

## EVERYDAY HEROES

From her home computer, Shannen Rossmiller helps take down terrorists.

# Cybersleuth Mom

BY LYNN ROSELLINI

**W**AS IT coincidence? Fate? Shannen Rossmiller isn't sure. But on the evening of September 11, 2001, after a wrenching day absorbing horrific images of death and destruction from the East Coast, Rossmiller stepped out of the tub in her Montana home, slipped and broke her pelvis.

For the next six weeks, Rossmiller, 31, a mother of three, was under doctor's orders to remain in bed. All day long, for stretches as long as 12 hours, she watched—and wept—as TV cameras showed the crumbling Twin Towers, the crumpled Pentagon, a blackened field in

Pennsylvania. But before long, her tears turned to anger. Who were these terrorists? And why couldn't our government protect us? Rossmiller was sick of feeling helpless. Her rage made her want to learn more. "I got radicalized," she would later recall. And that was the beginning of her new career: tracking down terrorists.

The small ranching and farming community where Rossmiller lives is located in north-central Montana, where the Great Plains roll up against the Rocky Mountains. Though the town has a library and bookstore, the selection on Arab studies was slim. So while Ross-

PHOTOGRAPHED BY STEVEN G. SMITH

millers remained in bed, her husband drove to Great Falls, 45 miles away. He brought his wife books on Al Qaeda, Islam and jihad, as well as a biography of the Prophet Muhammad. When she was able to sit up, Rossmiller logged on to alneda.com, then one of Al Qaeda's main Inter-

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net communication vehicles. The text was in Arabic, so she bought some translation software.

By early 2002, Rossmiller was back at her \$27,000-a-year job as a municipal court judge. But at three o'clock most mornings, while her family slept, she crept out of bed and sat at the computer. She scrolled through the words of hatred, the calls for violence, the sickening images of blood and gore. And gradually, an idea took form. Why couldn't she infiltrate Al Qaeda's network by posing as a member? That way, she could learn more about the jihadists and their schemes for vengeance.

A slim, blond ex-cheerleader who was once named Miss Congeniality in a local scholarship pageant, Rossmiller was not an obvious choice for a cybersleuth. But criminal behavior had always fascinated her—as a girl, while others read teen romances, young Shannen devoured articles

about serial killers. With a degree in criminal justice and paralegal studies, she speaks French, Spanish and German, and had signed up for an online course in Arabic.

One night, she dared herself to post a message on a Saudi Arabian Internet forum known for its violent anti-American content.

Within a few months, Rossmiller had begun to establish contacts among the mujahedin, the brotherhood fighting for jihad. She could entice would-be terrorists into e-mail "conversations," she realized, by promising money and weapons to support jihad. Maybe her efforts could even foil their plans and lead to their capture.

In August 2002, she convinced a Pakistani arms dealer that she was interested in buying weapons. When he offered to sell her U.S. Stinger missiles, she turned the information over to the FBI.

The following year, posing as an Algerian member of Al Qaeda, she spotted a man writing in English in another Arab forum. "Just curious," he wrote, replying to Rossmiller's e-mail, "would there be any chance a brother who might be on the wrong side at the present could defect?" In a series of 30 e-mail exchanges, Rossmiller established that the man was Spec. Ryan G. Anderson, a National Guardsman stationed at Fort Lewis, Washington. A Muslim convert, Anderson was on his way to Iraq and wanted to sell secrets of

weapons vulnerabilities and information about troops to Al Qaeda.

Rossmiller turned over her information to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. She was a central witness at Anderson's court-martial. He was convicted of treason and is serving a life sentence.

By now, she had created a handful of radical Muslim identities with names like Mohammed, Ahmed and Khalid. Rossmiller did her homework carefully. She gave each persona an actual street address in Pakistan or elsewhere, and learned the names of local spiritual leaders and the location of their mosques. She set the date and time on her e-mails to coordinate with "home" for each identity. A pop-up screen cued her not to send messages during the time set aside for prayer.

As a result, she has supplied government agents with hundreds of e-mails and backgrounds on dozens of foreign terrorist suspects. In one case, she believes her information led to the capture of an Al Qaeda cell planning to attack U.S. troops in Iraq with chemical weapons. And although the FBI refuses to

comment publicly on Rossmiller's efforts, national intelligence sources have consistently verified the usefulness of her information in interviews with reporters in recent years.

But success for Rossmiller has come at a price. After her identity was disclosed in the Ryan Anderson court-martial in 2004, anonymous callers phoned her courthouse office with death threats. The FBI directed that she be put under police protection. These days, local police make a point of routinely patrolling her house. "We always keep watch on her; everybody does," says Deputy Carl Suta of the Pondera County Sheriff's Department. As for Rossmiller, she doesn't go anywhere without a .38-caliber pistol tucked into her handbag.

The threats make her nervous, but not enough to stop what she's doing. "With anything that's important, you have to take risks," she says. With worrisome stories on the news every night, Rossmiller is sick of the everyday threat of terrorism. But she feels better for knowing that her efforts might make the world a little safer.

#### WHO'D HAVE THOUGHT?

*A good newspaper headline summarizes the article. But with great headlines, there's no need to read any further.*

"Homeless Face Housing Shortage"

Waterville, Maine, Morning Sentinel,  
submitted by SHERRY GRUNDER

"Fatal Tour Boat Unsafe"

Albany, New York, Times Union

"Slain Pastor's Wife Says Little in Court"

AP, submitted by KAREN ROBBINS