

Disconnection



They're called "phreakers," and they can do with a phone what hackers can do with computers. Few were more skilled—or more feared—than Matt Weigman, a blind teenager from East Boston. Using his heightened senses, he made himself untouchable. What he lacked, the FBI says, was the good sense to know when to hang up.

BY DAN MORRELL
ILLUSTRATION BY
JOE MORSE

A

about 1 a.m. on June 12, 2006, a 60-year-old truck driver named Jim Proulx walked out of his Alvarado, Texas, trailer home and into the sights of assault rifles. The

guns were held by SWAT team officers responding to a dire 9-1-1 call from Proulx's phone number. A caller who'd identified himself as Proulx said he was on hallucinogens, that he had an AK-47 and had just killed his wife. He said he was holding his daughter hostage, and would kill her, too, if he wasn't given \$50,000 and transport to Mexico. He also said that he was looking to kill some police officers.

It wasn't the sort of situation the people of Alvarado—with a population of 4,000 and zero murders in the previous six years—were used to handling. If the cops were high-strung, it was understandable. They had no way of knowing that Proulx hadn't made the call.

Proulx had no way of knowing what was happening, either, no way of realizing that as he walked out the door there were several different ways he could die. Maybe Proulx, only a few months removed from open-heart surgery, would find the commotion too much for his weakened heart. Perhaps the police would mistake an unfortunately timed reflection off his watch for the glint of a gun barrel. Considering all the threatening calls he'd been receiving over the past few weeks, it was a wonder Proulx hadn't armed himself before heading outside.

But Proulx had no weapon, and when the cops got inside his trailer, there was no dead wife, no hostage daughter, nothing. The 9-1-1 call had come from the Seattle area, placed by a man who'd used the Internet phone service Skype and a computer program to make it look as if the call was coming from Proulx's phone. And those menacing calls that had been ringing in for weeks, goading Proulx to a showdown: At least one of them had come from East Boston, from the bedroom of a 16-year-old blind kid named Matt Weigman.

It had started as a game, an absurd bit of one-upmanship orchestrated within an underground culture composed of tech geeks from across the country who congregated on telephone chat lines. Yet by the time the mischief reached its dark crescendo and Jim Proulx was set up for a shootout on his front steps, the whole thing had spiraled into something far more sinister. Nobody knew this better than Weigman, who's scheduled to stand trial this month on federal charges that could earn him more than 20 years in prison. (Weigman has pleaded not guilty to

the charges against him; neither he nor his lawyer would comment for this story.) Today, as he sits in a jail cell in Texas, Weigman is just another inmate, another head to count before lights-out. But in the world he made with his phone, the boy who called himself Li'l Hacker was a king.

IT WAS THE PARTY LINE THAT GAVE BIRTH TO the game, and the party line was everything to Matt Weigman. A decidedly low-tech form of social networking, party lines are essentially toll-free chat rooms, open to anybody with a dial tone. Before World War II, when many homes in a community shared a single phone line, more than a dozen callers could join the conversation on the so-called party line. These days, callers dial in and then shuffle through "rooms" of live conversations.

The party lines that Weigman frequented were populated not by the purring coeds of late-night TV ads, but rather by lonesome souls searching to fill some social void. Like a junior high cafeteria, the party-line scene was replete with social hierarchies and unnecessary conflicts. It was a place for techie teens, for overwrought boys looking for sex and settling for drama.

To Weigman, it was a perfect social outlet. He was born blind, his optic nerve atrophied and damaged. During his early childhood, he was paired with an advocate who taught him how to crawl and later how

to read Braille. There was briefly hope that his eyes might flicker to life: When he was four, Weigman's mother turned on the lights of the Christmas tree, and Matt told her he could see them. His mother, knowing her son had already developed an uncanny sense of hearing, thought he'd merely heard the click of the switch and thus made the connection. No, Matt said. He *saw* the lights. But while Weigman would achieve some ability to discern light, the world never came into view for him. He grew up self-conscious about his impairment, aware of his limitations and embarrassed by his eyes; he knew how their tendency to roll rapidly and involuntarily (likely due to nystagmus, a condition common in those with optic nerve damage) freaked people out. He didn't go out much.

