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Montana mother fights al-Qa'eda from her sitting room

Francis Harris; 6/26/06; London "Daily Telegraph"
http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2006/06/26/wross26.xml

Helena, Montana -- Radical Islamists may not know it but their global jihad has more to fear from Shannen Rossmiller, an American mother-of-three, than from a squadron of F16s.

The former cheerleader doesn't phrase it quite like that. That isn't her style.

Yet a summary of case histories and transcripts seen by The Daily Telegraph reveals that she has uncovered the whereabouts of al-Qa'eda fighters in the lawless highlands of Pakistan, shopped groups of would-be terrorists from Liverpool to Lebanon, tracked down an Islamist designing a nuclear device and much, much more.

For four years, she has alternated her day jobs of mother and court magistrate in the state of Montana with a night-time role as a hunter of terrorists. Mrs. Rossmiller first turned freelance spy after September 11th.

Donning a range of virtual disguises, she uses her functional, self-taught Arabic, and customised software that masks her true identity and whereabouts, to navigate into radical internet chat rooms frequented by real terrorists or any fanatic with a computer and a grudge.

In her first interview with a British newspaper, the 37-year-old said that at first she kept her nocturnal sleuthing secret: "I didn't want my family to know because they'd call me crazy and this was just too damn interesting."

Now she finds it hard to escape the world she has entered. Asked whether she seeks a way out, she said: "I've tried a couple of times to back off, but it just hasn't been the right time.

"I remember the time I screamed, 'Can't these guys take a weekend off?' But humanity is such a precious thing that you don't want to see [terrorist attacks] happen to anybody, to any country, any people."

She has proved increasingly useful to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which now supplies her with handlers, Arabic translators and security, in case the terrorists seek revenge.

They have reason to be angry: in America alone, the authorities have made several arrests based on Mrs. Rossmiller's work.

In her best known case, she secured a life sentence for a treacherous soldier, Pte Ryan Anderson, who was trying to transmit the weaknesses of the M1 Abrams tank to al-Qa'eda. It was when she was called to give evidence in that case that her cover was blown. "I didn't have the choice of remaining anonymous," she said, despite earlier pledges from the authorities that her name would never be made public.

On many occasions she has encountered terrorists overseas. Three times she has lured young British Islamists into unmasking themselves, including one group in Liverpool. The FBI passed the material to British intelligence, after which she heard nothing more.

She brushes off the possible threat to her and her family from terrorist reprisal. She pointed out that in Montana's little towns, strangers stick out and the locals are armed. "There have to be risks taken, otherwise you can't get anything done."

The FBI refuses to comment on her work and she has not been offered public thanks by members of the Bush administration. Behind-the-scenes however, intelligence staffers acknowledge her role.

One American newspaper reported that "federal intelligence sources confirmed that for several years she has provided the FBI and the CIA with useful information." Another was told "she's legitimate" by an unnamed FBI agent.

That has helped to make Mrs. Rossmiller a star of Right-wing internet sites, but she disavowed any political motivation beyond plain patriotism. "I'm not a Republican, I'll tell you that right now. But at the same time you get tired of seeing your government looking like a bunch of walking idiots."

Mrs. Rossmiller is understandably discreet about her current operations, but said that as the years have passed she has become more ambitious and made "her" fictional Islamists more senior.

But when things get sticky she can be ruthless. "I kill off certain identities, make them martyrs, so [the radicals] think 'so-and-so is dead'. When I've had an idea that's worked well for some time but things are getting fishy, I'll move him into Ramadi or Basra and have him martyred."

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Sampling of her successes (from 99 released files)

http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2006/06/26/wross126.xml

-- Mrs. Rossmiller poses as an al-Qa'eda figure to establish links with a senior Palestinian terrorist. He seeks ties to Osama bin Laden's organisation and proposes to damage the ailing peace process by assassinating Mahmoud Abbas, president of the Palestinian Authority. Arrested.

-- Mrs. Rossmiller offers the services of an imaginary jihadi as a courier between two senior al-Qa'eda operatives. She is asked to convey a sensitive document containing the locations and composition of 20 al-Qa'eda cells in villages along the Afghan-Pakistan border. Passed to FBI.

-- When an al-Qa'eda cell leader in Gulf area seeks outside assistance for WMD attack, Mrs. Rossmiller pretends to be working for the terrorist leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. The man boasts of battles with British and US forces in Iraq, claiming to have killed 20. His details are checked and confirmed. Mrs. Rossmiller arranges a meeting. Terrorist and nine associates arrested.

-- Three Egyptians in the US seek assistance to carry out attacks. Instead they meet a stand-in for Mrs. Rossmiller. Arrested.

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