

Jihad Jane: Uncovering the Cult of Radical Islamic Terror

"Kill him."

The American who called herself Jihad Jane read the words on her computer screen. Colleen LaRose was fiddling on the Internet, passing time in her duplex near Philadelphia, when the call to martyrdom arrived from halfway around the world.

The order came from an al-Qaida operative. The date: March 22, 2009.

This was it, she thought. Her chance. At 45, LaRose was ready to become somebody.

A compact woman with a seventh-grade education, LaRose was a recent convert to Islam. She found a place for herself quickly, raising money and awareness online for the plight of her Muslim brothers and sisters. They were underdogs, just like her.

During her darkest days, LaRose had endured incest, rape and prostitution. She surrendered her life to drinking and drugs, from crack to crystal meth. Now, if she accepted the order to kill, she would surrender her life to a higher power: Allah.

The man who issued the directive called himself Eagle Eye. LaRose knew him only by his online messages and his voice, and he claimed to be hiding in Pakistan. Eagle Eye wanted her to fly to Europe to train as an assassin with other al-Qaida operatives, then to Sweden to do what few other Muslim jihadists could: blend in.

The terrorists believed that her blonde hair, white skin and U.S. passport, even her Texas twang, would help her to get

close enough to the target: Lars Vilks, a Swedish artist who had blasphemed the Prophet Mohammad by sketching his face on the head of a dog.

“Go to Sweden,” Eagle Eye instructed LaRose. “And kill him.”

A year later, when U.S. authorities revealed the plot, they repeatedly described the Jihad Jane case as one that should forever alter the public’s view of terrorism. At the time, one official said the conspiracy “underscores the evolving nature of the threat we face.” A second said the case “demonstrates yet another very real danger lurking on the Internet” and “shatters any lingering thought that we can spot a terrorist based on appearance.”

The case was so serious, authorities said, that they charged LaRose with crimes that could keep her in prison for the rest of her life.

The court filings and press releases draw a frightening portrait of the Jihad Jane conspiracy. But an exclusive Reuters review of confidential investigative documents and interviews in Europe and the United States – including the first with Jihad Jane herself—reveals a less menacing and, in some ways, more preposterous undertaking than the U.S. government asserted.

“I got so close to being able to do this,” LaRose says today of the plan to kill Vilks.

In truth, what happened proved more farcical than frightful, more absurd than ominous.

The conspiracy included a troubled trio of Americans, each a terrorist wannabe: LaRose; a Colorado woman named Jamie Paulin Ramirez; and a Maryland teenager named Mohammed Hassan Khalid. All have pleaded guilty to breaking U.S. terrorism laws, but only LaRose was charged in the plot to kill Vilks. Her sentencing was recently rescheduled to May 7 from December 19.

Since the 9/11 terror attacks, the FBI has investigated hundreds of cases similar to the Jihad Jane conspiracy. With each investigation comes a challenge: how to prevent acts of terrorism without violating civil rights or overreacting to plots that are little more than bluster.

"We are going to err on the side of caution," says Richard P. Quinn, the FBI's assistant special agent in charge for counter-terrorism in Philadelphia. "We will go after operatives and operations that are more aspirational than operational because to do otherwise would almost be negligent."

At least at the outset, authorities had no way to be certain how much of a threat LaRose might pose, given her resolute conviction and her unique attributes—primarily the way she looked. No one disputes that LaRose and Khalid managed to make contact with overseas al-Qaida operatives and with a loose affiliation of young American-born male Muslim jihadists inside the United States.

Quinn says the case exemplifies al-Qaida's new approach to terrorism. He says the Jihad Jane conspiracy—from recruiting to planning—"represents the many new faces of the terrorist threat."

But some civil rights advocates say the U.S. government has exaggerated the danger posed by aspiring terrorists—in this case and scores of others.

"You can't say these people are totally innocent—they aren't, and there's something wild and scary about them—but almost all of them seem to be incompetent and deluded in some way," said Ohio State University professor John Mueller, who has written extensively about how the government has handled terrorism cases. "When you look closely, many of these cases become interestingly cartoonish."

Interviews and documents, many composed by those involved in

the Jihad Jane case as the conspiracy unfolded, often reveal their innermost thoughts. They also show the gullibility of the main players or the ways that they botched almost every assignment along the way.

Khalid, a troubled high school honor student who lived with his parents in Maryland, inadvertently linked his secret jihadist blog to a page on his school website.

Ramirez, a lonely Colorado woman known as Jihad Jamie, headed to Europe to train for holy war. She was lured to Ireland by a Muslim man promising a pious, married life but soon came to believe that all he really sought was a cook, a maid and a sex slave.

Perhaps most intriguing is the story of LaRose, the aspiring assassin whose devotion and naiveté left her susceptible to recruitment but prone to failure.

In the only interview she has given, LaRose says she became devoted to the Muslim men she met online and blindly followed their instructions because they seemed righteous. "I just loved my brothers so much, when they would tell me stuff, I would listen to them, no matter what," she says. "And I also was ... lost."

