

The Other Hannibal Lecter

by Andrew Gumbel

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If he had only his own tale to tell, the story of David Paul Hammer -- career criminal, scourge of the U.S. prison system and, now, the next federal prisoner in line to be executed -- would already be extraordinary enough. In his native Oklahoma, where he first entered the prison system 26 years ago at the age of 19, he so exasperated and terrified the state prison authorities with his spasms of extreme violence, his knack for running scams and his track record of successful escapes that they constructed a special isolation cage for him with shatterproof glass and reinforced steel doors.

Since arriving on federal death row, he has often been likened to Hannibal Lecter, the savagely intelligent man-eating serial killer of pulp fiction and Hollywood movies.

And not without reason.

Like Lecter, the crimes Hammer has admitted committing are little short of flabbergasting. At the age of 18, strung out on the substance PCP and contemplating suicide, he held several hostages at gunpoint at the Oklahoma City Hospital. At 24, on the second of his two prison escapes, Hammer took a man at gunpoint, ordered him to undress on a lonely road and shot him three times in the head. The man, who somehow survived, later testified that he found Hammer to be "crazy, man ... completely insane."

Having been transferred to the federal prison system -- Oklahoma could not cope -- Hammer then brutally murdered the first man unlucky enough to be assigned as his cell mate, tying him to his bunk with knotted bedsheets, stuffing a sock in his mouth and slowly garrotting him with a braided cord.

That was the crime that earned him the death sentence and a final transfer to "Dog Unit," the federal death row in Terre Haute, Indiana.

Like Lecter, Hammer is also a man of impish deviousness. In Oklahoma, he set up a bogus church with himself as minister and his fellow inmates as the board of directors, conned a department store into sending him thousands of dollars of merchandise, orchestrated death threats against elected officials and, on one notorious occasion, brought the Oklahoma legislature to a standstill with a chillingly convincing bomb threat.

Hammer is more than just a criminal monster, however. He is highly intelligent and almost limitlessly resourceful when it comes to understanding the prison environment and taking his quiet revenge on the system.

Already, before he arrived in Terre Haute, he made himself useful to lawyers and researchers working on cases that depended on an intimate knowledge of the U.S. prison system.

Nothing gave him greater pleasure than to read of a possible miscarriage of justice in the newspapers and then volunteer his services as the most inside of inside sources.

Then, after he arrived in Terre Haute, he was granted access to one of the most notorious and, in many ways, least understood U.S. criminals of modern times, the Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh.

For 23 months, between the establishment of the Terre Haute death row in 1999 and McVeigh's execution in 2001, the two men lived three cells down from each other.

Although each had plentiful reason to be wary of the other -- McVeigh, like everyone, appears to have been terrified of Hammer at first -- they eventually formed a genuine friendship.

Now Hammer has written a book about it. Or rather, he has written a book that promises to unlock a whole treasure chest of secrets about the Oklahoma City bombing, based in part on his conversations with McVeigh.

The book, entitled *Secrets Worth Dying For* and due to be issued by a small Indiana publishing house next month, is likely to be Hammer's epitaph since he has just relinquished all further appeals and is awaiting an execution date, expected to be set sometime this spring or early summer.

It turns out that Hammer has not one but three extraordinary stories to tell -- his own, McVeigh's and that of Kenneth Michael Trentadue, who starts out as a bit player and ends up taking on a role of surprising prominence. Even if one chooses not to believe everything, there's a hair-raising trail of dead bodies, many of them found hanging in prison cells, and all of them traceable in some way to the Oklahoma City bombing. Real-life mysteries don't get much better than this.

The first time McVeigh spoke to Hammer, he bragged about the death toll at the Oklahoma City federal building in a characteristic mixture of bravado and utter tastelessness.

"All I have to say is that the official score is 168 to one. I'm up," McVeigh said. To which Hammer replied: "Well, I guess they can't kill you more than once."

Even on death row, McVeigh's crimes were on a scale that disgusted his fellow inmates.

He was frequently tarred as a "baby killer" (the bomb exploded right under a day care centre) and taunted for everything from his conviction that the world would tumble into chaos as the year 2000 rolled around, to his apparent dearth of sexual experience.

Hammer describes McVeigh as being obsessed with posterity and his reputation as the lone-wolf mastermind of what was then the worst peacetime atrocity committed on U.S. soil.

Slowly, though, Hammer, McVeigh and a third inmate, Jeffrey Paul, started to spend time together, if only because they were the sole white prisoners on death row. Hammer explained the relationship this way: "There were intense disputes and allegations of broken promises and even treachery, but in the end the necessity for co-operation won out."

Hammer and Paul helped McVeigh project the image of himself that he wanted, and McVeigh, in turn, started talking to them about some of the details of the Oklahoma City bombing that he was not willing to share with anybody else. Much of what Hammer writes about the bombing goes over ground already explored in a number of books and articles challenging the lone-wolf theory put forward publicly by both McVeigh and his government prosecutors.

Notably, the book runs through the compelling evidence that McVeigh was part of a neo-Nazi bank robbery gang that financed the bombing and actively participated in bringing it to fruition. Some of McVeigh's claims say much more about him than they do about the bombing itself. In an extended riff, he suggests he was approached towards the end of his time in the armed forces by a shady U.S. government operative calling himself only The Major.

