

Spy or Nazi?

by Frank Robson
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Inside the murky past of Dan Van Blarcom - political candidate, Nazi infiltrator, anarchist.

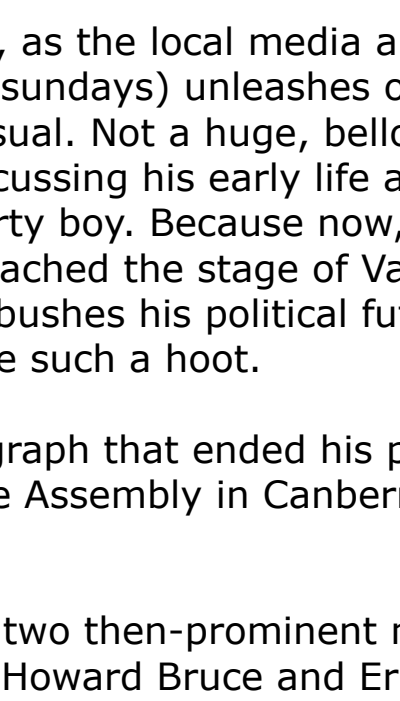


Mystery man ... a young Dan Blarcom in Canberra.

Political candidate Dan Van Blarcom was standing in a cafe field chatting to a farmer when his strange past finally caught up with him. "Are you the same Van Blarcom who was photographed in a Nazi uniform in 1970?" asked the journalist who had called his mobile phone.

"Well, actually it was a business shirt," replied the then-National Party candidate for the state seat of Whitsunday. "But, yeah, it had a swastika armband on it."

"Yes!" he remembers the journalist exclaiming on that January day in 2004. "I knew it!"



Cap'n Dan" Van Blarcom as he is today. Photo: Andrew Rankin

Van Blarcom (or Cap'n Dan, as the local media and boating identity is known throughout the Whitsundays) unleashes one of his big, piratical laughs. But not as big as usual. Not a huge, bellowing roar like all the others he's let rip while discussing his early life as a police spy, Nazi infiltrator and dedicated party boy. Because now, holed up in my Airlie Beach hotel room, we've reached the stage of Van Blarcom's bizarre story where his reckless past ambushes his political future. And suddenly, nothing seems to strike him as quite such a hoot.

The *Canberra Times* photograph that ended his political aspirations was taken at the ACT Legislative Assembly in Canberra in 1970, when Van Blarcom was 19.

It shows him sitting beside two then-prominent members of the National Socialist Party of Australia, Howard Bruce and Eric Wenberg, at an advisory council meeting they had gatecrashed as a publicity stunt. All three are wearing dark suits, white shirts and swastika armbands.

The photo resurfaced a week before the 2004 Queensland election and appeared around the nation. Within 24 hours, Van Blarcom - unable to prove his claim he had been working as an "undercover operative" for the Australian government - was dis-endorsed by the National Party and widely cast as yet another crackpot banana-bender with a dodgy past.

Van Blarcom hadn't told the party about his claimed undercover role. He hadn't told his wife of six years, Fiona (then about to give birth to their second child), either. When he did, he says, she cried for most of the day: "I told her I'd been recruited as an undercover agent for the Queensland Special Branch at the age of 16 and that I'd hung out with a Nazi group and pretended to be one of them. She was stunned. She said, 'Oh, Dan, what were you doing? What were you thinking?' And I had to admit that at the time I wasn't thinking much at all. I was just a kid and I had no idea what I was getting into."

Friends rallied to their support and Van Blarcom saw out the election campaign as an independent. Among his public defenders was his friend De-Anne Kelly, the then-Nationals federal MP for Dawson and Minister for Veterans' Affairs, who said Van Blarcom had been "acting in the service of his country". It was Kelly and her husband, Roger, Van Blarcom tells me, who first suggested he stand as a candidate for the party.

But the humiliation continued: "In the media, I was mentioned in the same context as Pauline Hanson, or as 'that Nazi guy at Airlie Beach' ... and that's still happening today."

