



Angered by 9/11, Montana judge is 'out for the hunt'

Alfred Lubrano, Philadelphia "Inquirer"; 2/12/06

<http://www.timesleader.com/mld/timesleader/news/13849335.htm>

Posing as an al-Qaeda operative with cash and a desire to destroy America, a former cheerleader who grew up on a Montana wheat farm helped orchestrate a sting that nabbed an alleged terrorist.

Shannen Rossmiller, a 36-year-old municipal judge from Montana, manipulated Michael Curtis Reynolds of Wilkes-Barre into thinking she was a radical Islamist eager to underwrite his plan to blow up American oil and gas hubs, including the Trans-Alaska Pipeline.

Reeling in Reynolds during six weeks of e-mail exchanges, Rossmiller's male cyber-persona finally persuaded Reynolds to travel to a lonely stretch of Idaho highway to pick up a bag containing \$40,000. Instead, Reynolds was met by federal authorities alerted by Rossmiller.

"I feel compelled to do what I can and I know that I have an ability to do something," Rossmiller said in a telephone interview Friday night. "I'm out for the hunt."

Rossmiller began trolling the Internet for potential terrorists after Sept. 11, 2001. Stunned and angered by the attacks on the United States, Rossmiller read the Koran, studied radical Islamic culture, and learned enough Arabic to lurk in chat rooms and ensnare jihadists.

She had fractured her pelvis after slipping in the tub, and the convalescence afforded her the time to start her new avocation.

Since then, Rossmiller said, she has assumed the identities of more than two dozen male personae on the Internet and has been involved in "a large number" of cases hunting terrorists.

"Something in me changed on Sept. 11," she said. "It got me focused and I never wavered."

In October 2003, Rossmiller posed online as an Algerian terrorist. She befriended a National Guardsman from Washington state named Ryan Anderson, a Muslim convert who wanted to give al-Qaeda information about how to destroy U.S. Army tanks and humvees, court records show.

With Rossmiller's help, Anderson was convicted of treason and sentenced to life in prison.

An FBI agent in the Salt Lake City office whose area covers Montana vouched for Rossmiller's credibility, saying, "She's legitimate."

"I just do what I can and I hope it helps," Rossmiller said.

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Federal authorities say W-B man is a terrorist

Alfred Lubrano & John Shiffman, Philadelphia "Inquirer"; 2/12/06

<http://www.timesleader.com/mld/timesleader/news/13849119.htm?template=contentModules/printstory.jsp>

Federal authorities say Michael Curtis Reynolds is a terrorist.

The FBI believes that the Wilkes-Barre man tried to conspire with al-Qaeda to wreck the American economy.

Agents say Reynolds plotted to blowup the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, a Pennsylvania pipeline, and a New Jersey refinery. The sensational allegations, disclosed in a federal transcript obtained by The Inquirer on Friday, reveal a convoluted plot that includes cyberspace intrigue, an elaborate FBI sting, and a clandestine money-drop on a deserted Idaho road.

The case also involves a municipal judge from Montana who has devoted the last four years to snaring would-be terrorists online.

Reynolds, 47, has not been publicly charged with terrorism. But a federal prosecutor leveled that accusation during a December court hearing, saying that Reynolds attempted to “provide material aid to al-Qaeda” and that the case “involves a federal offense of terrorism.”

“He was doing it as a plan to disrupt governmental function, to change the government’s actions in foreign countries, and to impact on the national debate about the war,” Assistant U.S. Attorney John C. Gurganus Jr. said at the hearing in Wilkes-Barre.

Reynolds has been held without bail since Dec. 5 on unrelated weapons charges. A U.S. citizen, he is being detained in the Lackawanna County jail.

Reynolds’ lawyer, Philip Gelso, declined to comment. U.S. Attorney’s Office spokeswoman Heidi Havens said her office “does not comment on active investigations.”

Described by his former father-in-law as a “John Wayne wanna-be,” Reynolds has a string of bad debts and criminal convictions - including one for attempted arson.

