



Montana woman battles terrorism in a big way

By Evan Moore, Editor & Publisher

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***Editor's note:** I met Shannen Rossmiller in July, 2004, when, as a reporter for the Houston Chronicle, I wrote one of the first stories about her one-woman crusade to catch terrorists. At the time Rossmiller was an anomaly, an unknown quantity who might or might not have been lucky in catching one would-be terrorist. Today, with more than 200 cases to her credit, she has become an accomplished sleuth and an acknowledged American hero. Recently, Rossmiller was responsible for the arrest of yet another alleged terrorist, one accused of planning the destruction of the Alaska Pipeline and the intercontinental pipeline in Texas.*

This is her story.

It began on Sept. 11, 2001, the day the terrorists struck the World Trade Center.

It was also the day that Shannen Rossmiller took a wrong step in the shower, a misstep that was to land her in a role as a one-woman defense force for America. Since then, it's been a long path of many steps for Rossmiller.

In July, Rossmiller is scheduled to testify as the primary prosecution witness in the case against Michael Curtis Reynolds, accused of – among other things – hatching a plot to blow up sections of the transcontinental pipeline, the primary conduit for natural gas from the Gulf Coast through Houston to New York City, via Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

It will be only the latest in scores of such cases in which Rossmiller has been the principal – if unpaid – undercover agent.

She hadn't planned it that way. On Sept. 11, 2001, Rossmiller, then 34, was perfectly happy as the petite mother of three and the municipal judge in a Montana farming town.

On that day Rossmiller, like other Americans, was shaken by the tragic events in New York. She was preoccupied that evening as well, when she stepped into a newly remodeled shower in her home and fell, breaking her pelvis. And, for the next six weeks, Rossmiller was confined to her bed, faced with a television that carried the constant reminder of what had happened.

"I couldn't avoid it and I couldn't help but feel that I had to do something," said Rossmiller.

She may just have been the right person at the right time.

Intrinsically American, Rossmiller was a former high school cheerleader from the Midwest who married a computer expert. The couple later settled on a wheat farm in the shadow of Glacier National Park, where they began a family. There, Rossmiller, a child of the heartland, was as passionate about her pursuits as her country.

Her first thought after 9-11 was to join the National Guard, a plan her husband emphatically opposed. Undeterred, she soon found a new avenue.

"I began fishing around on the Internet and I found these groups," she said.

Those "groups" were made up of violent Islamic terrorists. Their language was Arabic, but the photos of decapitated westerners on their websites left little question about their political sentiments.

Unable to decipher the language, Rossmiller began studying Arabic, taking two courses and immersing herself in the language until she was sufficiently fluent to write a convincing script. She studied the Koran and searched out the addresses and names of mosques and clerics to make her references authentic.

She began visiting the chat rooms between 4 and 7 a.m., when it is afternoon in the Middle East. Then, she began conversing – not as herself, but as an angry, Muslim man, one who wanted to kill Americans and was searching for others to help him accomplish that goal.

In August of 2002, she found a person in Pakistan who claimed to be an arms dealer, a man she called "rocket man."

“This character said he had missiles and missile parts for sale,” said Rossmiller. “I went about it pretty slowly, said I didn’t believe him.

“Then, I really couldn’t believe it when he sent me a picture of himself and his address.”

Rossmiller turned the information over to the FBI, but never learned the outcome of the case.

Next, as former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was preparing for his first visit to Iraq after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, Rossmiller learned of plans for a roadside bombing, targeting the motorcade route. She had no sooner forwarded that information than she learned of plans to bomb Western housing complexes in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Authorities apparently did not take her warnings to heart, however, and, days later, 34 housing residents were killed.

Then, in June 2003, while posing as an insurgent web messenger, Rossmiller was asked to scan and forward a scribbled note whose author was identified as Saddam Hussein. She forwarded it to the FBI in Montana.

Despite her activity to that point, Rossmiller had maintained her anonymity. But all that would change with the discovery of Ryan Anderson, however. Using the on line name Amir Abdul Rashid, Anderson was actually a 26-year-old Army National Guard Specialist E-4 who was a Muslim sympathizer.

As Rashid, Anderson began conversing with Rossmiller in Oct. 2003. He offered Army battle plans, weapons secrets and even tank designs to what he thought was a male Al-Qaeda operative. Once again, Rossmiller contacted the FBI.

