

String of Bank Heists Helped Finance 'Aryan Army'

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Third in a Series

For nearly a decade, federal authorities believed "The Order" had perished with the violent death of Robert Jay Mathews in 1984.

Many believed the organization existed, once again, only in the fiction of William Pierce's "Turner Diaries" ...a make-believe game of robbery and genocide between the covers of a racist's paperback book.

Yet, as events were to demonstrate, "The Order" was only nascent — not dead. The organizer this time seemed an unlikely candidate, the son of a former CIA agent who was apparently sprung from jail to be an undercover agent for a federal agency.

His name is Peter K. Langan — or "Commander Pedro" as he came to be known by his colleagues.

Langan is said to have begun organizing his "army" shortly after his release from jail in August 1993.

How he got released in the first place is singularly curious.

Langan was being held on charges related to a 1992 armed robbery of a Pizza Hut in Lovonia, Ga., when a strange opportunity came his way.

According to a sworn affidavit filed by FBI Agent Kenneth C. Howard, Langan agreed to be an informant for the Secret Service in return for his release from Georgia custody.

That statement said the Secret Service was seeking information on far right-wing militant groups — in particular, one Richard Lee Guthrie Jr., a court-marshalled ex-Navy Seal and an old friend of Langan's from Maryland.

After accepting the deal, Langan was sprung from jail and set up in Ohio, where he was to cooperate with authorities in locating Guthrie.

But somewhere along the line, the agreement went awry.

Secret Service Agent Dick Rathnell summed up the fiasco this way:

"Our main interest was to find if there was an interest to harm the president or overthrow the government...We didn't know they were these bank robbers." For his part, "Commander Pedro" did locate his old friend Guthrie.

Soon afterward, the pair had a "safe house" in Pittsburgh, Kan., from which they are alleged to have begun a crime spree.

Bank Robberies Begin

That crime spree of bank robberies in the Midwest was so prolific that authorities likened it to the incredible record of the Jesse James Gang more than a century earlier.

Employing cheap used cars and disguises that included Bill Clinton masks, hard hats, T-shirts with FBI or ATF logos and even a Santa Claus suit, two gang members would enter a bank heavily armed while a third waited in the getaway car.

Then, while holding employees and customers at bay, one member would vault the counter and clean out the drawers. During these heists, the men would speak to each other in gibberish as they went through a well-rehearsed routine, trying to make those present think they were foreigners.

When finished, a member of the gang would leave a bomb at the bank with instructions not to activate the alarms. FBI spokesman Larry Holmquist said the pipe bombs left at the crime scene were usually small ones with either no explosives or designed to do little damage. No one was ever injured in the robbery spree, Holmquist said, and gang members often displayed a wry sense of humor. In one such episode, the gang left a gold pipe bomb nestled inside an Easter basket with a Twinkie.

The bank robbers also had a perverse sense of fun. When authorities did eventually locate the gang's abandoned getaway car, they'd often find it had been purchased in the name of various retired FBI agents.

Using a variety of aliases obtained from blank stolen birth certificates, the men obtained Social Security numbers and driver's licenses.

The new identification was used to travel widely between safe houses and motels, casing and robbing banks and leaving their gear and weapons in storage lockers around the nation.

They were cocky and not above poking fun at their pursuers.

On several occasions, the gang even sent letters and cartoons to newspapers mocking their pursuers. They signed themselves the "Midwest Bank Robbers."

But this past January, the FBI caught and arrested Richard Guthrie after a two-mile chase through Cincinnati, Ohio, ending when his vehicle crashed into a snowdrift.

Three days later, Langan's rented house in Columbus was placed under surveillance by a team of agents. When he emerged, the neighborhood erupted in gunfire.

He was later arrested after a hail of bullets from FBI agents, which Langan likened more to an assassination attempt than an arrest.

A pre-trial hearing later vindicated his assertion that he had never fired at FBI agents.

An FBI spokesman told media members that, "We had information that (Langan) wouldn't be taken alive."

Partnership Collapses

During a subsequent hearing, Langan denied taking part in any bank robberies and told the judge he wanted to be referred to as "Commander Pedro."

He alluded to himself as "just another innocent person caught up in the tyrannical legal system...Power to the people! Up with the revolution!"

Ironically, those rallying cries were the same used two decades earlier by black militants.

But Langan made it abundantly clear that he was a white militant — calling himself the founder of the Aryan Republican Army.

He told the judge its mission was to overthrow the government and "set free the oppressed people of North America." Separately, Richard Guthrie indicated that he wanted to be a bit more cooperative.

And after entering into a plea bargain, Guthrie's information led to the arrests of alleged fellow gang members Kevin McCarthy and Scott Stedeford near Philadelphia in May.

To members of the media, Richard Guthrie confirmed that some of the unrecovered money from the bank heists was "spread around" the white separatist movement.

He also told reporters his deal with the government included a promise to provide them with information about organizations "whose goal is the overthrow of the U.S. government or to engage in domestic terrorism."

But how much information the government actually got from Guthrie is not publicly known — and never may be. For just nine days after signing the plea bargain — and only hours after telling a reporter for the Los Angeles Times that he intended to write a tell-all book that "would go a lot further into what we were really doing," Guthrie died.

He was found hanged in his jail cell from his bed sheets.

Cause of death? It has been listed, officially, as suicide.