

The rise and fall of a band of bank robbers with a hate message

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COLUMBUS, Ohio — The man in the ski mask glares into the camera. He casually brandishes a gun, then a machete, then a grenade. He laughs, flashes wads of cash — and talks of an Aryan revolution.

Three cohorts in camouflage, armed with semiautomatics, join him on the homemade video. One plunks down a money-filled plastic pumpkin in front of the masked man, who congratulates the group on a job well done.

"Our basic goal," rasps the hooded figure who identifies himself as Commander Pedro, "is to set up an Aryan republic. ... Don't mistake us for cultists. We, ladies and gentlemen, are YOUR neighbors."

The group had a name: The Aryan Republican Army.

The government claims it had a mission: to rob banks to finance its goals and help bankroll like-minded extremist groups.

For two years, the brash band of gun-and-bomb-toting robbers zigzagged across America's heartland, authorities say, hitting bank after bank, wearing costumes and masks, tweaking and taunting federal agents. They wore FBI hats, used retired agents' names to buy cars and mocked their pursuers in cartoons and letters to newspapers, almost daring officials to catch them.

Ultimately, they did.

Last year, four men were arrested in connection with 22 bank robberies in seven Midwest states, netting a reported \$250,000 and nearly matching Jesse James' string of bank, stage coach and train heists.

On Wednesday, 38-year-old reputed gang leader Peter K. Langan, also known as "Commando Pedro," goes on trial on charges of robbing two Ohio banks in what prosecutors claim was supposed to be a means to an end — the overthrow of the government.

The trial comes two months after a fellow gang member was convicted of bank robbery in Iowa. A star witness there — he'll also testify in Ohio — was a former Aryan Republican Army soldier now cooperating with the government. The fourth man committed suicide last year after pleading guilty.

It is easy to dismiss these guys as zany felons given to political lunacy — easy, but wrong, says Chip Berlet of Political Research Associates in Cambridge, Mass., a group which monitors right-wing extremists.

"The fact they may not be cutting-edge philosophically or intellectually doesn't diminish the danger they pose to society," he said.

"Throughout this movement, there has been macho bravado and sophomoric, fraternity party-like stunts. At the same time, they have bombs and automatic weapons. It's a frightening combination."

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In the beginning, it was just a curious string of bank robberies.

About one a month in a Midwestern state. In Iowa. Wisconsin. Missouri. Ohio. Nebraska. Kansas. Kentucky.

A pattern began emerging. The robbers, at times dressed like construction workers, zipped in and out of the banks within five minutes. They sometimes yelled Spanish words. They'd snatch the cash themselves (so tellers couldn't rig the bags with dye bombs), then dash off in junk cars they had purchased with bogus IDs in the previous week or so.

They'd also leave smoke grenades and pipe bombs — usually inert — to slow their pursuers. No one was injured in the holdups.

The robbers had a whimsical side, too. In a December heist, one suspect wore a Santa Claus suit, shouted "Ho, ho, ho" to customers and left a bomb tucked in a Santa hat. In a March robbery, an 8- to 9-inch, gold-color pipe bomb was nestled in an Easter basket.

It was their political message, though, that intrigued authorities. The robbers stuffed a copy of the Declaration of Independence in the ashtray of one getaway car. They donned caps or bandanas bearing logos of the FBI or the ATF, the bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, the agency that led the fiery raid on the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas.

And in 1995, they bought a Ford Fairmont for a getaway car in the name of a retired FBI agent who had worked white supremacist cases in the Northwest. They abandoned it, leaving on the front seat an article about Timothy McVeigh, charged in the Oklahoma City federal building bombing.

Piece by piece — the anti-government rhetoric, explosives, imitating the feds — the puzzle began to take shape for FBI Special Agent Jim Nelson in St. Louis. It reminded him of The Order, a white supremacist organization that pulled off a \$3.6 million armored car robbery in California in 1984.

It also was clear to Nelson, who has since retired from the FBI, that the bank robbers had political motivations: "There's plenty of reason to believe they were very serious about their anarchist views," he said.

So he went public with his speculation. And there was a response — from the robbers themselves.

Several Midwest newspapers received letters ridiculing one Nebraska FBI agent as a "loudmouth" and nominating Nelson for an award for "honesty and demonstrating patriotism." The self-proclaimed "Mid-Western Bank Bandits" said they were "proud to appoint Jim Nelson as our new spokesman for 1996."