His last known address was Room 205 at the Thunderbird Hotel in Pocatello, Idaho.

In the FBI sting two months ago, Reynolds was drawn to a meeting with a purported al-Qaeda operative about 25 miles from the hotel, where he expected to receive \$40,000 to finance the alleged plot.

The al-Qaeda contact was actually Shannen Rossmiller, a 36-year-old judge who lives in Conrad, Mont.

She was working for the FBI.

“Yes, that was me in communication with Reynolds,” Rossmiller acknowledged in a telephone interview Friday night. “But I can’t comment further.”

This is not Rossmiller’s first sting. She regularly monitors extremist Muslim Web sites, searching for potential terrorists. In 2004, she helped win a conviction against a National Guardsman in Tacoma, Wash., whom she met online.

Rossmiller met Reynolds online last fall.

Expose al-Qaeda cell

According to the government, Reynolds tried to disavow any intent to conspire with al-Qaeda when he was questioned by FBI agents.

In fact, authorities say Reynolds told them that he, too, was a patriot and intended to expose an al-Qaeda cell inside the United States.

“He claimed he was trying to lure this terrorist group in,” prosecutor Gurganus said in court.

But, Gurganus said, that doesn’t jibe with Reynolds’ e-mails, in which he said he needed to leave the country after the planned attacks, or why he said he needed a fraudulent passport.

Reynolds was serious about the plot, Gurganus argued, because in his e-mails, he said that he realized he could be sentenced to death as a traitor.

Since his arrest in December, FBI agents in Idaho, Montana, Utah and Pennsylvania have scrambled to piece together Reynolds’ background and gauge the credibility of the threat he posed.

“We certainly took it seriously,” said one federal official who is familiar with the deliberations regarding whether or when terrorism charges will be brought against Reynolds.

Credible tips

The FBI’s Philadelphia division, which includes much of eastern Pennsylvania and South Jersey, receives two or three tips or leads of possible threats each day, according to an agent here who is involved in terrorism work. Only a handful a month - such as the Reynolds case - turn out to be credible enough to launch full-scale investigations, the agent said.

Authorities said Reynolds’ letters, computer drawings and e-mails spelled out his plot to detonate trucks filled with propane along the Alaskan pipeline. This included “information on explosive devices, site plans and placement of explosive devices.” He also allegedly planned to blow up sections of the Transcontinental Pipeline, a natural-gas pipeline that runs from the Gulf Coast, through Pennsylvania, to New Jersey and New York City.

Further, the government alleges, he targeted Standard Oil Co. in Perth Amboy, N.J., as well as the Williams Refinery in Opal, Wyo. He was arrested not far from there.

According to Gurganus, Reynolds hoped that the attacks on the oil industry would “disrupt governmental function,” provoke opposition to the Iraq war, drive up fuel prices, and “lend to the efforts by al-Qaeda to terrorize this nation.”

He needed \$40,000 to carry out his alleged plot.

After his arrest, Reynolds was shipped back to Pennsylvania to face a single charge: possession of a grenade. The FBI then obtained search warrants for his desktop computer and his laptop and, later, search warrants for his Yahoo, AOL and Hotmail e-mail accounts.

Richard Danise has bitter memories of Reynolds, his former son-in-law, who, he said, eloped with his daughter, Tammy, in December of 1982.

“Stupidity” compelled her to marry Reynolds, said Danise, an ex-Marine who lives in Kunkletown, Monroe County.

Although he had misgivings about the marriage, Danise said, he tried to help the couple get started. He arranged for them to acquire an acre of land in Tannersville, Pa., to build a house.

Reynolds had big, fanciful plans, Danise said.

“I got the mortgage for him,” Danise recalled. “He literally wanted to build a castle, with turrets and everything else. But he had no credit, and he never broke ground.”

The couple later divorced, although Danise said he didn’t remember when.