At first, his efforts to prove his undercover claims met a brick wall. Queensland's controversial Special Branch (often used by Joh Bjelke-Petersen as a tool against his political enemies) was disbanded in 1989 at the recommendation of the Fitzgerald Inquiry and its files shredded. But copies of all Australian Special Branch files were kept by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) and during the past year - with the help of former Special Branch officer Barry Krosch (later an investigator with the Fitzgerald Inquiry) - Van Blarcom was able to legally gain access to ASIO files that Krosch says confirm "without doubt" he had been an undercover police agent from 1968 to 1971.

"His Special Branch file number was 2E.648," says Krosch, now a postgraduate student at Griffith University's Centre of Excellence in Policing and Security. "Everything Dan told me checked out through the ASIO files ... they also contain photos of him strutting about Canberra in Nazi uniforms and he was clearly sent there on behalf of the Queensland Special Branch."

When I first met Van Blarcom in the mid-1970s, he was known around Brisbane as Anarchist Dan. I was a reporter on a Sunday newspaper; he was (or seemed to be) a jocular, bearded leftie who ran a printing business called Planet Press and hung about with counterculture figures of the day. Thinking back, I realise none of us really knew Gilbert Daniel Van Blarcom. We knew he had come to Brisbane from the US years earlier and, like others in our social group, he held boisterous opinions and liked to party.

But we didn't know he had been a police spy. And we didn't know, until later, that police special branches in the late '60s and early '70s weren't really interested in dress-up Nazis but used them as a means of disrupting and destabilising their real targets: namely, the communist and anti-war groups whose existence in those Cold War days was seen as a threat to Australia's deeply entrenched conservative establishment.

After moving to Airlie Beach in 1986, Anarchist Dan soon morphed into Community Dan, unsuccessfully running for the council, becoming commodore of the Whitsunday Sailing Club and serving all sorts of other community organisations. I bumped into him occasionally and we shared a drink or two. But Cap'n Dan ("Aho!" booms his voicemail) never seemed inclined to talk much about his brief incarnation as Candidate Dan.

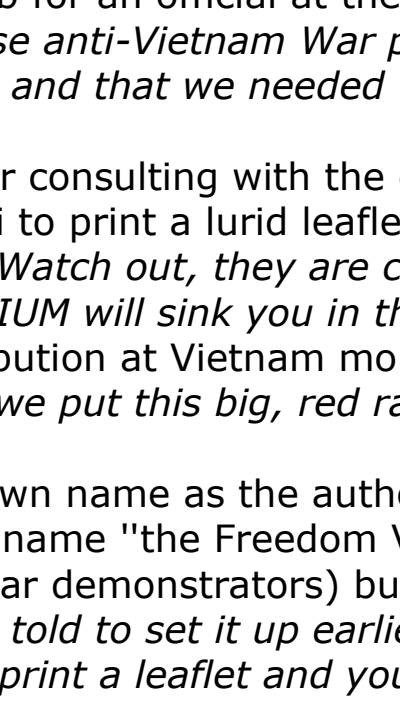
Then, in early January, he contacted me to say he could now prove he had been an undercover agent and wanted to tell his story.

He was sick of people repeating Nazi slurs against him but his real motivation for going public was his children, now aged 12 and eight. "When they come to me and say, 'Hey dad, somebody said you were a Nazi,' I want to be able to sit them down and say, 'OK, kids, here's the real story.'"

Born and raised in New Jersey, Van Blarcom arrived in Brisbane with ship with his parents and two younger sisters in November 1967. His parents wanted an adventurous new life in a warm climate but when the rest of the family set off by car to explore Australia, Van Blarcom stayed in Brisbane to do his own thing. Although only 16, the high school athlete was tall and well-built and could pass for 20.

He worked as a roadie for local bands, then went to Melbourne and got a job as a waiter in a restaurant where the drink waitresses eyed off his tight shorts. ("And if one of them took you home," Cap'n Dan recalls lustily, "it was your night to shine. Har, har, har!")