When he was 11, Weigman discovered the party lines. Within a couple of years, friends say, he was spending days at a time dialed into them. Along with offering entertainment and a sense of community, the hobby appealed to his interest in the technological without requiring facility with a computer—something he had limited use for, given his lack of sight—and that rewarded his extraordinary sense of hearing and the supercharged auditory memory he'd also developed. It wasn't just the talking on the phone but also discovering how the phone system itself worked that excited him. Among the party-line regulars, he found a subculture of tinkerers, enthusiasts known as phreakers, who probe and scan telephone networks, developing hidden tricks and looking for vulnerabilities to exploit. Among the phreakers, Weigman was soon considered one of the best.

UNTIL THE 1950S, the bulk of the U.S. phone system operated manually. Calls were placed via live operators connecting the right wires to the right jacks, forming one long connection by hand. Over time, with the advent of electronic switches, networks were automated, with calls relayed through a system of giant call centers and then on to the intended recipient. A price of the efficiency of these vast networks was the loss of human gatekeepers. There were loopholes and glitches in the new system, and no one to guard them.

The phreaker scene first sprang up in the early 1960s, in the hotbeds of technological innovation—places like Cambridge and the Pacific Northwest. "The personal computer didn't exist then," says Phil Lapsley, who is at work on a book on the history of phreaking. "And the closest thing you had to a computer or a network was the telephone system."

Tech luminaries Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak, cofounders of Apple, were part of the early subculture. The pair jury-rigged a device that allowed them

SUPER PHREAKS

Four seminal moments in phone-hacking history.

THE WHISTLER

In 1957, blind seven-year-old Joe Engressia (who would later legally change his name to Joybubbles) discovers that he can disconnect phone lines by whistling at a certain frequency. His prowess at unlocking phone-system secrets eventually prompts J. Edgar Hoover to pen a letter alerting President Nixon and the secretary of defense to the threat he poses.

MAC ATTACK

A notorious phreaker named John Draper meets future Apple cofounders Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak, and, in 1971, teaches them how to build a device that emits tones that fool the telephone system into giving them free calls. Jobs and Wozniak then sell the instruments door-to-door, a partnership that presages their much more famous startup.

QUEEN PHREAK

Leslie Lynn Doucette is arrested in 1989 after leading a ring of more than 50 people in a voice-mail hacking operation. The crew racked up \$1.4 million worth of phone-service charges to unsuspecting corporations, and used the companies' voice-mail systems to set up an exchange for stolen credit card numbers.

ALWAYS THE IOOTH CALLER

In the early 1990s, Kevin Poulsen (now an editor at *Wired.com*) hijacked the phone lines going into radio station call-in contests and won himself two Porsches, two trips to Hawaii, and \$2,000 in cash.

to make free long-distance calls. In a move later cemented in phreaking lore, Wozniak once employed it to place a call to the Vatican, during which he impersonated Henry Kissinger and was nearly connected with the pontiff himself.

"We wanted to learn about the network," says Bill Acker, a top phreaker of the time. "It was this big toy box." Phreaking in its purest form was an impish pastime with discovery as the goal. "Phone phreaking is a relatively benign activity done by people looking to find out new things, people who want to play games and learn along the way," says Chris Bernay (a phreaking alias), a comrade of Acker's.

Both Bernay and Acker, as it happens, are also blind. Indeed, the scene in the 1970s was full of blind phreakers. Among the most famous was Joybubbles, the legal name of a man formerly known as Joe Engressia. A bona fide genius, he was seven years old when he discovered that whistling into the phone at specific frequencies could trigger certain telephonic switches. Before long he was whistling for free calls. His exploits, though, were short-lived: In 1971 he was caught by the FBI and charged with malicious mischief, and from then on the 22-year-old resolved to keep the tinkering aboveboard.

