navy ships. What I saw made me believe they have some kind of spaceship, off-planet."

"The Americans have a secret spaceship?" I ask.

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## **The Nerd Who Saw Too Much**

The Guardian - UK

7-15-5

Terrified Gary McKinnon says his forays into secret Pentagon networks were never politically motivated.

A computer geek faces 70 years in jail for hacking into the top levels of US defence. He tells Jon Ronson how, hooked and stoned, he landed himself in such hot water.

In 1983, when Gary McKinnon was 17, he went to see the movie WarGames. In the film, a geeky computer whiz-kid hacks into a secret Pentagon network and, inadvertently, almost instigates World War III. Sitting in the cinema, the teenage McKinnon wondered if he, too, could be a hacker. "Really," I say to him now, "WarGames should have put

you off hacking for life."

"Well," he replies, "I didn't mean it to actually come true."

WarGames ends with the Pentagon officials telling the young nerd how impressed they are with his technical acumen. He's probably going to grow up to have a brilliant career at NASA or the Department of Defence. This is an unlikely scenario for McKinnon. He faces 20 charges in the US, including stealing computer files, obtaining secrets that might have been "useful to an enemy", intentionally causing damage to a protected computer, and interfering with maritime navigation equipment in New Jersey.

Last month he attended extradition proceedings at Bow Street Magistrates Court in London. He had, the US prosecutors said, perpetrated the "biggest military computer hack of all time". He "caused damage and impaired the integrity of information. The US military district of Washington became inoperable and the cost of repairing the shutdown was \$700,000 US." These hacking attacks occurred immediately after September 11, 2001, they said.

This is McKinnon's first interview. He called me out of the blue last week, just as I was screaming at my child to stop knocking on people's doors and running away. "Your son sounds like a hacker," he said. Then he invited me to his home in Bounds Green, north London.

He is good-looking, funny, slightly camp, nerdy, a chain-smoker - and terrified. "I'm walking down the road and I find I can't control my own legs," he says. "And I'm sitting up all night thinking about jail and about being arse-f---ed. And, remember, according to them I was making Washington inoperable 'immediately after September 11'.

"I'm having all these visions of " McKinnon puts on a redneck prisoner voice, "'What you doing attacking our country, boy? Pick up that soap.' Yeah, it is absolutely f---ing terrifying."

The sentence the US Justice Department is seeking - should McKinnon be extradited - is up to 70 years. What McKinnon was hunting for, as he snooped around NASA, and the Pentagon's network, was evidence of a UFO cover-up.

McKINNON was born in Glasgow in 1966. His parents separated when he was six and he moved to London with his mother and stepfather, a bit of a UFO buff. "He comes from Falkirk," McKinnon says, "and just outside Falkirk there's a place called Bonnybridge, which is the UFO capital of the world. When he lived there, he had a dream that he was walking around Bonnybridge seeing huge ships. He told me this and it inflamed my curiosity. He was a great science-fiction reader. So, him being my second father, I started reading science-fiction, too, and doing everything he did."

McKinnon read Isaac Asimov and Robert Heinlein - "the golden age of science-fiction". When he was 15 he joined Bufora, the British UFO Research Association, which describes itself as "a nationwide network of [about] 300 people who have a dedicated, non-cultist interest in understanding the wide-ranging extent of the UFO enigma".

Then he saw WarGames, and he thought: "Can you really do it? Can you really gain unauthorised access to incredibly interesting places? Surely it can't be that easy." And so, in 1995, he gave it a try.

He sat in his girlfriend, Tamsin's, aunt's house in Crouch End, and he began to hack. McKinnon was looking for - and found time and again - network administrators in high levels of the US government and military establishments who hadn't bothered to give themselves passwords. That's how he got in.

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And so, for the next seven years, on and off, McKinnon sat in that aunt's house, a joint in the ashtray and a can of Foster's next to the mouse pad, and he snooped. From time to time, some NASA scientist sitting at his desk somewhere would see his cursor move for no apparent reason. On those occasions, McKinnon's connection would be cut. This would never fail to freak out the then-stoned McKinnon.

When I ask if he is brilliant, he says no. He's just an ordinary, self-taught techie. And, he says, he was never alone. "Once you're on the network, you can do a command called NetStat - Network Status - and it lists all the connections to that machine. There were hackers from Denmark, Italy, Germany, Turkey, Thailand."

"All on at once?" I ask. "You could see hackers from all over the world, snooping around, without the spaceniks or the military realising?"

"Every night," he says.

"What was the most exciting thing you saw?"

"I found a list of officers' names," he says, "under the heading 'Non-Terrestrial Officers'. It doesn't mean little green men. What I think it means is not Earth-based. I found a list of 'fleet-to-fleet transfers', and a list of ship names. I looked them up. They weren't US Navy ships. What I saw made me believe they have some kind of spaceship, off-planet."

"The Americans have a secret spaceship?" I ask.

"That's what this trickle of evidence has led me to believe."

"What were the ship names?"

"I can't remember," he says. "I was smoking a lot of dope at the time. Not good for the intellect."

This was November 2000. By now, McKinnon was hooked. He quit his job as a systems administrator for a small business, "which hugely pissed off my girlfriend, Tamsin".

