

In the Matter of Kenneth Michael Trentadue Part II

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By J.D. Cash, Part Two

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When two members of the Oklahoma Medical Examiner's office arrived at the sparkling new Oklahoma City Federal Transfer Center (FTC) at 7 a.m. on Aug. 21, 1995, what they found in the infirmary was the body of a man badly bruised, bloody and his throat cut. Guards and supervisors at the institution were calling it a suicide.

When questioned in more detail by the medical examiner's investigator, Tammi Gillis, Federal Transfer Center personnel stood by their story that the subject hanged himself while in isolation. One even said he thought the inmate had tried to slash his throat first. It was a bizarre story even from the beginning.

Adding to the strange nature of the situation, prison officials refused Gillis access to the cell where the inmate was supposedly found - a clear violation of Oklahoma law.

Gillis was told the inmate on the gurney, with his scalp split to the skull in three places and throat slashed from ear to ear, had used his bed sheet and a couple of tubes of toothpaste to commit suicide.

Numerous bruises on the inmate's feet, legs, torso, both arms and back were passed off as self-inflicted, also, by the center staff.

Officials at the prison said they found the inmate hanging from a grate mounted on the wall in his cell at 3 a.m., during a routine inspection made by a guard on his regular rounds of the Special Housing Unit (SHU).

The SHU at the Oklahoma City facility is a high-security unit where prisoners are kept in solitary confinement, safe from other inmates.

Inmate records obtained from the institution reflect that the subject was strip searched before entering the SHU, 17 hours before his death. At that time, guards only noted a single blister on one of the inmate's feet and listed no other medical problems.

Inspection denied

After a closer physical examination of the body revealed a myriad of bruises and serious wounds, Gillis once again demanded an inspection of the cell for evidence of foul play. The investigator suspected that the inmate had been subjected to a violent beating.

Federal Transfer Center officials responded that a federal investigation was taking place and any investigation by the medical examiner's office would have to be put on hold.

Voluminous evidence would later surface, however, that proved the staff at the center were not investigating anything at the time of the incident.

No meaningful outside investigation was done that day by any federal or state agency. The staff at the center, however, tried to turn away outside investigators at the same time the scene of Trentadue's death was undergoing changes.

Records later would show that even before Gillis arrived to investigate the inmate's death, an Oklahoma City police officer was also turned away when he arrived to investigate why an ambulance was initially called to resuscitate a suicide victim.

Like Gillis, the police were told federal officials would take care of their own investigation. Later, investigators would discover that the ambulance team had been turned away at the gates.

Denied unfettered access to the inside of the cell, Gillis was only offered a brief look through the window on the door of the A709.

After a quick peek, the state investigator and her assistant left with Trentadue's body.

Records obtained by this newspaper indicate the pair were only on federal property 20 minutes that morning.

Trentadue held under

an alias at center

Documents obtained by the McCurtain Daily Gazette reveal a most unusual fact: Kenneth Trentadue was not listed at the Oklahoma City Federal Transfer Center by his real name. Instead, the inmate was listed as Paul Vance Brockway - an alias Trentadue used many years earlier.

And there would be more mysteries to emerge from the Oklahoma City Federal Transfer Center as Trentadue's death came under scrutiny.

According to Salt Lake City attorney Jesse Trentadue, his mother received notification of his brother's death on the morning of Aug. 21 from Marie Carter, acting warden at the Oklahoma City facility.

"After they told my mother that Kenny had killed himself, they said they wanted to cremate the body and send the ashes to us. My mother refused," Trentadue told this newspaper.

"I knew this was all bull---! Kenny had been on the phone with us a day or so earlier and was fine. He had no reason to kill himself. He hadn't committed a serious crime. He had been working, taking care of his family. He messed up with his parole officer, but was not robbing banks. Kenny was just going to appear before a hearing on a minor parole violation. He had a new baby and a wife to come back home to. If he had to serve a few weeks on the parole violation, no big deal."

Deep suspicions

The Trentadue family was not the only group to find the government's suicide story hard to believe.

From the outset, the Oklahoma State Medical Examiner's staff was highly skeptical.

The day following Trentadue's death, an Oklahoma City FBI agent received a murder complaint from Kevin Rowland, the medical examiner's lead investigator.

Once the medical examiner's office completed the Trentadue autopsy, they found the suicide claim very unlikely.

According to former FBI special agent Jeff Jenkins, Rowland told him in a telephone call that the inmate's wounds were inconsistent with a suicide and were likely the result of a murder.

In a Dec. 6, 1995, internal FBI memo marked NOT APPROPRIATE FOR DISSEMINATION TO THE PUBLIC, special agent Jenkins advised his superiors that the Oklahoma Medical Examiner's official findings would, "...likely rule that Trentadue's death was a homicide."