Phreakers who are so inclined can cause a surprising amount of harm with a phone. Consider the three blind brothers in Israel who managed to exploit an inactive feature within the Israeli army's telephone system to build their own phone company. Charging their customers and then using the hacked phone system to place calls for free, the brothers and their associates pocketed \$2 million before they were nabbed in 1999. Just last August, another phreaker wormed into the telephone network of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (which is part of the Department of Homeland Security) by breaking into the voice-mail system. Once in, the hacker made \$12,000 worth of calls to the Middle East and Asia.

Even for today's phreakers, there's still a thrill in merely getting access to something not intended for them. Something like the machines near the giant fish tanks at Kelly's Roast Beef restaurants, which monitor water temperature and noise levels and offer a menu of reports and 15-second live audio feeds through a phone system accessible to Kelly's employees—and to the curious phreakers who dial in as well. Phreakers make such finds by scanning—dialing numbers sequentially until they stumble onto something interesting. It takes time and patience to do this. They have to work as a team. But they can uncover oddities like inactive intercept recordings from the phone companies ("We're sorry, but due to a mudslide in the area, your call cannot be completed"). The rewards can be as simple as that. A new find, some bit of uncharted territory.

Weigman knew this history well and revered the pioneers of the practice; he even spoke

to Joybubbles on occasion until his death in 2007. He picked things up quickly, and as he got into phreaking, his forays were harmless enough. He could remember long sequences of tones—10, 15, 20 at a time—after just one listen, which could be helpful if you overhear the tones for someone's voice-mail password, and then maybe want to log in to that person's account. Probing their systems for soft spots, he learned the phone companies inside and out, and held a mental Rolodex of hundreds of numbers and names. He started memorizing the industry jargon. Then he began putting it to use by calling internal phone company numbers and using the right buzzwords to get the operators to hook up free service for him. By dropping the correct lingo on the operators, he could also manipulate other people's service. Among the phreakers, this is referred to as social engineering. The FBI calls it pretexting. Everyone else knows it as conning.

The emotional connection offered by the phone means people can get hurt and manipulated. Weaknesses and faults are subject to relentless scrutiny. As the atmosphere darkened on the party line, Weigman came to regard his phone as a weapon to wield in his defense.

THERE IS AN ART TO IT. TO DO IT WELL, Weigman had to get into character. He'd picture the guy in his head. He'd become the phone company agent. An AT & T recording obtained by phreaker-turned-reporter Kevin Poulsen of Wired.com reveals just how convincing Weigman could be. In the winter of 2006, Weigman called the phone company posing as one of its agents. He wanted to get the service of a fellow party-liner turned off.

"How ya doing, Byron? My name is William Jones, I'm calling you with AT & T asset protection," Weigman says on the tape, running it off quickly, as if he's practiced. For the sake of

authenticity, he's chosen the name of a real AT & T security agent.

"I am actually working on a customer fraud issue. We need to write out a 'D' order," he says, using company-speak for an order to disconnect someone's phone service.

The AT & T worker checks the account, sees that it's paid in full, and wonders what the problem is. Weigman has anticipated this. "Yeah, we're looking at a fraud account, so...we're just gonna have to take that out of there."

Then, 11 seconds of silence. "You almost about to leave, huh?" Weigman asks. He's reminding the agent that they're colleagues, that they're just doing their jobs.

"How long you been with AT & T?" Weigman asks.

"Bout 13 years."

"Yeah, we just bought up BellSouth."

"Yeah."

"\$85 billion."

"Heh."

"Imagine what I'd do with all that cash."

"Oh man. Give me half a percent of that...okay, well, that will be off tonight."

And so it was. *Click.* Just like that.

box for him within its security division. When on occasion the company wanted to reach him, its employees would beep Weigman on his personal pager.

THE ENDURING APPEAL OF THE PARTY line in the age of the Internet owes a good deal to the real human contact a telephone provides. You can read passion and anger in a voice. You don't need emoticons to tell when someone is sad; you don't have to spell out to the other party that you're Laughing Out Loud.

