

Howe, Acquitted on All Counts, Wants to Help OKC Victims

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By J.D. Cash

TULSA - After nearly six hours of deliberations Friday, a jury acquitted Carol Howe of all charges against the former debutante-turned-government undercover informant.

Howe's acquittal was a major loss for the Justice Department that could have widespread reverberations.

Tulsa's most high-profile criminal trial in years lifted Howe into the national spotlight because of information she passed to the government about a bomb plot discussed at a paramilitary-religious compound in far eastern Oklahoma.

If it is later established Howe's warnings of the plot were specific enough to have averted the Oklahoma City disaster, the ramifications in Washington D.C. could be on a scale not seen since the Watergate scandal.

In the tearful aftermath of the innocent verdicts, the 26-year-old Howe said she intends to resume her college education and work toward a degree in law.

And with the government's efforts to put her behind bars derailed, Howe is expected to provide potentially explosive evidence to a grand jury meeting in Oklahoma City.

The grand jury is looking at other persons - still at large - who may have participated with convicted mass-murderer Timothy McVeigh in the Murrah building bombing.

Recently, that grand jury's spotlight has turned to Tulsan Dennis Mahon and others who frequented Elohim City's 1,000-acre compound.

Only two weeks ago, Mahon - an Oklahoma organizer of a group called White Aryan Resistance (W.A.R.) - claimed his privilege against self incrimination when he appeared before the grand jury.

Howe's information also could be crucial to those who are suing the government for negligence in failing to prevent the Oklahoma City terrorist attack. Howe's BATF reports indicate she reported Dennis Mahon and his side-kick Andreas Strassmeir were discussing plans to bomb federal buildings months before the carnage in Oklahoma City.

But in court, Howe's supervisor, Special Agent Angela Graham, testified that she dismissed the discussions of such a plot as mere rhetoric common at Elohim City, Graham herself also been named in a civil suit brought by families who lost loved ones in the bombing.

Elohim City first came into the national news after it was reported that McVeigh called the compound on April 5, 1995, just seconds after he placed a call to a Ryder truck rental.

A later story by the McCurtain Gazette reported that McVeigh was said to be looking for Elohim City's paramilitary instructor, German national Andreas Strassmeir.

Strassmeir has since fled and has been barred from re-entering the U.S. because the U.S. State Department says he is a terrorist.

Howe also told the Gazette that one of the three Oklahoma buildings Mahon and Strassmeir targeted was the "Oklahoma City federal building."

Adding to the evidence that there was such a widespread plot, the BATF's own investigative reports show Howe told them that Rev. Robert Millar - the religious leader at Elohim City where Mahon and Strassmeir were conducting paramilitary exercises - was also encouraging his "warriors" to strike against the government by April 19, 1995.

Both Strassmeir and Mahon have denied to the media any participation in the bombing.

Inexplicably, while government documents obtained by the Gazette clearly show that Mahon and Strassmeir were considered suspects in the mass murder, neither was interviewed by the FBI immediately after the attack.

Instead, it was over a year later - and after numerous articles appeared in the press - before the FBI bothered to contact the pair by phone.

Howe was indicted on March 11 - two months after her boyfriend, James Dodson Viefhaus, was charged with making a bomb threat and possession of a pipe bomb.

Only last week a Tulsa jury convicted Viefhaus on all three counts against him. But some believe Howe's subsequent indictment for the same crime was an attempt by the administration to silence or discredit her after lawyers for Timothy McVeigh said they planned to call the informant as a witness in Denver.

Judge Richard Matsch eventually ruled Howe's testimony irrelevant and would not let her testify.

Friday's stunning defeat for the government capped a dramatic day of testimony.

Early that morning, a former assistant director of the BATF was called to testify as an expert for the defense - shredding the earlier testimony of BATF agent Angela Graham.

Robert Sanders explained that during his 24 years of service, he had held every management, supervisory and executive position at the agency.