"It was the last straw," he says. "She dumped me and started seeing this other bloke because I was such a selfish waste of space. Poor Tamsin. And she was the one paying the phone bill because I didn't have a job. We were still living together. God, have you ever tried living with someone after you've split up? It's bad."

So, while Tamsin was trying to get on with her new relationship, McKinnon was in the living room of her aunt's house, hacking. He snooped around all the forts - Fort Meade, Fort Benning, and others - reading internal court-martial reports of soldiers getting imprisoned for rape and murder and drug abuse.

"You end up lusting after more and more complex security measures," he says. "It was like a game. I loved computer games. I still do. It was like a real game. It was addictive. Hugely addictive." It was never really politically motivated.

Yes, he was hacking immediately after September 11, 2001, but only because he wanted to see if there was a conspiracy. "Why did the building fall like a controlled series of explosions?" he asks. "I hate conspiracy theories, so I thought I'd find out for myself."

He strenuously denies the Justice Department's charge that he caused the "US military district of Washington" to become "inoperable". Well, once, he admits - but only once - he inadvertently pressed the wrong button and may have deleted some government files.

"I thought, 'Ooh, bloody hell.' And that's when I stopped for a while. And then my friend told me about DARPA. And so I started again."

DARPA is the Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency, an intriguing collection of brilliant military scientists, funded by the Pentagon. DARPA has been widely credited with inventing, among other things, the internet, the global positioning system, the computer mouse, and - somewhat more boneheadedly - FutureMAP, an online futures market designed to predict assassinations and bombings by encouraging investor speculation in such crimes. The US Senate once described FutureMAP as "an unbelievably stupid idea". DARPA has long been of interest to conspiracy theorists because it is semi-secretive,

bizarre and occupies that murky world that lies between science and war.

McKinnon was caught in November 2002. He says it was inevitable because he was "getting a bit sloppy". He pauses. "I'd never have envisaged this happening to myself, but I did get a bit megalomaniacal, as well. It got a bit silly. I ended up talking to people I hacked into - I'd instant-message them, using WordPad, with a bit of a political diatribe. You know, I'd leave a message on their desktop that read, 'Secret government is blah blah blah.'"

McKinnon was tracked down because he'd used his email address to download a hacking program called Remotely Anywhere. "God knows why I used my real email address," he says. "I suppose it means I'm not a secretive, sophisticated checking myself every-step-of-the-way type of hacker."

On the night before his arrest, McKinnon had been up playing games. "Maybe I'd been doing a bit of weak, fun hacking, too," he says. "I'd had one hour's sleep, and I woke up completely muddled, and suddenly at the bottom of my bed there was this voice: 'Hello, my name's Jeff Donson from the National High Tech Crime Unit. Gary McKinnon, you're under arrest.'"

"They put Tamsin and me in the meat wagon. They took my PC, Tamsin's PC, three other computers I was fixing for friends. They went upstairs and took my girlfriend's aunty's daughter's computer."

McKinnon was kept in a police station overnight. Then the Americans offered him a deal, via his British solicitor. "They said, 'If you incur the cost of the whole extradition process, be a good boy, come over here, we'll give you three or four years, rather than the whole sentence.'"

"I said, 'OK, give me that in writing.' They said, 'Oh, no, we can't do that.' So they were offering a secret trial, no right of appeal on the outcome, no comment to the newspapers, and nothing in writing. My solicitor, doing her job, advised me to take it, and when I said no, she was very 'Ooh, they're going to come down heavy'."

In return, McKinnon offered a somewhat harebrained counter deal, via a Virginia public defender. "I made a sort of veiled threat to them. I said, 'You know the places I've been, so you know the stuff I've seen,' kind of thing." He pauses and blushes slightly.

"You know, the, uh, Non-Terrestrial Officers. The spaceships. The whole world thinks it's co-operating in building the International Space Station, but you've already got a space-based army that you refer to as Non-Terrestrial Officers." There is a silence. "I had very little evidence. It's not a very good bargaining chip at all, really, is it?"

Given the Justice Department has announced the information

McKinnon downloaded was not "classified", and he was stoned much of the time, perhaps we can assume NASA is not too worried about his "discoveries".

McKinnon hasn't spoken publicly before, but now, with the extradition proceedings, nothing is left open to him. For a while, he thought he might end up like the computer nerd from WarGames, having a brilliant career working for the Americans. "They need people like me," he says. "But that's not going to happen."

He and Tamsin have split. He no longer lives in Crouch End, but in the nearby, slightly more down-at-heel Bounds Green, and has given up smoking dope. He is not allowed near the internet, is not allowed a passport, and spends a lot of time reading and sitting in the pub, awaiting his fate.

Nothing much happened in the years since his arrest in 2002 under the Computer Misuse Act - no charges were brought against him in Britain. Then, on June 8, he found himself in front of Bow Street magistrates, the target of extradition proceedings. That's when the panic attacks kicked in again, the horror visions of life in a US jail. He had poked around, he says, but he hadn't broken anything, besides that one mistake. He thought he was going to get a year, max. Now they're talking about 70 years. "You know," he says. "everyone thinks this is fun or exciting. But it isn't exciting to me. It is terrifying."

The extradition hearing will resume on July 27.

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/technology/the-nerd-who-saw-too-much/2005/07/12/1120934245512.html?oneclick=true>

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