The memo went on to advise the Asst. Special Agent in Charge of the Oklahoma City FBI office that efforts were being made by Federal Transfer Center personnel to avoid polygraph examinations concerning the inmate's death.

"SA Jenkins stated that the new warden at the FTC will not allow any of the guards/officials to take polygraph examinations. The prison guards are represented by a strong union which will probably also object to their members taking a polygraph."

Destroying evidence?

Material obtained by this newspaper reveals that destruction of potential evidence by guards and officials at the FTC in Oklahoma City began in earnest on Aug. 21, 1995 - moments after Kenneth Trentadue took his last breath.

As soon as the medical examiner's investigator left with Trentadue's body, a team of guards and inmates began cleaning all the blood from the cell, before the local FBI or Bureau of Prisons special investigators flying in from Texas could conduct outside investigations as required by law.

In a sealed report of the investigation obtained by this newspaper, the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) for the Department of Justice determined that staff members at the Oklahoma City Federal Transfer Center immediately destroyed crime scene evidence and several months later lied about what they had done to federal investigators and grand jurors.

The man responsible for securing Trentadue's cell, Lt. Kenneth W. Freeman, was charged under law with notifying the FBI of the inmate's suspicious death so agents could investigate the scene.

Freeman was the special investigative supervisor responsible for conducting the initial investigation of Trentadue's death.

The Office of Inspector General found that Freeman did not immediately contact the FBI as the law required.

Instead, the OIG determined that center officials set about the process of cleaning the cell after learning that a special team of Bureau of Prisons investigators were winging their way to Oklahoma City for an internal investigation and could arrive at any moment.

Dated November 1999, the OIG report states:

"Later that morning (Aug. 21, 1995), Associate Warden Flowers decided that Trentadue's cell should be cleaned. Flowers told the OIG that when he asked Freeman during the morning of Aug. 21 if the FBI had been notified, Freeman told him the FBI had been notified and had instructed Freeman to send in a report about the incident. In addition, Flowers said that he had been informed by the FTC medical staff that Trentadue's blood count indicated a high probability that he was HIV-positive. (In fact, he was not HIV-positive.) Flowers said he thought the cell should be cleaned promptly because of the potentially infectious blood. ... Flowers said he therefore instructed the FTC health unit to clean the cell.

"Although the center staff had been told by the medical examiner's office that the condition of the body required them to immediately report the incident to the FBI and be careful to treat the cell as a crime scene and not disturb anything, the OIG report notes that statements made by the center's special investigative supervisor, Lt. Freeman, were not truthful about how he handled the situation.

However, contrary to Freeman's representations, he still had not spoken to the FBI when he told Flowers he had. SA Jenkins stated that Freeman did not speak with him until approximately 11:30 a.m. Although Freeman falsely represented to the BOP and other investigators about when he first spoke with Jenkins, Freeman eventually admitted to the OIG that he had tried to contact Jenkins early in the morning on Aug. 21, but he did not provide full details about Trentadue's death. Although their recollections of the conversation of Aug. 21 differed, Freeman said he told Jenkins that FTC correction officers had found Trentadue hanging in a secure cell, that Trentadue had committed suicide by hanging himself, and that there was a little bit of blood. Jenkins said that Freeman did not mention any blood and did not describe the extent of Trentadue's injuries. ... At approximately 1 p.m., FTC medical staff and inmates cleaned Trentadue's cell."

The OIG investigation record is replete with details that while staff at the center mopped up blood from the floor and wiped away bloodstains from walls and furniture, others removed the bed sheet that Trentadue was supposed to have used to hang himself.

Also, most of the inmate's clothing would disappear that day. And prior to the rush to clean the cell, some photographs and a videotape were made of the scene and victim. Much of this evidence would also disappear - some for years, some forever.

At 2 p.m., the Bureau of Prison's Psychological Reconstruction Team landed in Oklahoma City to conduct an investigation that is required under BOP rules of every suspected inmate suicide case.

But once on Federal Transfer Center grounds, investigators would be shocked to discover the cell had been meticulously cleaned and what little evidence remained in the cell had been rearranged by the staff. The next day the team would leave Oklahoma City, unable to conduct a meaningful investigation.

The OIG report notes that transfer center officials had been aware since 8 a.m. that this special unit would be arriving that day.

Subsequent state and federal investigations concluded that by the time the team of Bureau of Prisons investigators walked into the facility, crucial evidence that might implicate others had been removed or washed away.

While the methodical destruction of the crime scene evidence was going forward, the Federal Transfer Center's psychologist, David Wedeking, had a meeting with his superiors.

After the meeting, Wedeking prepared a suicide watch report stating that Trentadue had been placed on a suicide watch shortly before his death. It was a lie.

While under oath, later, Wedeking admitted the report was false and that inmate Kenneth Trentadue was never under a suicide watch.