Indeed, just weeks into her jihad, she became homesick. And days before returning from Europe to America, she emailed the FBI—to see whether the government might spring for her airfare home.

Despite the media attention the case has received, many details haven't been previously disclosed. Among them: how LaRose, Khalid and Ramirez became radicalized; how they found one another; how they repeatedly bungled the plot that authorities say posed a "very real danger;" and how they came to sacrifice everything for a group of strangers who promised immortality but delivered ignominy.

“Jihad Jane is a perfect figure in some ways because it’s like a soap opera,” says her intended victim, the artist Vilks. “This is today’s most interesting part of terrorism—the amateurs.”

The Encounter

Colleen LaRose’s path toward terrorism began with what devout Muslims would consider a sin – a one-night stand.

Her tryst occurred in 2007, two years before LaRose agreed to kill Vilks. At the time, she was in Amsterdam on vacation with her longtime boyfriend, Kurt Gorman, and the two were arguing.

They had dated for five years and were living in suburban Pennsylvania. They had met when Gorman, a radio technician, was dispatched from Pennsburg, Pa., to repair a 307-foot radio tower that stood near cotton fields south of Dallas. LaRose was living beneath the tower in a single-wide trailer she shared with her sister, her mother, her stepfather, and two ducks named Lewis and Clark.

Gorman, who declined to talk to Reuters, was a few years younger than LaRose. Colleen found him mellow, gregarious and adventuresome. He fell for her loud, infectious laugh and her penchant for practical jokes. He flattered her with attention and spoiled her with generosity. When she told him that she wished she had bigger breasts, he paid to get them enlarged. Her new size DDs came to dominate her 4-foot-11 frame.

One night during the Amsterdam vacation, the two were at a bar and LaRose got loaded. She could be a mean drunk and she lit into Gorman. He left the bar. LaRose remained.

A short time later, a man approached her. He was Middle Eastern, a Muslim—and handsome. She went home with him, in part to spite her boyfriend, in part because she was curious.

The decision would change her life.

The Conversion

The Amsterdam dalliance with the Muslim man sparked an interest in Islam, one that LaRose kept secret from her boyfriend Gorman when they returned to Pennsylvania.

To learn more about the religion, she began visiting Muslim websites. To meet Muslim men, she signed up for a popular dating site, .

She used Gorman's credit card to pay for access to the site. When Gorman saw the bill, LaRose laughed it off as a lark.

LaRose believed in God but she had never followed any particular religion. As she continued to explore Islam online, she met a man in Turkey who became an especially helpful mentor. He explained the Five Pillars of Islam, and LaRose learned the wudu, the Muslim washing ritual. She ordered a Quran.

After a few weeks, she discovered that converting was easy; she didn't even have to visit a mosque. All she had to do was recite the Shahada, a pledge to accept Allah as her only God and the Prophet Mohammad as his messenger. Just months after her one-night stand in Amsterdam, while chatting with a Saudi Arabian man, LaRose typed the Shahada and converted to Islam via instant messenger.

Sitting before the Dell desktop computer, an unusual feeling washed over her. Happiness.

"I was finally where I belonged," she recalls today.

She took as her Muslim name Fatima, after one of the Prophet Mohammad's daughters. "That's the prophet's favorite daughter," she reasons, "and I was my dad's favorite daughter."

By "dad," LaRose meant her stepfather. Her biological father – she dismissively calls him "nothing more than a sperm

donor"—was, by his own admission, a monster.

The clearest documentation is contained in a series of archived juvenile court records reviewed by Reuters.

On November 6, 1980—when LaRose was 17—she wandered into Runaway House, a shelter for teens in Memphis, Tenn.

The girl's platinum-blond hair desperately needed a wash. Her hollowed eyes betrayed cocaine and heroin use. She carried venereal disease.

Colleen told a counselor that she had run away from home at age 13 and lived on the streets as a prostitute. She became pregnant and suffered a miscarriage that left her unable to have children. At 16, she married a man twice her age.

Runaway House routinely saw its share of cruelty. But Colleen's story deeply shook the counselor, Ollie Avery Mannino.

Colleen's parents, heavy drinkers, divorced when she was 3. Growing up near Detroit, she struggled in school and had to repeat the first grade. Once, she came to school with mouse bites on her fingers.

There was more. When Colleen was 8 years old and her sister, Pam, was 11, her biological father began to rape them, Colleen told the counselor. Her father, Richard LaRose, would appear at their door at night with a bottle of lotion, a silent signal that it was time to undress. The rapes started when Colleen was in the second grade; they continued until she ran away.

Mannino promised to help but explained that the law required her to notify a minor's parent that a runaway was safe. Colleen gave Mannino her father's number. When the counselor reached Richard LaRose, she told him that his daughter was in Memphis. Then she told him what Colleen had said.

"Yeah," Richard LaRose replied without hesitation, Mannino recalls. "I raped her."

He said it sharply, without remorse, and in such a prideful, guttural tone that Mannino snapped her head, stunned. The confession—or boast—is memorialized in the confidential report Mannino wrote to the court shortly after the call. To this day, Mannino, who spoke to Reuters with Colleen's permission, vividly remembers what happened next.