In 2006, Weigman met his girlfriend, Chastity, through a party line called "Jackie Donut." Though they've never met in person, the party lines have helped them sustain a relationship for two and a half years. Chastity had known of Weigman before they spoke and had heard of his phreaking skills, of how he'd once procured Eminem's cell-phone number, which she thought was pretty cool. But the emotional connection offered by the phone also means people can get hurt and manipulated. Weaknesses and faults are subject to relentless scrutiny. For Weigman, this meant insults about his blindness. As the atmosphere darkened on the Jackie Donut line—and on other lines he frequented, including "Seattle Donut" and "Boston Loach"—he came to regard his phone as a weapon to wield in his defense.

There were always pranks on the party lines; they're ingrained in the broader hacker ethos. But by 2004 things had progressed from the childish (like ordering food to be delivered to a rival's house) to the downright mean (shutting off a phone line) to the flat-out nasty. A party-liner from New York state who goes by the name Nunya was a frequent target. She admits that she poked her tormentors, though. She's got a mouth, she says. Before long, the phreakers' prank orders had gotten her blacklisted at all the pizza places in town. By her count, their hoax calls resulted in two visits from a tow company, two from the fire department, and three from the cops. (As a precautionary measure, she began leaving a note posted on her door notifying responding officers that it was unlocked, so they wouldn't feel the need to break it down.) Her landlord was threatened and harassed in an effort to get her evicted. But by far the most frequent calls were those that involved her kids. "They told social services that my children were outside eating out of garbage cans. Then they said that I

was a prostitute and that my kids were outside on the porch while I'm inside with my johns."

It's impossible to pin down exactly who was responsible for which phone assault, mostly because all the offenders claimed responsibility for everything, not unlike the way every jihadist with an e-mail account proclaims triumph when a bomb goes off. The phreakers would boast of their attacks, playing recordings of the hoax calls to one another over the phone as a kind of audio trophy. Everyone on the party lines knew the usual suspects, Weigman among them.

"He was a miserable kid that messed with everybody," one party-liner wrote in an e-mail. And while Nunya taunted the other phreakers, she kept her distance from Weigman. "I sense[d] he was crazy enough to do anything," she says.

"He was a force to be reckoned with on the phone," says Daniels. "He was feared by grown men and women. I'm saying *feared*. Like, 'Please, I'll do whatever you say.' And I don't mean by a few people, I mean by masses of people. Because he was that ruthless."

Daniels says that as the trouble escalated, so did Weigman's intolerance of being taken lightly, of being dismissed for his age or his disability. "I think what made him mad is when he'd run into other phreakers who didn't really know him and they would...try to belittle him. Say, like, 'Oh, you're just a little blind punk-ass kid.' That would enrage him. He'd go from nice to naughty real fast."

Nunya said Weigman never harassed her personally. Everyone else did, though. She was an easy target because the misfits had her information—real name, address, phone number. This is why every party-liner calls in under an alias: Your identity is your Achilles' heel. If the phreakers got hold of your information, you were in their control. All it took was one piece of data, and they could use a commercial research database or work their social-engineering magic to pull the rest of your identity from the phone company. And once they had that, they could force you to do anything, from aiding in the harassment of other callers to the ultimate humiliation. "No phone sex, no dial tone" was allegedly a favorite phrase of party-liner Stuart Rosoff. By most

out&about

(FEBRUARY)



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accounts, Rosoff was one of the worst menaces to fellow party-liners. According to Chastity, Rosoff (who went by the handle Michael Knight) pressed Weigman repeatedly for her personal information, but Weigman refused to comply.

In early 2007, someone allegedly called the Massachusetts Department of Social Services and said that they'd witnessed a sexual assault at Weigman's home involving Weigman's infant sister. As a clincher, the caller reportedly added that there was a crack pipe in the house. When DSS paid Weigman's horrified mother a visit, she told the caseworkers they'd been lied to. The incident enraged Weigman, who was so convinced there were more plots forming against him that he stopped going to school so he could stay at home and monitor the party lines.

