

Jihad Jane: The FBI Visits, the Jihad Begins

Colleen LaRose answered the door of her duplex near Philadelphia to find an FBI agent standing on the porch.

He had questions about her interest in Islamic websites.

For LaRose, whose online name was Jihad Jane, it was the second time the FBI had questioned her that summer. Weeks earlier, she'd spoken with an agent by phone and offered a series of lame lies: She had denied any interest in jihadist forums, denied wiring money overseas, denied that she went by Jihad Jane.

This time, on Aug. 21, 2009, LaRose lied less.

Yes, she visited Muslims websites, she said. As a recent convert to Islam, she wanted to learn as much as possible. Yeah, she said, maybe her political views had angered others online. But she denied raising money for al-Qaida or having any connection with extremists.

Lying to the FBI is a crime, the agent told her.

OK, she said.

Then he asked if she planned to travel to Holland.

She was thinking about it, she told the agent, but there had been a death in the family—a heart attack had just taken her boyfriend's father. His funeral was the next day.

When the agent asked for a way to keep in touch, LaRose gave him her cell number. Call anytime next week, she told him.

A day later, LaRose attended the funeral. The day after the service, Aug. 23, she pulled the hard drive from her computer

and stashed it in a box. She gathered \$2,000 in cash and packed three suitcases. With a bargain plane ticket to Amsterdam in hand, LaRose persuaded an acquaintance to drive her to the airport.

She was moving ahead with the plan conceived by the al-Qaida operative in Pakistan, the man she knew only as Eagle Eye. Already, she had pledged to kill the Swedish artist Lars Vilks. He had blasphemed Islam by drawing the Prophet Mohammad's head on a dog.

As she headed to Europe with plans to murder in the name of Allah, LaRose left her boyfriend and mother with the impression she was running a quick errand.

Mary Richards

Landing in Amsterdam, LaRose felt euphoric. She had shed her old life—46 years scarred by rapes, prostitution, drugs and failed marriages—for this new one full of promise.

At the airport, LaRose donned a full burka for the first time. More firsts awaited: She would meet her first jihadist, enter her first mosque and learn how to pray.

She gave the taxi driver the name of the mosque, and as the cab pulled away from the airport, a song from childhood popped into her head.

Who can turn the world on with her smile? Who can take a nothing day, and suddenly make it all seem worthwhile?

It was the theme from the 1970s TV series, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. LaRose imagined herself as the lead character, Mary Richards. If she had been wearing a hat instead of a burka, LaRose thought, she would have stepped from the cab with a huge smile and acted out the show's classic opening, twirling around and tossing her hat in the air.

'Well, it's you girl and you should know it!

With every glance and every little movement, you show it....

You're gonna make it after all....'

When the taxi driver found the mosque, no one was waiting for LaRose. For nearly an hour, she stood outside in a full hijab with her luggage. Then it began to rain.

Finally, another Muslim woman arrived and took LaRose to see her contact, a man named Abdullah. LaRose had expected him to introduce her to fellow jihadists, to train her for her mission, to teach her the ways of Islam.

None of that happened. Now that LaRose had actually arrived and it was time for action, Abdullah the terrorist was suddenly hedging, dodging, equivocating, pleading for patience.

Two weeks into her visit to Amsterdam, LaRose concluded that Abdullah was a poseur. It was time for her to leave, she told him, and Abdullah quickly agreed. He suggested that she visit his associate in Waterford, Ireland, the man who called himself Black Flag.

LaRose packed her bags.

Calling 911

Back in the United States, one of LaRose's most trusted allies was struggling, too.

Mohammed Hassan Khalid had lost access to his primary weapon of jihad: his computer. His parents took it away.

It happened a few weeks into the boy's junior year in high school, after Khalid's parents confronted him about the long stretches he spent alone in his bedroom with his laptop. They suspected he was trolling for porn.

When Khalid refused to explain what he was doing, his parents grabbed his computer. Khalid threw a tantrum but they wouldn't

give it back.