"They knew I had hit the nail on the head," Nelson recalled.

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If Peter Langan and Richard Lee Guthrie Jr. were, as the government suggests, architects of the

Aryan Republican Army, it was the culmination of a friendship that began when they rode bikes together as kids in a Washington, D.C., suburb.

Langan was born in Saipan, where his father worked for the CIA. His sister, Leslie Maloney, told The Columbus Dispatch the family lived in Vietnam, but moved to the United States when her brother was 6.

Then, she told the newspaper, her father died and her brother went wild. He was arrested for robbery when he was 16 and had been in and out of trouble ever since.

Guthrie, meanwhile, had joined the Navy but was court-martialed and left in 1983. Nearly a decade later, in 1991, authorities searched a motel room where he had stayed and discovered a pair of night-vision goggles that had been stolen from Fort Bragg, N.C. He also was arrested in a Kmart scam involving phony receipts and stolen goods.

In 1992, when robbers knocked off a Pizza Hut in Lavonia, Ga., Guthrie and Langan were suspects. Langan was arrested in Cincinnati and escorted back to Georgia by Franklin County Sheriff Hugh Roach.

Roach recalls conversations in which Langan told him he was an Aryan Nations supporter and "said he wanted to tie up the court system so it couldn't operate."

Kevin McCarthy, 19, was one of the duo's recruit — a former drug abuser and 10th-grade dropout. He was introduced to Langan by a Pennsylvania minister in the Christian Identity movement, which regards Jews as the seed of the devil, blacks and others of color as subhuman and white Christians as God's true chosen people.

McCarthy has become a government witness; his testimony has offered an inside view of the Aryan Republican Army's workings.

They wore bulletproof vests, carried police radios and used two getaway cars, abandoning one, McCar-

thy said. And, he added, they cased banks, with one member visiting beforehand and sometimes making tape recordings describing the number of tellers, the height of the counter and other details.

Authorities say Langan had asked Shawn Kenney, a friend he had met at a Christian Identity meeting, if he would like to join the gang. In fact, they say, Kenney accompanied Langan and Guthrie in 1994 when they cased a bank near Cincinnati and armored cars in Arkansas.

But Kenney declined to join and eventually he led authorities to Guthrie. They captured him in Cincinnati last January.

Guthrie, in turn, told police where to find Langan.

Three days later, on Jan. 18, 1996, FBI agents and police were waiting on a street in Columbus when a slight, red-haired man, stepped into his white Chevy van. It was Langan.

Nearly 50 shots were fired in the ensuing fusillade; 30 riddled the van.

Miraculously, Langan made it out with scrapes, small cuts and superficial wounds. Authorities said he was armed and carrying phony identification, including a U.S. Marshal's badge.

A search of Langan's van and house turned up more than 3,400 rounds of ammunition, semiautomatic pistols and rifles, 11 pipe bombs, five hand grenades, FBI hats, police uniforms, false IDs from nearly every state, ski masks, literature from the white supremacist Aryan Nations group and a Bible with foam inside so it could conceal a gun, according to the FBI.

There was more.

In exchange for a cup of coffee, a cigarette and a call to his sister, Langan told authorities about a storage locker in Shawnee, Kan.

There, they found pipe bombs, weapons, a Santa suit, FBI raid jackets and office addresses, and Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton

masks.

Langan was surprisingly talkative and cheerful. He said he wanted to be known as Commander Pedro. In court papers, he listed his occupation as a "revolutionary."

"I'm just another innocent person caught up in the tyrannical legal system," he told reporters. "Power to the people. Up with the revolution."

Guthrie, 38, pleaded guilty in July to 19 bank robberies; he was expected to testify against Langan. But nine days later, he was found hanged in his cell with a bedsheet.

His death was a setback for those who seek the solution to what is perhaps the greatest mystery left by these peculiar crooks:

What happened to the money?

McCarthy said he and the others divided the proceeds and used a separate share as living expenses. In the Iowa trial, prosecutors didn't indicate where all the money went.

But Guthrie reportedly said his gang had funneled money to white supremacist groups.

Michael Reynolds of the Southern Poverty Law Center, remain suspicious.

"What actions their finances funded or will fund ... we may have seen them already or maybe they are yet to come," he said. "The possibility is out there."



Langan

Guthrie