By now, the phreakers were making increasing use of a new trick that allowed them to fool emergency responders by manipulating caller ID—as they did to Jim Proulx that night in Alvarado, Texas. Proulx's brush with a SWAT team came on account of his daughter Stephanie, who no longer even lived with him. She was reportedly a brash presence on the party line, mocking the phreakers and daring them to action. So strong was the hatred toward her that the phreakers put aside the conflicts that had arisen during their battle for party-line supremacy and focused their efforts on putting her in her place.

Following the Alvarado incident, a \$300 prize was offered to whoever could pull another so-called SWATting against Stephanie or her family, according to an indictment later filed in a case against Stuart Rosoff and three other party-liners. Despite what you might expect, setting up such an attack is hardly complicated. For their most brazen gambit, the phreakers stooped to using one of the handful of online sites providing what's called a "spoofing" service, which allows calls to appear to come from any number you'd like.

A few months after the Alvarado SWATting, the Fort Worth police department responded to a call from the apartment of Stephanie Proulx. There was, of course, no emergency.

That's when Stephanie told them about the party line, the harassment, and the power the phreakers had to manipulate their calls. The Fort Worth police called the Dallas branch of the FBI, which assigned Special Agent Allyn Lynd to figure out what was going on.

PLENTY OF PHREAKERS EXPERIENCE that moment when the wall between life on the phone and its real-world consequences comes crashing down. For Bill Acker, it happened when he was 18 and was visited by a New York Telephone Company investigator, who had a few questions about some free calls being placed by a student at the Lavelle School for the Blind. Chris Bernay was 15 when the cops showed up. He'd been monkey-ing with 9-1-1 calls.

Matt Weigman had his moment in December 2006, when FBI agent Lynd, a 40-year-old West Point grad and Desert Storm veteran, knocked on the door at Weigman's apartment in East Boston. Lynd had served nearly a decade on the agency's cybersquad unit, helping at one point to collar a gang of hackers who were notorious for breaking into government computer systems and had once defaced the White House website.

As the trouble began to mount, so did Weigman's intolerance of being taken lightly, of being dismissed for his age or his disability. "He'd go from nice to naughty real fast," says a friend.

Lynd discovered that the SWATting hoaxes were more ubiquitous than he'd first imagined; ultimately he uncovered more than 200 incidents that had tangled up law enforcement officials in more than 40 jurisdictions in at least 10 states.

What's more, he'd discovered a kind of *Ocean's Eleven*-esque cast of misanthropes behind it all. There was the Financier, Chad Ward from Syracuse, New York, who would pay the crew to carry out the SWATtings on party-line foes. The Researcher, Jason Trowbridge from Houston, who would track down the target's information. The Voice, Guadalupe Martinez from the Seattle area, who would place the menacing 9-1-1 calls. And then there was Weigman, whom Lynd later described in an affidavit as the "individual responsible

for altering telephone services in furtherance of this scheme." The Phreaker. Lynd would not comment for this article because the case against Weigman is pending. But in documents to be presented at his trial this month, Weigman is accused of being the person behind the effort to mask the origins of the calls—a master phreaker, caught using cheap phone tricks.

As Lynd interviewed Weigman, who was still just 16, the boy's mom sat nearby. While they talked, Lynd's cell phone rang. As the agent took the call, Weigman listened closely, trying to pick up the voice on the other end. Almost instantly he recognized it as belonging to a Verizon fraud investigator named Billy Smith, with whom he'd had run-ins before. After Lynd hung up, Weigman asked if Smith was assisting in the FBI investigation. Of course, he already knew the answer.

A month after Lynd's visit to East Boston, the Voice was arrested. The Financier and the Researcher went down six months later, along with Stuart Rosoff. Last May they all went to prison, some for as many as five years. Because federal prosecutors rarely bring cases against minors, Weigman was spared.

To anyone paying attention, the message was clear: The game was over. This was a good time to get off the party line. To lay low. And maybe Weigman wanted to. Things had been different since he'd been getting serious with Chastity. Everyone on the party line said so. He was calmer, less angry, it seemed. He was telling friends that he was thinking about college.