Colleen took the phone. Angry, her face flushed and tears flowing, she screamed at her father: "Look what you've done to me! You did this to me! It's your fault! Why? Why?"

A moment later, Colleen hurled the phone at a bulletin board, scattering notes and pictures. Then she crumpled into the chair.

The counselor bundled the girl off to a hospital for psychiatric treatment.

Mannino said she reported Richard LaRose to local authorities but, inexplicably, he never was charged with raping either daughter. He died in 2010.

"He never did say he was sorry for what he did to us," says Pam LaRose, now 52, who described the rapes recently in her first media interview. "I still have a lot of anger. Colleen feels the same way. We don't talk about it a lot. Too much pain is involved."

The Cause

LaRose remained infatuated with Muslim men and Islam throughout the first half of 2008. But shortly after she converted, she stopped taking her new religion seriously. Pledges to stop drinking fell away. She never visited a mosque. She never learned how to properly pray.

Her waning interest fit an often flighty personality. In Texas, she had worked in a nursing home. But living outside Philadelphia, she held no job and struggled to pass the time

while Gorman traveled.

She had her cats, Klaus and Fluffy, chatted on the phone with her sister in Texas and played games on websites like . She also flirted with men in chat rooms and became obsessed with fantasy warrior stories—she read *Shogun* and watched the movies *Spartacus*, *Braveheart*, *300* and *Troy*.

Not until six months after her online conversion to Islam would she re-engage. In addition to passing time watching action movies, LaRose became riveted by violent YouTube videos of Israeli attacks on Palestinians and American attacks on Iraqis.

The videos of dead and wounded children moved her most. Sometimes while she watched, she could hear the young American children in the duplex below hers, laughing and playing. The disconnect infuriated her. No one seemed to know or care about the plight of the Palestinians. It was so unfair.

By summer 2008, LaRose was posting jihadist videos on YouTube and MySpace. She used various names online, including Sister of Terror, Ms. Machiavelli and Jihad Jane. During the next year, she exchanged messages with avowed jihadists—people with codenames such as Eagle Eye, Black Flag, Abdullah and Hassan—as well as with a woman in Colorado who seemed a lot like her.

LaRose didn't try to hide her posts. She didn't know how. Whenever she wanted to have a private discussion with Eagle Eye, she simply let him take remote control of her computer so he could ensure the secrecy of their chat.

Eagle Eye seemed careful, brave and righteous. He claimed to be on the run from Pakistani authorities and to have participated in the 2008 Mumbai attacks in which terrorists killed 166 people. In mere months, LaRose grew to trust him implicitly. She asked what she could do to help.

His first request seemed innocent enough: Send money to your Muslim brothers and sisters, he told her. So she did, dipping into cash that her boyfriend gave her.

LaRose knew that sending money to people who might be jihadists could be illegal, but who was watching her? Among those she helped: a Cairo cab driver who wanted \$450 to fix his broken taxi.

At one point, she also tried to send \$440 to a Somali man who wanted to start an online forum for an al-Qaida cell. She soon discovered that Western Union didn't serve war-torn Mogadishu.

The Pledge

In January 2009, al-Qaida operatives asked LaRose to do more. They wanted her to become a martyr.

She agreed, and by February sent an online message pledging to use her blonde hair, green eyes and white skin to "blend in with many people ... to achieve what is in my heart."

A month later, LaRose also agreed to an overseas rendezvous with Eagle Eye, to marry him and help him get "inside Europe." Finally, in late March, Eagle Eye asked LaRose to commit her words to deeds. Travel from Pennsylvania to Europe, he said. Find Vilks, the Swedish artist who has blasphemed the Prophet Mohammad. Then shoot him—six times in the chest.

LaRose felt torn.

She wanted to say yes to Eagle Eye instantly. It would be an honor to become a martyr, she thought. Few sisters received such an opportunity. Plus, she wanted to make Eagle Eye proud. He was so religious, and though she had never seen his face, she had come to love him—not in a romantic sense but more like a brother.

But there were other considerations. Her elderly mother had recently moved to Pennsylvania to live with her, and her boyfriend's ailing father also lived in the duplex. Whenever

her boyfriend traveled for work—often—she was left to care for them.

Sitting before the keyboard, she read and reread Eagle Eye's message: "Go to Sweden...And kill him."

She would have to choose one path or the other—an exciting life as jihadist or a mundane one as caretaker.

She chose jihad.

"I will make this my goal," she promised, "'til I achieve it or die trying."

Patiently, she awaited further instructions from Eagle Eye. But she didn't keep a low profile.

Throughout the spring and into mid-summer, LaRose drew more and more attention to herself, posting jihadi videos, anti-Zionist rants and solicitations to raise money.

Then, on a humid day in mid-July, a stranger approached the duplex near Philadelphia and rapped on her door. LaRose didn't answer, and the man left his business card behind. When she picked it up, she rushed to her computer.

LaRose sent two messages—one to a high school student 150 miles away and another to her al-Qaida handler on the other side of the world.

The messages were the same: The FBI was on to her.

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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