In the Anderson case, however, her exclusive information was crucial and it was necessary for her to testify. That testimony was impressive. On Sept. 2, 2004, Anderson was given five life sentences for treason.

But Rossmiller’s identity was exposed, and it lead to almost immediate consequences. Within hours of her identity being broadcast, a man with a Middle-Eastern accent called her judge’s chambers, attempting to learn her schedule. Rossmiller and her husband, Randy, obtained gun permits and began carrying pistols.

The man was not heard from again, however, and Rossmiller kept up her Internet sleuthing.

“That (exposure) is not really the problem it might seem,” said Rossmiller. “They (the radical Muslim groups) just don’t seem to read the news much. They keep up with the war in Iraq and they probably know more about it than (the public) in America does, but they don’t pay much attention to what goes on in this country.”

That would appear to apply to some Middle Eastern journalists as well. In Jan. 2004, Rossmiller said, she began conversing with a broadcast journalist in Afghanistan who was working as a “sleeper-terrorist.”

Believing her to be a messenger for Al-Qaeda, he asked her to forward a 17-page “Special Clarification” to Al-Qaeda leaders. The secret battle plan contained the exact locations of more than 20 terrorist cells, preparing to attack American troops on the Afghan border in the coming Spring offensive.

Once again, Rossmiller forwarded the information and special forces hit the cells.

This coup made Rossmiller’s potential obvious to the U.S. government, even if federal agents remained reluctant to acknowledge her. Though prosecutors have since confirmed that she has provided the FBI and the CIA with useful information, both intelligence agencies declined to speak publicly about her.

Still, some subsequent events can be verified through secondary accounts. Some of those include:

- The Nov. 2004 arrest of an Al-Qaeda recruiter in Palestine who offered to help assassinate moderate Palestine leader Abu Mazen.
- The capture of two Arab nuclear experts in 2005 who, independently, had offered to design an atomic bomb for jihadists.
- The arrest of a London-based terrorist who offered to help “brothers” enter England covertly.

In most of those cases, said Rossmiller, she is not told what became of the terrorists she identified and, she adds, “I don’t want to know.”

And, if anyone still doubted her value, her latest case should be enough to convince them.

In late 2005, while posing as a terrorist “banker” on the web, Rossmiller came in contact with a disgruntled American oil engineer who said he had already recruited a group of Asian Muslims to help him destroy key points along the transcontinental pipeline and the Alaska pipeline.

Rossmiller said the man, later identified as Michael Curtis Reynolds, told her he needed \$40,000 to purchase trucks to use as bombs for the missions.

On Dec. 5, 2005, acting on information from Rossmiller, an FBI team met Reynolds at a highway rest stop in Idaho and arrested him.

Reynolds now faces multiple counts of terrorism and other federal charges. His trial has been set for July 9 in federal court in Scranton, Penn., and the prosecution's primary witness will once again be Shannen Rossmiller.

The avocation as an undercover agent has its drawbacks, said Rossmiller, who recently left the bench and became senior civil litigator for the Montana Attorney General's office in Helena.

"I have no social life," she said, with a laugh. "But my son has just graduated from high school and my daughters are at an age where they don't need me all the time and I still feel like I have to do it."

The danger of exposure persists as well. Last Sept., she said, FBI agents evacuated her and her family after four Muslim extremists, equipped with GPS tracking gear, a laptop, and disassembled weapons, were taken into custody in Montana. The men had apparently crossed the nearby Canadian border in a rental truck, but lost control and flipped it on an old logging road - crashing just 20 miles from Rossmiller's home.

Once again, Rossmiller was not told of the fate of those men.

She accepts no pay and receives no perks for her efforts. Recently, she was honored in a small, private ceremony when a group of Middle East experts, including Philadelphia author and historian Daniel Pipes, cited her as an "American Hero."

"That meant a lot to me," said Rossmiller.

She has no plans to stop. In fact, she has become increasingly aware of the intensity of the hatred the radical groups harbor for the U.S.

"I don't think it will make any difference what the outcome of the war in Iraq is," said Rossmiller. "These people aren't going to stop hating us and they're not going to stop trying to kill us."

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