

## Five white supremacists charged in Midwest bank robberies

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PHILADELPHIA (AP) \_ A group of white supremacists robbed Midwestern banks to bankroll their movement, which teaches that people of color are "mud races" and gays should be executed, federal prosecutors say.

The five men \_ including Mark Thomas, a minister in the Christian Identity Movement and leader of the Aryan Nations in Pennsylvania \_ were charged Thursday with conspiring to rob seven banks in 1994 and 1995.

Three of the men were also charged last year with robbing 22 banks of \$250,000 as members of the self-proclaimed "Mid-Western Bank Bandits," also known as the Aryan Republican Army.

The gang's alleged ringleader, Peter Langan, 38, is standing trial in Columbus, Ohio.

Thomas recruited gang members at his home in Macungie, a small town in eastern Pennsylvania, the indictment said.

One recruit, Kevin McCarthy, testified at Langan's trial Thursday that the group robbed banks to spread its beliefs and finance terrorism against the government.

"We believed the government was corrupt and that it was evil," said the 19-year-old McCarthy, one of the five charged Thursday.

The name of another suspect, Michael W. Brescia, 24, has surfaced during the investigation of the Oklahoma City bombing. He once lived with a German citizen whom bombing suspect Timothy McVeigh tried to call 12 days before the attack.

McVeigh's sister, Jennifer, reportedly told the FBI that her brother helped plan some of the Midwest bank robberies and asked her to launder some of the loot. McVeigh's lawyer, Stephen Jones, said McVeigh was only joking.

U.S. Attorney Michael R. Stiles said Thursday's indictment was not connected to the Oklahoma investigation.

Four of the suspects split proceeds from the robberies and gave some money to Thomas, who planned but did not participate in the heists, Stiles said.

The string of robberies had puzzled authorities.

The robbers, at times dressed like construction workers, zipped in and out of the banks within five minutes. They'd snatch the cash themselves (so tellers couldn't rig the bags with dye bombs), then dash off in cars they had purchased with bogus IDs.

They'd leave smoke grenades and pipe bombs in the bank and in abandoned getaway cars to slow their pursuers. No one was injured in the holdups.

The robbers taunted FBI agents on their tail and one even wore a Santa Claus outfit to a robbery. Another time, they placed a pipe bomb in an Easter basket.

Thomas, 44, surrendered to the FBI in Allentown, while Brescia was arrested outside his house in Philadelphia as he

was leaving for work.

The indictment charges that Thomas, Brescia, Langan, McCarthy and Scott William Stedeford, 27, conspired to rob banks in Ohio, Missouri, Wisconsin and Iowa from October 1994 to December 1995.

Stedeford was convicted of bank robbery in Iowa and faces a 30-year term. McCarthy has pleaded guilty to three robberies and is expected to plead guilty to six more.

If convicted of the charges in Thursday's indictment, the five men could each get up to five years in prison. Thomas also faces an additional 20 years if convicted of receiving money stolen from banks.

Stedeford, McCarthy and Langan were also charged last year with robbing 22 banks of \$250,000.

Thomas' specialty is recruiting young supremacists, said Barry Morrison, regional director of the Anti-Defamation League in Pennsylvania.

"He has had a string of young people visit and stay at his home where they have been exposed to hate doctrine," he said.

Thomas is also head of Christian Posse Comitatus, a branch of Christian Identity, which espouses that Northern European whites are the chosen people, Jews are the "synagogue of Satan," people of color are inferior "mud races," and gays should be executed.

Morrison said Thomas took Brescia to Elohim City, a white separatist religious community in far eastern Oklahoma, where they met Andreas Strassmeir.

McVeigh reportedly tried to call Strassmeir twice in the weeks before the Oklahoma bombing. Strassmeir, who has returned to Germany, has said he met McVeigh in 1993, but has not spoken with him since.