But Weigman couldn't stop, according to Lynd's affidavit in the government's case against him. Maybe it was curiosity, or maybe fear, but he was convinced the federal investigators were still building a case against him. Relying on the skills that had made him untouchable on the party line, according to Lynd's affidavit, Weigman set about trying to break into the voice mail of the

U.S. Attorney's Office in Dallas. Lynd claims Weigman called party-liner witnesses and attempted to intimidate them, pressing them to stop cooperating with the FBI. Lynd also contends in an affidavit that Weigman threatened to kill potential witnesses and their family members, even intimating he might harm one woman's baby.

To make matters worse, in late spring Billy Smith, the Verizon fraud investigator, disconnected a phony account Weigman was using to make calls. It was infuriating enough that Smith was working against him by aiding the FBI, but this new affront crossed a line for Weigman.

According to Lynd's affidavit, after posing as a Verizon employee to get his phone turned back on, Weigman retaliated, obtaining Smith's personal telephone billing records and placing a number of harassing calls to his house. When Weigman's phone was blocked from calling certain numbers, he suspected Smith (who declined to comment for this story) was behind it. It was more than Weigman could handle. His girlfriend, his community, his whole life—it all required unfettered access to a dial tone. Weigman decided the only way to resolve the situation would be to pay a personal visit to Billy Smith at his home in New Hampshire.

WEIGMAN FOUND A SYMPATHETIC ear and a ride to Smith's house in Sean Benton. The pair had met on a party line in 2004. But they didn't really get to know each other until Benton showed up at Weigman's front door—a short trip from his place in Malden—in the fall of 2005, after Weigman had made some disparaging remarks about a friend. For a young man who showed a good deal of bravado on the phone, Weigman was sheepish when confronted. Benton, then 19 and four years older than Weigman, says he told Weigman he was too young to get caught up in this kind of stuff. After that they stayed in contact and by last spring were hanging out in person.

They left for New Hampshire on May 18, 2008, just days after their fellow party-liners were sentenced to prison—and just a month after Weigman turned 18. Weigman got the address, Benton pulled the directions, and Weigman's older brother tagged along with an ulterior motive: a stop at the Atlas Fireworks Factory in Londonderry.

Whatever plan they may have plotted during the hour-or-so drive, it fell apart nearly immediately. Arriving at Smith's house, they caught him out on his lawn. Weigman walked up and introduced himself. A look of concern flashed across Smith's face, and he told the boys to hold on for a moment while he ran inside. As he did so, Benton says, the trio conferred: This was a mistake. They realized what Smith was doing. He was calling the cops.

The police showed up in short order. When they did, Weigman told officers that *he* was being harassed, that he had come to discuss the Verizon agent's "vendetta" against him. In an affidavit later filed in court, Lynd says that Weigman admitted to having made SWATting calls, and that he said he was continuing to do so.

The young men were sent back toward Boston. Two weeks later, agents from the Boston FBI office swarmed Weigman's home and arrested him. He was charged with intimidating a federal witness and attempting to influence his testimony—the alleged crimes for which he'll stand trial this month.

To those who regard Matt Weigman as a protective son, a supportive boyfriend, a shy blind teenager who walks with his head down—to the few people who know what he's like in person—the charges against him seem almost comically unbelievable. Death threats against infants. Conspiring to instigate police shootouts. You wonder if even Weigman recognizes himself in the picture that the FBI paints of Li'l Hacker.

Not too long ago, Chastity took a call from the jail in Mansfield, Texas, where Weigman has been doing a lot of thinking. Chastity says he's got a plan for when he gets out—whenever he gets out. He wants to work with the blind, just like the people who helped him learn how to take care of himself when he was growing up. He told her that he wants to embrace his handicap and help others embrace theirs; he wants to teach them to be able to operate in the real world so maybe they won't have to create their own. As he has gone about this self-reflection, it has no doubt helped that Weigman, like all his fellow inmates, has limited access to the phone.

Freelance writer DAN MORRELL wrote about philanthropic venture-capitalist John Simon in the March 2008 issue.

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