During testimony, Sanders said he had reviewed Howe's informant files and determined that her assignment to ferret out evidence of illegal activities at Elohim City was so important to the government that it was listed as "SIGNIFICANT - SENSITIVE."

It was bureaucratic jargon, Sanders explained, that denoted this: "An investigation that has potential national interests involved and that was, or should have been, monitored at the highest levels in Washington."

During an evidence hearing concerning Sander's proposed testimony, the retired official said Howe's reports "showed reliable and uniquely detailed information and no evidence of deception or exaggeration on her part."

Sanders also believed Howe's work was extremely dangerous and that she had reason to fear being exposed as an informant.

Other critical points, Sanders gleaned from the reports were that Howe had clearly obtained items from one of the targets of her investigation, Dennis Mahon, and turned those items over to her supervisor, Special Agent Angela Graham. It was those items, such as gun powder and cannon fuse, that Graham testified earlier she returned to Howe because they were not evidence that Mahon intended to build a bomb.

But when Howe was indicted, her attorney pointed out, the grand jury said just the opposite - that those components were evidence Howe and Viefhaus intended to build a bomb.

Also, Assistant U.S. Attorney Neal Kirkpatrick introduced evidence of racist-oriented literature found during the raid, along with photos of Howe in neo-Nazi regalia and books on how to make bombs.

Howe claimed that she was encouraged to acquire these items as part of her "cover." She said she continued living the lifestyle of a neo-Nazi in order to escape detection after her name was leaked to the McVeigh defense team by the FBI in early 1996.

"I had to go deeper," she said. Last Thursday, BATF agent Angela Graham testified that Howe quit working for the agency in June 1995.

Graham then said Howe was only listed as an "active informant" through the end of 1996 "because critical investigative reports concerning the Oklahoma City bombing would have to be destroyed if she were taken off the books."

Such an account by Graham was finally shot down by Sanders.

He flatly stated that the agency does NOT destroy investigative files just because an informant is fired or quits. With a courtroom filled with observers including the media and a large contingent of federal agents, defense attorney Clark Brewster called Howe to stand at midmorning Friday.

He then walked his client through testimony centered on her efforts to obtain evidence of illegal plans being pursued by the residents of Elohim City.

"Mahon," Howe recalled, "told me he would take me to Elohim City and show me how they train terrorists there." And at one point, Howe said, "Over time, I gained their trust and came to see that they were not some fringe religious group."

"I watched their paramilitary training and learned they were extremely dangerous."

Under a blistering cross-examination by Kirkpatrick, the 98-pound Howe was unshakable in her statements that she was not a racist and had no intentions of building a bomb.

And as for the literature and possible bomb-making components, Howe said she continued to gather information and evidence from members of the "movement" because she never left the government's service until she was deactivated following her arrest in 1997.

The last witness called Friday provided the trial's most moving testimony. That was Carol Howe's father, who read a letter that had remained sealed since his daughter began working for the BATF.

Initially, Howe had prepared the letter in August 1994 and placed it inside an envelope with instructions that it not be opened unless she disappeared or was killed.

Choking back tears, the retired executive worked his way slowly through the four-page letter.

Citing the reasons Howe went against her family's wishes and joined with the BATF to infiltrate Mahon's group, she wrote, "These people intend to start a war here in the next few years."

Then, after thanking her family for providing the money for an education, Howe said, "Now the ATF will finish up where we left off. They will teach me to be responsible and to take care of myself." During closing arguments, Howe's attorney at one point turned and pointed at the government's table and said:

"They ought to be ashamed of themselves, now!"

"They want to put Carol Howe away for what she knows, but they need 12 accomplices to do it...Don't let them!" Following Howe's acquittal, Brewster told the Gazette this:

"I believed the system could work for Carol and it finally did... She now can help the families of the victims in the Oklahoma City bombing."

Kathy Wilburn, grandmother of two children killed in the bombing and widow of grand jury co-petitioner Glenn Wilburn, attended the entire trial.

She said she looked forward to Howe's help, adding, "Maybe people will listen to Carol... finally."