



Life as a superspy

UK's Mail on Sunday -- YOU magazine; 2/24/07; Lina Das

http://www.you.co.uk/pages/you/article.html?in_article_id=438096&in_page_id=1908

Shannen Rossmiller, an American mother-of-three, leads an unlikely double life: A court official by day, after hours she transforms into a cybersleuth to track down terrorists from her home – and she's had some astonishing successes.

Two years ago, a 26-year-old National Guard specialist by the name of Ryan G Anderson was tried and convicted of attempted treason for giving al-Qa'eda details of the weaknesses of the US Army's M1 Abrams tank.

He was given five life sentences and condemned to live out the rest of his days in a military prison.

The case, which made headlines across America, was particularly remarkable for the manner in which Private Anderson was caught - because the wheels of his capture were set in motion not by the FBI but by a 37-year-old housewife and mother-of-three from her home in rural Montana.

Shannen Rossmiller had trawled through radical online chatrooms and posed as an Islamic militant to gather the evidence that secured Anderson's arrest. And he's not her only success.

Since Shannen took on her rather unusual hobby as an amateur cyberspy, she has collated enough evidence to track down two university students who claimed to know the suicide bombers responsible for the 7/7 attacks in London, a number of al-Qa'eda fighters in Pakistan - and Michael Curtis Reynolds, an American now accused of plotting to blow up oil and gas pipelines in the United States.

By her own reckoning, though it takes considerable prodding to get this out of her, she has been responsible for handing over around 214 "packages" of information on various terrorist suspects, all tracked down since the September 11 bombings five years ago. And her work continues to this day.

Admittedly, Shannen is not a total stranger to the US justice system, having worked as a court magistrate for seven years, but this was nevertheless a significant change of direction for her.

"It was not something I had planned to do and it was never my intention to catch people," she says.

"I started visiting the internet sites out of curiosity, because I wanted to see what people were saying, to see if I could distinguish between people spouting propaganda and those who had an actual involvement in what was going on.

"Some people say it must be really exciting, but it's more like a duty - and a burden too.

"I had wanted to remain anonymous, but wasn't allowed to do so and therefore it has taken a part of me that I will never have back, which is my privacy. I've tried to stop doing it but I can't: I worry that I'm going to miss something and that other people will suffer and possibly die because of it. Maybe it's become an addiction."

She shrugs. "I try not to think about that aspect too much."

Meeting Shannen in LA, you are immediately struck by how ordinary she seems, and it is that very ordinariness which makes her story so extraordinary and compelling.

She is small and trim and pretty, with coiffed blonde locks more appropriate to her high-school days as a cheerleader than her current status as cyber vigilante.

A bundle of nervous energy (she has roughly nine caffeine fixes a day), at times she talks about her role hunting would-be jihadists with enthusiasm, and at times with a weariness that suddenly makes her seem older than her 37 years.

She has just flown into California from Montana to give a talk about her extraordinary activities, and has lost her luggage, which means she is on the phone every half hour to check on its whereabouts. If you needed an illustration of how doggedly and compulsively Shannen pursues her target, you couldn't have asked for a clearer one.

Her involvement started, not surprisingly, with the attacks of 9/11.

Having spent the day at work watching the events unfold on TV ("I asked a court clerk to locate the television and, as it was a pretty light day, we had time to watch."), she then spent several weeks glued to the news coverage while at home recovering from an accident.

"Throughout that time it was all I watched. It really made me want to do something constructive, although at the time I didn't have a clue what that something would be.

"Then one news report mentioned a radical pro-Islamic website called *Almeda.com*. I logged on and found it so fascinating that I spent about \$500 downloading translation software and stayed up all night reading the posts."

Shannen was instantly hooked. "I've never been much of a sleeper, so every day I'd wake up at around 4 am and just surf the net. I'd spend about three hours doing it before my kids and my husband Randy were awake, and I certainly didn't tell them what I was doing."

Before long, what began as a casual interest had become an obsession: Shannen even took online Arabic lessons to improve her understanding of the postings, and in March 2002 she created her first online 'character' so that she could converse in the chatrooms.

"My character was a male - there's no way I could make it a woman because no one would listen to her," she says.

"I knew someone who spoke Arabic so I would try out phrases on them first to make sure they sounded authentic. Once I'd created my first character, I managed to get into a site that needed an access password by playing stupid and getting a guy to give me directions, and then I got chatting with another guy who said he had Stinger missiles."

"I watched and waited, and eventually he gave nine stock numbers for leftover Stinger missiles from the Eighties.

"I was in no position to find out his legitimacy, so I put together a summary of our conversations and the information I had on him and submitted it to the FBI's public tip website. Several days later I got a phone call from someone at the FBI in New Jersey saying: 'We checked out those numbers and they do appear on the inventory.'"

"It was not a pleasant conversation. He was obviously grilling me - he wanted to know personal details such as my full name, age and social security number, and exactly how I had found out these stock numbers. The phone call seemed to last forever, and I was trembling, but if I were in his position I'd have been sceptical too. But it did make me think, oh my gosh, there really are people on these sites who are not just cranks."

Shannen half expected them to tell her to curtail her activities.

Instead she received a visit, one morning without warning, from plain-clothes FBI officers wanting to find out how she managed to filter out the cranks from those genuinely intent on terrorist-related activities.

"I think it helps that I have an imagination when it comes to creating my characters," is her explanation, "which means that I can converse convincingly with people on these websites, get inside their heads and hopefully infiltrate their networks." (Shannen has six characters who are currently "active" and 23 that have been "retired.")

