

Jane's Jihad: Confessions, Jail and Unwavering Faith

When the flight from London landed in Philadelphia on October 15, 2009, the pilot asked everyone to stay seated. A passenger was ill, he explained, and paramedics needed the aisles clear.

It didn't take long for passengers to realize the ruse. Federal agents entered the plane and made straight for the short woman in a full burka.

Colleen LaRose, the woman who called herself **Jihad Jane**, didn't resist when they handcuffed her.

FBI agents drove her to their offices two blocks from Independence Hall. When she complained of a headache, they gave her three Tylenol and a Sprite. Then they asked her to tell her story.

LaRose, a former teenage prostitute with a heavy history of drug abuse, mangled some facts. But mostly, she told the truth:

She became intrigued by Islam after a one-night stand with a Muslim man in 2007. She converted a short while later and became radicalized watching YouTube videos of atrocities against Palestinian children.

Online, she met a man who called himself Eagle Eye and who claimed to work for al-Qaeda. Eagle Eye convinced her that she could travel to Sweden and use her appearance – her white skin and her blonde hair—to blend in. That way, she could get close enough to assassinate Lars Vilks, a Swedish artist who had blasphemed the Prophet Mohammad by drawing his head on a dog.

Agents asked her why she had returned to the United States. LaRose, 46, said she had been concerned about her mother. When

she talked with her Pennsylvania boyfriend on the phone, he had said her mother was deathly ill. Not true, an agent assured her. Her mother was fine. It had been a trick intended to get LaRose back to the United States.

Did you give up your jihad because you got scared? an agent asked.

No, LaRose insisted. She gave up, she said, because Eagle Eye's men in Holland and Ireland moved too slowly. She felt "let down," she told the agents.

During her initial interviews, she didn't tell the agents that she also felt homesick. Or that, even as her host in Ireland – the man who called himself Black Flag–had driven her to the airport, she had feared she might be killed because she knew too much.

One agent pressed. Are you sure you didn't abandon the jihad because you got cold feet?

No, she insisted. And if they let her go, she told them, she planned a suicide attack against U.S. soldiers in Iraq or Afghanistan.

The agents asked about Jamie Paulin Ramirez, another blonde American woman who had travelled to Europe with her son. LaRose said she lived with her briefly in Ireland but didn't know much about her.

The agents also asked about a U.S. passport they found in LaRose's luggage. It belonged to the Pennsylvania boyfriend. But it was expired. Where, an agent asked, was the valid one?

LaRose knew the answer: For safekeeping, she had mailed it months earlier to the youngest member of the conspiracy, a high school junior in Maryland named Mohammed Hassan Khalid.

She didn't give Khalid up. Instead, she lowered her eyes and asked for a lawyer.

The FBI kept her arrest quiet as they checked out her story.

Sex Slave

About a week after LaRose's arrest in Philadelphia, Ramirez, the other blonde American woman, sat before a laptop in a southern Ireland apartment and let her emotions flow.

"I wish I was never stupid enough to come here," Ramirez typed in a note to herself.

A recent Muslim convert, Ramirez, 31, had arrived just six weeks earlier with her young son. On the very day they landed, she married Ali Damache, the man others knew as Black Flag.

He had wooed her by promising to teach her Arabic and Islam. But his lessons ended soon after they mastered the alphabet and a few basic prayers. He rarely spoke with her, except to bark orders about cooking and cleaning. She wanted to be a good Muslim wife, but if he wouldn't help her, how could she?

"This man has no intentions to make this relationship work, ever," she wrote.

"I am just a sex slave to him," she concluded. And later, she wrote: "... I cry because I always wanted a person in my life who could love me for who I am."

Ramirez felt trapped, afraid that if she returned to the United States her estranged mother might try to wrest custody of her son. Still, she took tentative steps to try to leave. When her husband was away, she began reconnecting by email with friends and family in Colorado.

Then in January, she learned she was pregnant by Damache. How could she possibly leave now?

Irish police answered the question two months later. On the morning of March 9, 2010, police raided the small flat in Waterford, detaining Ramirez, Damache and five of his

associates for questioning. Later, Ramirez was whisked past a mob of journalists and into a closed courtroom. There, she stood before a judge for a brief session, bewildered beneath her burka.

During questioning, she told the detectives what she knew, which turned out not to be much. She had come to Ireland to live with this man; he spoke of jihad but she couldn't offer specifics— in part because Damache had never offered any himself.

Damache refused to cooperate. In fact, he played coy with the police, deflecting questions by posing his own. He almost seemed to relish the interrogation.

The Discovery

Hours after the raids in Ireland, the FBI announced terrorism charges against LaRose, who remained in custody in the United States. U.S. officials called her by the online name she had chosen, Jihad Jane, and the story would lead the network news.

Near Baltimore, LaRose's teenage accomplice, Mohammed H. Khalid, found the indictment online. He had known the FBI was after LaRose, but he hadn't heard from her in seven months, since shortly after she had arrived in Ireland.

