

Thomas Indicted in Bank Robberies

Prosecutors say the Berks man helped a gang that pulled heists to fund their white supremacist movement

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Federal prosecutors yesterday said Mark Thomas of Longswamp Township helped build a gang of armed robbers that knocked off banks throughout the Midwest to fund their white supremacist, anti-government movement.

A federal grand jury in Philadelphia charged Thomas with conspiracy to commit bank robbery and receiving stolen bank money.

Thomas, its indictment says, "recruited young people at his residence....to rob banks and commit other crimes on behalf of the Aryan Republican Army," a name the group chose for itself.

Thomas, the 46-year-old Pennsylvania leader of the Aryan Nations, surrendered with his attorney to the FBI in Allentown around 2p.m. He was jailed last night in LeHigh County Prison after a hearing before U.S. District Magistrate Arnold Rapoport.

Meanwhile, federal agents spent hours yesterday scouring Thomas' Walker Road home for evidence. By evening, they appeared to have removed only a few boxes. Also arrested yesterday in connection with the case was Michael Brescia, 24, of Philadelphia. He and Thomas became the fifth and sixth defendants linked to the group, dubbed by some the Midwestern Bank Bandits. Of the others charged in the indictment, one is now dead, another convicted, a third on trial, and a fourth testifying for the government.

In an interview about two hours before his surrender, Thomas admitted knowing the defendants but denied any complicity in the crimes. He also tried to paint the government's key witness-- one of the bandits-- as an accomplice in the April 1995 bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City.

Prosecutors denied the accusation.

Thomas' link to the gang emerged early last year after agents arrested two suspects, Richard Lee Guthrie and Peter Langan, following a shootout in Ohio. Guthrie struck a plea bargain and named Scott Stedeford and Kevin McCarthy, both of the Philadelphia area, as accomplices. He also said Thomas had introduced some of the gang members.

The conspiracy detailed yesterday focuses on seven bank robberies between October 1994 and December 1995, though the group is believed to have committed nearly two dozen heists dating to January 1994, and collected more

than \$250,000. The indictment charges that Thomas supplied the group with false identification papers and a book "New ID in ZOGLANDIA", that explained how to get fake licenses and ID's. Among separatists and supremacists, ZOG stands for Zionist Occupied Government.

He also allegedly bought a van used in a robbery to lease an Emmaus storage garage for the group, and took from McCarthy's grandmother's house weapons and other items that might have been evidence in the robberies. The indictment contends that the bandits passed an unspecified amount of the robbery proceeds to Thomas "to further the goals of the organization and to purchase weapons, and other items necessary for additional bank and armored car robberies.

If convicted, Thomas faces seven years in prison.

The gang has drawn comparisons to The Order, a 1980s crew of Aryan Nations members and others who robbed banks, counterfeited money, murdered three people, and plotted to overthrow the government. The leader, Robert Mathews, died in a 1984 shootout with federal agents.

In his newsletter, The Watchman, Thomas has praised Mathews and encouraged others to follow in his footsteps.

Thomas said he met Guthrie, nicknamed "Wild Bill," at Aryan Nations headquarters in 1991. McCarthy, 19, was a close friend who had lived at his home in Longswamp. Thomas said he had also met Stedeford.

The indictment alleges that, at a November, 1994 meeting in Arkansas, Thomas introduced McCarthy "as a potential recruit" for the Aryan Republican Army. Thomas recalled such a meeting but insisted the discussion was unrelated to criminal activity.

"I'm innocent," he said.

Guthrie apparently hanged himself in his Kentucky jail cell days after pleading guilty and agreeing to be a government witness last summer. McCarthy then accepted a similar plea bargain and agreed to cooperate with prosecutors. (He testified yesterday in Columbus, Ohio, where Langan is being tried for robbery and other charges..)

Stedeford was convicted last fall in Iowa for his role in three robberies and faces a minimum 30-year sentence.

Thomas said he was aware of the probe and believed law enforcement officials were trying to lure him from his home in recent days to arrest him. So he called the FBI yesterday and arranged to surrender.

He also called the news media and by midday, as prosecutors in Philadelphia were detailing the indictments at a news conference, Thomas stood in his kitchen juggling several interviews.

"Can you call me back in five minutes?" he asked one caller. "I'm being arrested. Yeah, I'm being indicted for conspiracy."

He said he called the press because he feared agents would raid his house and harm him and his family.

"I was afraid that, if they didn't know the cat was out of the bag, they might try to kill the cat," he said.

Thomas also said he believed McCarthy, a skinhead he once described as a son, was an accomplice in the Oklahoma City bombing. He said Guthrie told him as much in July 1995.

"His exact words were: 'Your young Mr. Wizard took out the Murrah Building,'" Thomas said.

First Assistant U.S. Attorney Robert Goldman, who represented the government at the Allentown hearing, rolled his eyes but declined comment after hearing Thomas' remarks. And prosecutors in Philadelphia insisted there were no links between the bandits' case or its defendants and the Oklahoma City bombing. Internet postings and a civil suit by some survivors of the bombings have accused Brescia of being "John Doe #2," the never identified accomplice in the blast. Thomas appeared before Rapaport wearing a green shirt with his standard black jeans, suspenders and Aryan Nations belt buckle. With him was Reading attorney Peter David Maynard, who said he would represent Thomas only through his bail hearing.

Thomas asked the judge for a court-appointed attorney. He said he is a driver for the Austin Fleet Maintenance Co. in Trexlertown and is paid between \$1,000 and \$2,000 monthly. He lives on the Walker Road property rent free under an agreement with its owner, Montgomery County developer Donald Neilson.

"Yes, your Honor, I'm indigent," Thomas said.

Rapaport scheduled a bail hearing for 11:30am Tuesday.

Thomas also said he has been subpoenaed to testify in the coming days as a defense witness in Langan's trial in Columbus. It was unclear last night when Thomas would testify.

An ordained Christian Identity minister, Thomas repeatedly has preached for the overthrow of the government and attacked Jews and non-whites. He drew attention two years ago when reports surfaced that skinheads David and Bryan

Freeman, the Salisbury Township teens who murdered their parents, had been to Thomas' home.

Thomas said the Freemans might have attended one of his parties, but that he didn't know them.