As he tells it, after returning to Brisbane in March 1968, he went to Centenary Park in the city one Sunday to watch a clash, predicted in that morning's newspaper, between a group of so-called Nazis and their opponents from communist and student organisations. Watching from the sidelines, he was approached by an odd-looking man with a large nose dressed in a suit and a pork pie hat.



Dan Van Blarcom was recruited by the then-Special Branch detective Don Lane, seen during his time as a Bejelke-Petersen government minister.

The man identified himself as Special Branch detective Don Lane and said he'd pay Dan to hang about with the Nazi group and report back to him on their activities. (In 1971, Don "Shady" Lane quit the force and became the Liberal member for Merthyr. He later switched to the National Party and became a minister in Joh Bjelke-Petersen's government; still later, in the wake of the Fitzgerald Inquiry, Lane was jailed for 12 months for falsifying his ministerial expenses. He died in 1995.)

Van Blarcom accepted Lane's offer and soon became a paid undercover agent, code name "Bobby Rimmer". Lane told him his main "target" would be Eric Wenberg, an organiser with the National Socialist Party of Australia. He told Van Blarcom how to set up a meeting with Wenberg and the teenager duly joined the fascist group. The first NSPA meeting he remembers attending was a celebration of Hitler's birthday.

When Wenberg moved to Canberra, Van Blarcom went with him. His moving expenses were paid by Lane and he was allocated a "minder" - either by ASIO or the local Special Branch - who used the name "Lee". Van Blarcom says Lee met him regularly on Canberra streets to receive his verbal reports about NSPA activities and paid him \$50 a meeting, for which he had to sign. At the time, this was more than he earned weekly at his full-time job in a Canberra music store.

Van Blarcom says most of the Nazis were fools but Wenberg, then in his 20s, seemed more "sensible". (This was the same young fascist, from Mackay in north Queensland, who was deported from the US in 1967 after a courtroom incident in which he leapt from the public gallery and assaulted John Patler, the man accused of murdering US Nazi leader George Lincoln Rockwell.)

Did Van Blarcom really see Wenberg as sensible?

He shrugs and repeats what he's told me from the start: he was just a dumb kid, with no interest in politics, caught up in the excitement of peculiar times. He says he tried to get out of his undercover role when Wenberg went to Germany to meet Rudolf Hess's son, Wolf (then orchestrating worldwide campaigns to have his father released from Spandau Prison) but his minder, Lee, induced him to stay by getting him a well-paid job at the Commonwealth Government Printing Office.

By then, Lee and Don Lane seemed to have abandoned their supposed interest in fascist groups. Instead, Van Blarcom says, Lee arranged for him to do a lucrative printing job for an official at the South Vietnamese Embassy. "Lee told me these anti-Vietnam War people were doing all this shit like spitting on soldiers and that we needed to do something about it."

What Van Blarcom did, after consulting with the embassy official, was use a press owned by a local Nazi to print a lurid leaflet attacking the anti-war movement - "Australians!! Watch out, they are coming. The moribific [sic] enslavement of the MORON-TORIUM will sink you in the red red mud of communist enslavement ..." - for distribution at Vietnam moratorium rallies. "Up the top," Cap'n Dan chortles, "we put this big, red rat."

The teenage spy used his own name as the authorised printer at the base of the leaflet. It also bore the name "the Freedom Vigilantes" (a group accused of attacking anti-war demonstrators) but which Van Blarcom says didn't actually exist. "I was told to set it up earlier [again, by Lee] but it was just a piece of paper - print a leaflet and you have the Freedom Vigilantes ... but they never existed, except as some sort of [rallying cry]. Har, har, har!"

By this time, Van Blarcom was also doing freelance printing jobs for other far-right individuals from the Social Credit Party and the League of Rights, whose members often mingled with NSPA followers.