Then, this aspiring jihadist, who knew that his friend LaRose had twice been visited by the FBI, made an odd and impulsive choice: He dialed 911 and invited law enforcement into his home. His parents, he told the dispatcher, were abusive.

When police arrived, the officers backed the parents. Only after authorities left and Khalid gave his parents his password would they begin clicking through his computer. They discovered his al-Qaida translation projects and jihadi videos.

As the teenager later wrote to a friend, they “saw the beheadings, which scared the crap out of them.”

Stripped of access to his online life, Khalid soon became despondent. He refused to eat. He slept all day. After a few days, his parents dialed 911 themselves and had Khalid admitted overnight to a psychiatric facility.

The boy told no one about Eagle Eye, Jihad Jane, Black Flag, or the stolen passports LaRose had sent him for safekeeping—including the one he had forwarded to Black Flag in Ireland.

‘No Matter the Risk’

Waterford seems an unlikely place to launch a jihad.

Founded by Vikings and renowned for its crystal, the southern Irish city is far more tranquil than Dublin or Cork. Only a few hundred Muslims live there, many who immigrated for jobs at the regional hospital. To create a mosque, local Muslims converted a suburban home near the hospital.

Yet the city became the confluence of the Jihad Jane conspiracy. Here, in September 2009, Black Flag met his two prized recruits in person for the first time: LaRose and Jamie Paulin Ramirez, the lonely Colorado woman whom he had

persuaded to come by telling her that Allah had willed it in a dream.

Both women were Americans—white, blonde and recent converts to Islam. And though they had often chatted online, neither knew that the other was coming.

Short but thin and handsome, Black Flag was known in Waterford by his given name, Ali Damache. Born in Algeria in 1965, Damache grew up in central France. After high school, he sold perfume and cosmetics in the women's section of a Paris department store for many years. Around 2001, he moved to southern Ireland.

Damache bounced from sales job to sales job—he worked at a drug store, a telephone call center, a real estate agency and an insurance firm. To comply with Irish welfare and immigration law, each time he lost a job he enrolled in computer-training programs, giving him access to computers and a reason to spend a lot of time online.

He wed an Irish Catholic woman, a marriage that lasted about seven years. In 2007, Damache began regularly going to mosque and, about a year later, wearing Muslim attire.

By 2009, Damache was calling himself Black Flag. Online, he made contact with Eagle Eye, LaRose, Ramirez, Khalid, Abdullah and others whom the FBI has linked to al-Qaida cells.

Throughout the summer, even after LaRose tipped him that the FBI was watching, Damache continued to send online messages that U.S. authorities say place him at the hub of the conspiracy.

"The job is to knock down some individuals that are harming Islam," Damache explained to a friend in Europe. He was busy building "an organization," he wrote, divided into a "planning team ... research team ... action team ... recruitment team ... finance team."

Damache wrote breathlessly of his plans for LaRose. "We have already organized everything for her. We are will to die in order to protect her no matter what the risk."

'So Close'

LaRose and Ramirez each landed in Ireland within days of the other, during the second week of September. On the day she arrived, Ramirez married Damache.

There would be no honeymoon.

Instead, with Ramirez's young son, they all stayed in a one-bedroom apartment Damache rented in the heart of Waterford. The flat stood steps from upscale Italian and Chinese restaurants and the city archives, on a neat, narrow street close to the central shopping mall, riverfront and Catholic church.

The sleeping arrangements proved awkward. At times, the women stayed with the boy in the living room; Damache took the bedroom for himself.

Despite the unorthodox accommodations, LaRose remained committed to the notion of killing the Swedish artist. With little direction, she was doing what she could, tracking her target the only way she knew how: online.

To try to learn more about Vilks, for example, she signed up for a virtual community he had created. Filling out the online form, LaRose typed a false name—Sally Jones—and created a new Gmail account.

She also left a clue that underscored her sloppiness. In the postal code section of the online form, she typed 48174—the zip code for Romulus, Mich., her childhood home.