Thus her vigilante activities began in earnest.

As her services were so unique, the FBI "had nothing set up for someone like me," says Shannen, who works unpaid on a purely voluntary basis as well as working as a civil litigation specialist at the Attorney General's office in Montana.

"But over several months I was assigned an agent with whom I directly worked and to whom I reported anything I found."

Randy Rossmiller had no idea about his wife's investigative activities in the early hours of the morning until she crashed the computer one day - a potentially disastrous state of affairs for Randy as he had his own wireless internet company.

"Just to show you what my priorities were like at the time," says Shannen, "I wasn't worried about his business; I was more worried about getting back online myself. I didn't want him to find out what I was doing in case he told me to stop, but eventually he looked at the screen and asked me what the hell all these Arabic files were about and I had to explain."

"He could see I was really involved and eventually was very supportive - he even let me go to New York to take an Arabic course.

"But he and I always thought my identity would be protected as I'd set up untraceable e-mail accounts (I'd always been very computer literate as I used to help Randy with his work). The Anderson case completely destroyed that anonymity."

When Private Anderson was arrested, no one, not even Randy, knew it was down to Shannen - only she and the FBI were privy to that knowledge.

"When I started to become involved in the whole terrorist tracking process, the FBI promised me anonymity, but then the army subpoenaed me for the Anderson court case, demanding that the FBI reveal their source so they had to supply my name which is when it all became a problem.

"I fought and fought against it because I absolutely wanted to remain anonymous, but it wasn't to be. I felt very bitter and resentful because our privacy was lost forever."

The public "outing" caused huge tension between Shannen and Randy, who was concerned for his family's safety.

"I would say it put our marriage in jeopardy at times," says Shannen, "and although we came through, it was very tough."

It was also an unnerving experience for Shannen - having discovered Private Anderson's activities in the virtual reality of the internet - to confront him face to face in court.

"No one told me how to deal with that situation," she says now. "I see witnesses all the time in my job but I had never been a witness myself and seeing him in the flesh was a real shock.

"During the second half of the case, his eyes never left me. When the verdict came back 'Guilty,' I broke down. I had never intended for anything like that to happen and his parents and wife were there so it was hard to watch the break up of his family.

"I put him away and I still feel guilty about that. I still think to myself: 'What if I had let him be?', but I have to remind myself that, even though he didn't end up harming anyone, he was wearing the American uniform and attempting treason.

By preventing something potentially terrible from happening, you never get proper closure, so you have to keep reminding yourself of the bigger picture.

"I struggle with what I do all the time and it's not as if I can go to a counsellor; I doubt they would have been trained to be able to deal with a situation like mine."

Shannen laughs at this but, hearing her speak, you suddenly realise what a lonely and isolating business hers must sometimes be. Not to mention a dangerous one.

Since Shannen's identity was revealed, she and her family - she has one 17-year-old son and two daughters aged 15 and ten whom she doesn't wish to name - have had to adopt strict security measures.

Their home is continually monitored by surveillance cameras and phone lines, and private e-mails are also screened "and I have no problem with that."

Moreover she has a concealed-weapons permit: "I live in the country, where there are a lot of snakes, so I carry a handgun. I feel quite safe," she adds, "but in July, four Muslims came into Montana and were stopped about twenty miles away from our home when they wrecked the truck they were driving.

"No one ever confirmed that they were on the way to our home, but the FBI made my family leave the house. That did scare me."

Now that she is in the public domain, Shannen gets tip-offs from all over the world, including one from a professor who suspected two students at the London Metropolitan University of involvement with the 7/7 suicide bombers.

She concedes that she has always been driven by a passion for knowledge and a desire to "do the right thing and stand up for what is right."

"I was always reading, always pushing myself academically. I graduated from school at 16, married my first husband at 20 - even though that lasted less than a year [Shannen's son is from her first marriage] - and I've always done everything young.

"I was probably a little burned out in my job when all this started, but I had always kept busy, writing briefs and doing research, and always kept up on current issues. So my investigative work was a bit of an obsession to start with, and it wasn't until I found a kind of balance that I realised I could be more productive.

"Now, I never do any of this during the day and I make sure I have time for my children and for my life."

Shannen's daughters maintain a blithe indifference to their mother's work, "whereas my son is very interested. I would never encourage them to do this, though," she says.

"I'd never encourage anyone. When I started, there were only about 800 - 1,000 pro-Islamic websites and now there are anything up to 6,000. The game has just become too dangerous."

It's no surprise that plans are afoot to turn Shannen's story into a Hollywood film.

If she is upset that her anonymity has been compromised, then the flip side is that it has afforded her a fame - and a following - that she might never otherwise have achieved.

Later that day, we attend a dinner party where guests include Daniel Pipes, a controversial Middle East expert, and Wafa Sultan, a doctor who has spoken out vociferously against the fanatical Muslim element.

Shannen, the guest of honour, has a couple of whiskeys to settle her nerves before giving her speech, her nervousness in front of the gathering providing a stark and really rather endearing contrast to the enormous skill of what she does.

Trawling through extremist websites and reading about "what they want to do to us and how they see us" is, she admits, "like taking poison, because what they say and what they intend to do is so hateful."

But Shannen can't allow herself to stop in case someone gets away.

"September 11 changed life for all of us," she says, adding, "but if I could trade it all in and get back to how my life was before, I would do so in a heartbeat."

And not for the first time that day, a look of inescapable sadness flits across her face.

##