He says that in early 1971 he returned to Brisbane and told Lane he no longer wanted to be an undercover agent. "He said that was OK and that he was going to run for Parliament anyway. And that was it: I was no longer an agent."

But Special Branch-ASIO files continued to record Van Blarcom's movements and activities until 1979. During that period he went to Perth and lived with members of the WA Anarchist Federation, then spent two years overseas before returning in 1975 and setting up Planet Press in Brisbane.

In January 1972, newspapers reported that Eric Wenberg had been killed in a car accident in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe).

Not long afterwards, ASIO-Special Branch reports began referring to claims from another NSPA member that Wenberg may have faked his death and assumed a false identity, and that Van Blarcom (who went overseas in 1973) was a "close, personal friend" of Wenberg's and may have left Australia to meet up with him. Van Blarcom shows me these references in the ASIO documents he has obtained. He laughs off the claims. "There was talk that Wenberg had a lot of money with him when he died," he says, "and that this had come from the so-called Nazi gold. But it was all just typical of the paranoid bullshit that swirled about everywhere in those days."

Wenberg sent me a beer stein once and a brass swastika from India with a note saying, 'F---, there's swastikas everywhere over here.' And that was the last I heard from him. Were we 'close, personal friends'? No way.

"Did I meet up with him somewhere and share in the Nazi gold? Get real. I went to Mexico, among other places, but the only gold I was interested in then was Acapulco gold [cannabis]. Har, har, har!"

From the outset, Van Blarcom undertook to tell his story accurately and omit nothing of importance. But he didn't quite manage that.

In 1975, our restless mystery man joined something called the Libertine Socialist Party, a Brisbane anarchist group led by Brian Laver (Rod Laver's cousin). Still a political activist, Laver tells me Van Blarcom claimed at the time to have been a "committed fascist" who had experienced a change of heart.

"I still believe Dan was telling the truth about that," Laver says. "He gave us an amazing amount of information and files about the fascist movement in Australia which was very useful to us. Of course, he didn't tell us back then that he had been a Special Branch agent. We only found out about that in 2004, when he was dis-endorsed, and it was quite a shock."

Van Blarcom hadn't mentioned any of this to me. When questioned about it, he blithely changed his story, saying he hadn't really been a political innocent when Don Lane recruited him as a spy but "politically an anti-communist, like most of the community back then ... and I'm still anti-communist". And he hadn't really been puzzled by Don Lane's interest in Nazis, as he had told me, but in fact realised quickly that intelligence agencies were using fascist volatility against communist and anti-war organisations.

Why did he tell Laver he had been a committed fascist?

"Because it was better than saying I'd been a Special Branch agent. Laver knew I'd been hanging out with Wenberg, so I had to say something to justify that."

But why would an anti-communist, who insists he was no longer a police spy, go to such bother to join a bunch of anarchists?
"Because they had girls with nice tits. Har, har, har!"

And that, for the time being, seems to be Spy Dan/Anarchist Dan/Community Dan/Candidate Dan and Cap'n Dan's version of the "real story". Perhaps one day they'll all get together and work on the rough edges.

A life on the extremes.....
November, 1967
Dan Van Blarcom arrives in Brisbane with his parents and younger sisters.

March 1968
He says he is approached at a protest by Special Branch detective Don Lane, who will pay him to hang out with a Nazi group and report on their activities. He joins the National Socialist Party of Australia to monitor one of its organisers, Eric Wenberg.

1970
A 19-year-old Van Blarcom is photographed by *The Canberra Times* wearing a swastika armband during a meeting at the ACT Legislative Assembly.

Early 1971
Van Blarcom returns to Brisbane and tells his handler that he wants to end his involvement with Special Branch.

1975
He joins a Brisbane anarchist group saying he is a "committed fascist" who's had a change of heart.

January 2004
Days before the Queensland poll, a journalist uncovers Van Blarcom's involvement with neo-Nazi groups. The Nationals dis-endorse him.

Source: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/spy-or-nazi-20120331-1w52i.html#ixzz2FtnhJhh0>