Damache gave LaRose a key to the Waterford apartment, and she was free to come and go. Ramirez focused on supporting her new husband's activities, whatever they were. She didn't get a key

and was instructed to remain at home, to cook and to clean.

Local Muslim women took LaRose to the mosque and taught her how to pray. The first time she rose after praying, LaRose experienced what she believed to be a minor miracle. A persistent pain in her stomach, one that had bothered her for years, simply vanished. LaRose was astonished. What more proof did she need that Islam could heal her?

Her faith in the jihad was another story. In the weeks that followed, nothing materialized the way Damache had promised. No training, no planning, no brothers and sisters waiting to join her in assassination. To LaRose, the great Black Flag seemed nearly as unmoored as she was—chronically unemployed, spouting verses from the Quran to justify whatever he chose to do, hiding his cowardice behind his beard.

LaRose still refused to give up her jihad. On the last day of September, she emailed Eagle Eye to let him know she remained on task and that it would be “an honor & great pleasure to kill” the artist.

“Only death will stop me here,” LaRose wrote. “I am so close to the target!”

She hadn’t trained as an assassin and she hadn’t traveled to Sweden. But she was back on , the Islamic dating site, hoping to find someone who might put her up in Sweden—should she ever get there.

The Epiphany

Two weeks after promising that “only death” would stop her plans to kill for Allah, Jihad Jane decided to head home.

The epiphany came while she waited with a Muslim woman in a delivery truck outside a grocery in Waterford. The two women were covered head to toe. Only their eyes showed. The woman’s husband was inside shopping.

Sitting in the truck, LaRose considered the woman's life. She had a husband, children, a family and a bond with Allah. The woman seemed happy, LaRose thought. And she wanted that sort of happiness, too.

LaRose considered Damache and Abdullah again. Online, the men were aggressive, tough-talking jihadists, romantic, almost heroic. In person—in reality—they were tentative, chauvinistic and, perhaps most telling, hobbled by pedestrian struggles like finding enough cash to pay the electric bill.

LaRose asked the woman waiting with her in the truck what she thought of Damache. The woman replied that her husband believed LaRose was a lost soul and that Damache had misled her. Perhaps Vilks, the Swedish artist, did deserve to die, but that was up to Allah, not Damache, to decide, she said.

The woman and her husband were the first Muslims LaRose had met who did not advocate violence. They were wonderful, deeply religious people, and they held a starkly different version of Islam than the likes of Eagle Eye and Black Flag.

LaRose considered all this, sitting in the truck. Again, she felt torn. She wanted to please Eagle Eye, but nothing, not a single thing she had been promised, had worked out.

She was also growing lonely and missed her longtime boyfriend back in Pennsylvania. She wondered who was caring for her elderly mother. She thought about her cats, Fluffy and Klaus.

Jihad Jane was homesick.

She emailed her boyfriend with her new Irish mobile number. A short while later, he called. Come home, he urged. Your mother is ill, near death.

Today, LaRose insists that she wasn't abandoning her jihad, only pausing to visit a sick relative.

If so, what this budding terrorist did next is perplexing: She

visited the FBI's website, located the send-a-tip section and let agents know she was heading home.

The reason? She hoped the FBI would pay for her flight.

When LaRose got no response, she called her boyfriend back and he bought her ticket.

Damache tried to talk her out of leaving. He pleaded for patience, but LaRose insisted she needed to return to care for her sick mother.

LaRose said goodbye to Ramirez and her son, and reluctantly, Damache agreed to drive her to the airport in Cork. It was a two-hour trip along scenic and often rural roads.

Unannounced, Damache brought a husky friend along for the ride, a man LaRose had never met.

As the car left Waterford, LaRose grew suspicious. They were never going to let her go back to the United States, she thought. She knew too much—where they lived, what they were planning, everything.

They weren't driving her to the airport, she thought. It was all a setup.

They were going to make Jihad Jane disappear.

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. This is Part 3 of an exclusive four-part series. [Click here for Part 1](#); [click here for Part 2](#).

Editing by Blake Morrison.

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