Danise said the couple had three children, who live with their mother. Though the two have been apart for a while, Reynolds has remained in touch with Tammy, Danise said. “He’s never been out of the picture.”

Describing his former son-in-law, Danise said tersely: “He tried to be blood-and-guts.” He had an AR-15 rifle, Danise said. Reynolds also liked to play paintball at a facility called Skirmish in Jim Thorpe, Pa., Danise said. He even worked as a referee there for a few months last summer. The manager, Megan Mack, said he was a good employee.

“He’s a stand-up guy, very polite,” Mack said.

Said Danise, who was in touch with Reynolds for years: “I just washed my hands of him. I don’t know where he went. I have bitterness. You have no idea.”

Michael Curtis Reynolds was born in Mount Kisco, a well-to-do Westchester, N.Y., suburb. His father, Millard, now deceased, was employed in the business department of Reader’s Digest. A family member said that Reynolds’ mother, Joyce, worked there, too.

But his rootlessness in recent years belies his conventional upbringing.

He has lived throughout the United States, including Kokomo, Ind.; New Hartford, Conn.; Simi Valley, Calif.; Phoenix, Ariz.; Framingham, Mass.; and various places in New York and Pennsylvania. Reynolds also told authorities that he had taught English and math in Thailand and that he had traveled to Austria. From July 2004 until last spring, he lived on Scott Street in Wilkes-Barre.

The house Reynolds rented is a white, two-story frame with a small porch, a black wrought-iron fence, and a tiny, 9-square-foot patch of lawn in a crowded working-class section of the city.

Neighbors said he lived there with his mother, whom they described as an elderly woman who had lost a leg to diabetes.

About 6-foot-3 with broad shoulders and dark hair, and a self-professed computer expert, Reynolds was known on the block for working on electronic equipment in a rusted black-and-blue van that he parked outside his house.

Neighbor Tony Maslousky said Reynolds had strung nests of 70 or 80 wires throughout the van. He spent many evenings inside the vehicle, and had run an extension cord trailing from it to the house.

Sometimes, Reynolds would carry boxes of equipment containing electronic tubes from the van into the house, Maslousky said. In the back window of the van was an illuminated Tasmanian devil.

Soon after moving in, Reynolds accidentally slammed the van into Maslousky's parked car, he and other neighbors said. At first, Reynolds said he'd make good on the damages.

"Flipped out"

When he didn't, Maslousky asked Reynolds whether he'd be compensated.

"The guy flipped out and started screaming," Maslousky said. "We had to call the cops. He had no insurance. We never got the money."

Neighbors said that Reynolds told them he had worked at a nearby factory making metal hooks.

Some time in early spring, Reynolds disappeared, leaving his mother to fend for herself, neighbors said.

His sister came to care for their mother, and she was the one who discovered a grenade inside the house, neighbors said.

The sister, who described Reynolds as a “mercenary” to neighbors, called the police. They showed up with the bomb squad on April 23, records show.

Neighbors who said they saw the grenade said it looked as though it had holes drilled into its sides and wires running from it.

Reynolds’ current troubles aren’t his first brush with the law.

Grenade charges

Along with his conviction for attempted arson in 1978, Reynolds was convicted that same year of menacing, officials said. He also has unrelated convictions for disorderly conduct, resisting arrest, and breach of the peace - the latter a fight with his eldest son in Ansonia, Conn., where he lived from 1999 until mid-2003.

The grenade charges, however, carry greater penalties than the months-long sentences he has received in the past. Reynolds now faces three to seven years in federal prison.

Government officials believe that his crimes are much more serious than that, no matter how outlandish they might seem.

A former federal antiterrorism coordinator in Philadelphia said authorities could not afford to take such cases lightly.

“Before 9/11, flying airplanes into a building might have seemed like something out of a Tom Clancy novel, but now you have to take these kinds of threats seriously,” said Joseph Poluka, who is now a lawyer at the firm Blank Rome.

“You can’t treat these things as fiction unless something sounds plainly unbelievable.”

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