Now, he read the government's statement on the case:

"LaRose – an American citizen whose appearance was considered to be an asset because it allowed her to blend in – is charged with using the Internet to recruit violent jihadist fighters and supporters, and to solicit passports and funding," U.S. Attorney Michael Levy said in his statement. "It demonstrates yet another very real danger lurking on the Internet. This case also demonstrates that terrorists are looking for Americans to join them in their cause, and it shatters any lingering thought that we can spot a terrorist based on appearance."

Scanning the indictment, Khalid came to paragraph 18. It cited an unnamed co-conspirator and quoted excerpts from online posts that Khalid recognized.

He had sent them.

Not long after, FBI agents arrived at his parents' small apartment in Ellicott City, Md. They carried a search warrant. As some of the agents began rifling through the family's possessions, others took the teen into his bedroom.

"Tell us about it," one of the agents said to Khalid, who had turned 16. "There's no benefit in lying."

The FBI agents later showed Khalid lengthy transcripts of his chats in jihadi forums. They explained that LaRose was a former prostitute and drug addict. They told Khalid that everyone in the plot had turned on him. They told him that he would be smart to cooperate. They were, they said, the only friends he had left.

Khalid believed the agents when they said he was in big trouble. So he told them that he was no longer a jihadist. The people in those forums were misguided, he said. He had reformed.

The agents asked about the passports. LaRose had mailed them to Khalid before she left for Europe. Although he had sent one of the passports to Damache in Ireland, he had hidden the other at his school, he told the FBI. Now he claimed they were missing.

During the next few weeks, the boy met with agents a half dozen times, without a parent or attorney present. He believed he was a witness, not a suspect.

By then, Khalid had already acceded to his parents' wishes to seek counseling. A local Muslim scholar was teaching him that he was misinterpreting the Koran, and Khalid also met

regularly with an imam who preached peace. He stopped posting on his blog. But it was all a front.

Khalid continued to live a double life, assembling a strong resume for college applications while secretly translating jihadi videos. He entered two high school writing contests. For one, he chose as a subject the Dalai Lama. For the other, Malcolm X.

The Arrest

Months passed without any public word on the case, and that fall, Khalid began his senior year of high school.

In October, he aced the SAT college entrance exam and submitted an early decision application to prestigious Johns Hopkins University. By now, he had bought another laptop. He also found ways to sneak back into jihadi forums.

His writing turned darker.

That fall, Khalid struck up an online friendship with a troubled, 21-year-old neo-Nazi-turned-jihadist who lived in the Pittsburgh area.

During an online chat on November 22, Khalid told the man that he had daydreamed about “doing martyrdom operations together in my school.”

“Like Columbine?” the man asked.

“Na’am,” Khalid said, using the Arabic word for yes. “It was like we both were in a big truck and had guns and we were shooting randomly at a huge crowd of kids. Subhan’Allah how great would it be. I live in Maryland... and the kids who study in my school proudly state that their parents work in NSA and FBI.”

A few weeks after that exchange, news arrived inside a fat envelope.

“Congratulations!” began the letter from Johns Hopkins. Not only had Khalid won early admission but the school offered a full ride – a \$54,000 scholarship. It was quite an achievement for any student, let alone an immigrant who spent high school feeling alienated.

In June 2011, Khalid graduated from high school. A month later, while still 17, FBI agents quietly arrested him.

Why they chose then, months before he legally became an adult and months after his reference to Columbine, remains unclear. But that fall, shortly after his 18th birthday, the government indicted Khalid for his role in the Jihad Jane case.

The teenager became the youngest person to face U.S. terrorism charges.

The Future

Three years have passed since Jihad Jane’s arrest. And despite the guilty pleas by LaRose, Ramirez and Khalid, the Jihad Jane conspirators still await sentencing.

All confessed to conspiracy to provide material support to terrorists. LaRose also pleaded guilty to conspiracy to kill in a foreign country, lying to the FBI and attempted identity theft—for stealing her boyfriend’s passports.

The long delay in sentencing can be attributed to several factors: a continuing FBI investigation, extended psychological evaluations of some defendants, a government filing indicating that some evidence in the case is classified, and unexpected legal maneuvers in Ireland.

Ali Damache, the man who called himself Black Flag, caused a sensation in Irish legal circles by successfully contesting the police search of his Waterford apartment.

U.S. prosecutors have indicted him on terrorism charges and have asked Irish authorities to extradite him. Today, he

remains in Ireland, awaiting trial on charges unrelated to the Jihad Jane conspiracy. His lawyers declined to comment.

The five acquaintances detained with Ramirez and Damache were released without facing any terrorism charges.

U.S. authorities won't say if they know the whereabouts of Eagle Eye, the al-Qaeda operative who instructed LaRose to kill, or Abdullah, the man who was supposed to train her in Amsterdam.

