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Separatist admits role in robberies

Michael Brescia will help in the probe of bank heists aimed at funding white supremacists.

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INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Michael William Brescia, a Philadelphia firefighter's son and former Eagle Scout accused of robbing banks in the Midwest to fund white-supremacist activities, pleaded guilty yesterday and agreed to cooperate with authorities.

The decision came as a surprise from a man prosecutors described as a hard-core member of the Aryan Republican Army — a man they said brandished a gun before a friend earlier this year and vowed to "have it out with the feds" if they tried to arrest him.

Brescia, 25, of the city's Andorra section, pleaded guilty to federal charges of conspiracy and bank robbery. His lawyer, Michael J. McGovern, said Brescia had renounced his extremist views and accepted responsibility for his crimes.

"After he pays his debt to society," McGovern said, "we expect him to have a full, meaningful life."

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Plea entered in Midwest robberies

PLEA from A1

McGovern said Brescia's political outlook was "tremendously different from what it was on Aug. 30, 1995."

On that day, Brescia and four other white separatists stole \$9,845 during an armed robbery of a Bank One branch in Madison, Wis. Brescia carried a homemade bomb — a bottle filled with gunpowder and wrapped with nails — into the bank lobby. He did not detonate the explosive, but did set off a smoke bomb before fleeing.

Besides pleading guilty to the Bank One heist, Brescia admitted taking part in or helping plan six other bank robberies in Ohio, Missouri, Wisconsin, and Iowa from October 1994 through December 1995.

A federal investigator said that if Brescia had not pleaded guilty, prosecutors planned to bring fresh charges against him in Wisconsin, including charges of carrying an explosive during the Bank One robbery — an offense with an automatic 30-year prison term.

In return for his cooperation, prosecutors have agreed not to bring further charges.

In addition, Brescia will qualify for a lighter sentence on the rob-

bery and conspiracy counts to which he pleaded guilty, said Assistant U.S. Attorney Michael Schwartz. Schwartz said Brescia will likely get a term of five to six years without parole, compared with 6½ to eight years if had he had been found guilty at trial.

A sentencing date has not been set. Brescia has been held without bail since his arrest in January.

Brescia grew up in a leafy section of Northwest Philadelphia. His father is a battalion chief in the Philadelphia Fire Department. His mother is a former president of a civic group in Andorra.

Brescia graduated from La Salle College High School in 1990 and drifted into extremist activities. While going to college in Arkansas, he began living in Elohim City, a right-wing Christian compound in Oklahoma.

After a falling-out with the leader of Elohim City, Robert Millar, 71, Brescia returned to Philadelphia with his fiancée, Esther Den Hartog, Mil-

lar's step-granddaughter. The couple moved in with Brescia's parents.

Brescia enrolled at La Salle University as an accounting student. He worked as a bookkeeper on the side and became president of his fraternity. He also hung out with skinheads and handed out hate literature, according to students and university officials.

In 1995, Brescia was recruited into the bank-robbery ring by Kevin McCarthy, a skinhead from the city's Bustleton section, and Scott Stedeford, a singer/songwriter from Ardmore who played in skinhead bands, according to court papers filed by federal prosecutors.

McCarthy and Stedeford introduced Brescia to Mark William Thomas, a Berks County truck driver who has been a leader of white-supremacist groups in Pennsylvania for nearly 30 years, prosecutors said.

On Jan. 30, Brescia, McCarthy, Stedeford, Thomas and Peter Kevin Langan of Columbus, Ohio, were indicted by a federal grand jury in Philadelphia on charges of conspiring to commit the seven Midwest bank robberies.

Authorities said those were among 22 Midwestern bank heists carried out by white separatists from late 1992 to late 1995 in which more than \$250,000 was stolen.

Prosecutors said the robbers targeted Midwest banks because they thought security would be lighter and their chances of getting caught smaller. Some of the money they stole paid for recruiting videotapes for the Aryan Republican Army, a white-separatist group dedicated to overthrowing the U.S. government.

In court yesterday, Brescia, short and boyish-looking in an orange prison sweatshirt and olive pants, cordially answered U.S. District Judge Ronald L. Buckwalter's questions about whether he understood the significance of pleading guilty.

The Midwest bank robberies bedeviled authorities for several years. The ring began unraveling in February 1996, with the arrest of Langan and Richard Lee Guthrie Jr. in Columbus, Ohio.

Guthrie's cooperation with investigators led to the arrest of Stedeford, 28, at an Upper Darby recording studio in May 1996. That led to January's federal indictment.

In February, Thomas, 46, shocked right-wing groups nationwide by pleading guilty and agreeing to cooperate. McCarthy pleaded guilty three days later.

Stedeford has been convicted of an Iowa bank robbery and is serving a 9½-year prison term. Langan, 38, was convicted in February in Columbus, Ohio, of several bank robberies there. The two are scheduled to stand trial Sept. 8 on the federal indictment here.



Michael Brescia's extremist views are in the past, his lawyer said.

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Inquirer staff writer Mark Fazlollah contributed to this article.