The Major supposedly recruited McVeigh to infiltrate the militant far right, and later encouraged him to go ahead with the Oklahoma City bombing because its brutality would shock the militia movement into breaking apart. In other words, it was all a government plot, with McVeigh as the fall guy. A nice story, if only there were any credible evidence to back it up. McVeigh, though, seems to have believed it, at least on some level.

Just days away from his execution, Hammer reports, he became obsessed with the idea that The Major would either rescue him or replace the lethal chemicals with sophisticated substitutes giving only the appearance of death, Romeo and Juliet-style.

McVeigh told Hammer he expected to be transformed through reconstructive surgery and quietly rewarded for his services.

There were other avenues of conversation that, from a factual point of view, proved much more fruitful. None seems to have drawn Hammer and McVeigh together more closely than the story of Kenny Trentadue.

Trentadue was a convicted bank robber who had served his time and then skipped out on his parole officer, apparently because he was outraged at being barred from drinking beer.

On Aug. 18, 1995 -- four months after the Oklahoma City bombing -- he was picked up crossing the border from Mexico to California and then, for reasons the government has yet to explain, was transported to the Department of Justice's brand-new Federal Transfer Centre in Oklahoma City.

Three days later, his bloody, battered corpse was released to the state medical examiner's office.

Prison officials claimed he had committed suicide by hanging himself in his cell. There the story might have ended, but for Trentadue's family, which insisted on an autopsy.

It turned out that Trentadue's body was covered in blood from head to toe; he had suffered three massive blows to the head, rupturing his scalp and skull, and his throat was slit.

The government continued to insist that his injuries were self-inflicted, even as a growing chorus of journalists, congressmen and legal experts voiced their suspicions of foul play.

Hammer read about the case and wrote to Trentadue's brother Jesse, a lawyer in Salt Lake City, to offer his help in negotiating a path around the federal prison bureaucracy in the hunt for the truth. At that time it occurred to nobody that Kenny Trentadue's death might have had anything to do with the Oklahoma City bombing.

That changed, however, when Hammer arrived in Terre Haute and showed McVeigh a picture of Trentadue. McVeigh responded immediately: "Now I know Trentadue was killed because they thought he was Richard Guthrie." Guthrie was one of the neo-Nazi bank robbers suspected of involvement in the Oklahoma bombing.

At the time of Trentadue's arrest, he was at large, believed to be in either Mexico or Canada, and urgently sought by the FBI. He was the same height and weight as Trentadue, with similar complexion and a similar thick moustache. Both men used aliases. They even had the same dragon tattoo on their left arms.

In other words, this was a tragic case of mistaken identity. As the Trentadue family now sees it, Kenny was apprehended at the border, immediately flagged as a possible "John Doe 2" (the elusive presumed accomplice of McVeigh who was later dropped from the case), and shipped off to Oklahoma City for further questioning. Why he ended up dead in his cell is a matter of speculation, but he was not the only person connected to the Oklahoma bombing to end up that way.

The real Richard Guthrie was apprehended in January 1996 and charged on bank-robbery charges only -- the government having apparently lost interest in linking the robberies to the bombing. Six months later, Guthrie was found hanging in his cell under circumstances that some friends and family found suspicious. Then, as the Trentadue investigation deepened, it turned out there was an inmate in the Oklahoma Federal Transfer Center who claimed to have witnessed Trentadue's death and who, according

to FBI documentation repeatedly disavowed by the Justice Department, was sharing Trentadue's cell on the fateful night.

Sometime in 1999, Alden Gillis Baker volunteered to testify that Trentadue was murdered. In December that year, he told a lawyer he feared for his life because of threats from the guards in his new prison. In August 2000, he was found hanging by a sheet in his cell.

Is it outrageous to think these deaths might be related? The details are too complicated to lay out here, but here are two considerations.

First, in May 2001, the Trentadue family was awarded \$1.1 million in damages for "intentional infliction of emotional distress" by the Justice Department, lending considerable credence to their suspicion that Kenny was murdered. The federal judge in the case lambasted three government witnesses for "serious questions about their truthfulness." The court was unable, however, to rule on the exact cause of Trentadue's death because too much evidence in the case had been destroyed.

Second, that crucial clue that McVeigh appears to have given Hammer about Trentadue looks more and more convincing. One can reasonably cast doubt on the source of the information, but if McVeigh didn't say it, Hammer must have made it up, and there is no reason to presume Hammer knew who Richard Guthrie was, let alone what he looked like. (His picture never made the papers.)

Conversely, if McVeigh did say it, he not only linked Trentadue's physical appearance to Guthrie's, he also linked himself to Guthrie and the neo-Nazi bank robbers -- the first concrete admission we have from him to that effect. We know from an independent source that McVeigh was extremely interested in Trentadue's case.

Trentadue took up a large chunk of space in McVeigh's correspondence with a writer from Esquire magazine, published shortly after his execution.

What is Hammer's motivation in revealing all this now, on the eve of his own death? Part of it, no doubt, is a continuing desire to stick it to the establishment and shame the prison system with the truth.

He has gone on record many times to say how strongly he opposes capital punishment and the U.S. prison bureaucracy. And part of it, bizarrely, is in homage to his friend Timothy McVeigh. Hammer was so upset by McVeigh's execution that he attempted suicide the night before by injecting himself with an overdose of insulin (he is diabetic).

After he recovered, he wrote the following diary entry which is reproduced in his book: "My friend, Tim, is a troubled and misguided man. We disagree on most issues, but he is also a kind, loving and caring person with a quick smile, keen wit and a sense of humour. I will miss him and I continue to pray for his soul."