In U.S. District Court, sentencing for LaRose, Ramirez and Khalid has been postponed a handful of times. The most recent dates set: Ramirez and Khalid for early next year, and LaRose for May 7.

Until then, the three remain locked in the same federal prison in downtown Philadelphia, cut off from each other and from the tool that brought them together—the World Wide Web.

LaRose has been held in solitary confinement for three years; even so, on rare outings, she says she has caught glimpses of Ramirez, though the two women haven't spoken.

Ramirez, who miscarried the baby she conceived with Damache, may face the shortest sentence of the three. Her crime: traveling to Ireland to meet Damache with a vague promise to live and train with jihadists. Authorities say she never knew about the plot to kill Vilks. Her young son now lives with her mother in Colorado.

"I'm not saying that I like being in prison but I am very grateful for this time to be able to reflect and study," Ramirez says in a statement provided by her court-appointed lawyer, Jeremy H. Gonzalez Ibrahim. "I was a parakeet. I just repeated what other people said."

Khalid's admission to Johns Hopkins was rescinded. His court-appointed lawyer, Jeffrey M. Lindy, says his client now

realizes that his virtual friends did not love him the way his parents and teachers did. He also says Khalid regrets translating videos that may have led others astray.

"If you take away Jihad Jane and the ridiculous plan to kill the cartoonist" Vilks, says Lindy, "what you have is a teenager becoming fascinated with and learning about and adopting a radical ideology."

The lead prosecutor in the Jihad Jane conspiracy, Assistant U.S. Attorney Jennifer Arbittier Williams, says she cannot comment on the cases until after sentencing. But FBI officials in Philadelphia emphasize that they cannot afford to discount possible terrorism suspects, no matter how incompetent or intelligent they might seem.

Once a plot matures, they say, authorities might be too late to stop an attack.

"The more sophisticated that capability becomes, we may not be able to control the outcome," said Richard P. Quinn, the FBI's assistant special agent in charge for counterterrorism. "If you get shot by someone with a seventh-grade education versus someone with a Harvard education, does it matter?"

'My Destiny'

During an exclusive interview from jail, LaRose says she still believes that Islam saved her.

"I survived a lot of things that should have rightfully killed me," she says of drug use, rape and incest. "I also thought there was a purpose for me to be alive and then when I found Islam, I thought... 'This is why I have lived so long.'"

U.S. sentencing guidelines suggest LaRose could be jailed for 30 years to life.

Her intended victim, the Swedish artist Lars Vilks, says he believes LaRose has served enough time already.

"They should let her go," Vilks says. "Now that she is known, they can keep an eye on her."

Ollie Avery Mannino, the counselor who helped LaRose confront her father about childhood rapes three decades ago, also urges leniency.

Mannino says LaRose's harrowing past doesn't excuse her conduct as an aspiring terrorist. "But when you think about punishment, you have to consider the whole person," Mannino says.

"I don't want people to have sympathy for Colleen," she says. "I want them to try empathy."

Today, in jail, LaRose expresses few regrets. "I did everything I did for the love of my ummah", the Muslim community, she says. "Whatever happens to me, it's my destiny. Whatever time they give me, it's already predestined for me. So I'm not worried."

With limited access to media in prison, LaRose says she hadn't heard that the U.S. government held up her case as one that "underscores the evolving nature of violent extremism" and demonstrates a "very real danger lurking on the Internet."

LaRose also hadn't realized that her arrest caused so much buzz back in 2009—that Katie Couric had opened the CBS Evening News with her story, declaring that prosecutors were warning that this "petite woman from the Philadelphia suburbs" now "represents the new face of terrorism."

"Wow," LaRose says, almost tickled by the characterization. Then, after a momentary pause: "Well, they're right."

Confined to a cell, often for 23 hours a day, LaRose has nonetheless found a new path toward love.

She has discovered a makeshift Internet that exists within the walls of the federal prison in Philadelphia: If she scoops

enough water from her toilet bowl, LaRose can communicate with other inmates by speaking through the sewer pipes – they call it “talking on the bowls.”

By talking on the bowls, LaRose fell for a new man. She knows little about him other than what he has told her. But she finds him wise, compassionate and righteous. He is not a Muslim but promises to convert when he gets out. That way, they can marry and be happy.

Colleen LaRose believes him.

HOW THIS SERIES WAS REPORTED

JANE’S JIHAD is based on six months of reporting in Pennsylvania, Texas, Maryland, Colorado, Washington, D.C., and Ireland. The accounts, including the thoughts and actions of characters in the stories, are based on court records and other documents, many of them confidential, as well as interviews with people involved in the case. Reporter John Shiffman gained exclusive access to those documents and individuals. Many spoke only on condition of anonymity. In Ireland, the law forbids the government and defense lawyers from commenting until court proceedings are completed. In the United States, prosecutors do not typically comment before sentencing. The Reuters interview with Colleen LaRose, the woman who called herself Jihad Jane, is the only one she has granted.

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