

Case 35: Alaska

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Paul Rockwood is an American citizen and a military veteran who converted to Islam shortly after 9/11 when he was in his late 20s. He attended a radical mosque in Falls Church, Virginia, and became increasingly outraged at war crimes committed by American troops in Iraq and by a conviction that the war there was being fought simply to preserve oil supplies.¹ As some point, he began to research explosive components, triggering devices, and bomb construction.

In 2006, he took a job as a meteorological technician with the National Weather Service and moved with his British-born wife, also a convert to Islam, and their small son to King Salmon, Alaska, a town with a population of 442 that is accessible only by plane or small boat.² While there, according to federal authorities, he continued his research on explosives and began to put together a list of assassination targets that eventually included seven members of the military, a publishing company executive, a media personality, two religious organizations, two publishing companies, and seven other individuals.³

According to the FBI, the agency received a tip from outside Alaska, and then, working with an Anchorage mosque leader, hooked Rockwood up with an informant who was a state trooper. The pair, says Rockwood, soon became fast friends. They had many conversations, especially during Rockwood's visits to Anchorage where the informant sometimes put him up in an expensive hotel. In some of these discussions, they shared their outrage about American atrocities in the Iraq War. Rockwood had collected "news articles with the names of people that were involved in the atrocities and stuff," and together, he says, they worked up the assassination list. According to Rockwood, the informant also purchased cell phones and other devices to serve as triggers for the bombs and promised him \$8000 to get started on the plan. At one point, the informant asked for a full set of names and addresses for those to be targeted, and Rockwood drew up a detailed list for him. Rockwood's wife, knowing what the list contained, then delivered it to the informant on a trip to Anchorage.⁴

Rockwood had long suffered from anxiety and from Meniere's syndrome, a disease of the inner ear that causes vertigo, nausea, and hearing loss, and, according to his defense attorney, he had become addicted to opiate painkillers.⁵ Troubled as well by the mosquitos and biting flies that inflict the town each summer and by the fact that he and his wife were the only Muslims in the town, Rockwood decided to take his family to England to live near his wife's mother where he could get free, and better, medical treatment for his affliction. All their

¹ Kim Murphy, "In Alaska, becoming the militants next door," *Los Angeles Times*, December 22, 2011.

² Murphy, "In Alaska, becoming the militants next door."

³ Mark Thiesson, "Feds: Alaska couple had 20 names on hit list." Sentencing Memorandum, United States District Court For the District of Alaska, No. 3:10-cr-00061-RRB, August 16, 2010.

⁴ Murphy, "In Alaska, becoming the militants next door."

⁵ Thiessen, "Feds: Alaska couple had 20 names on hit list."

King Salmon friends gathered to bid them farewell in May 2010 when they began an airplane trip that was to take them to Anchorage, then to Boston (to visit family for a while), then to England.⁶

They were detained by the FBI in Anchorage, however. While not under arrest, they were not allowed to leave the city, were constantly followed, and were required to pay for their own living arrangements which, as their funds dwindled, included a homeless shelter. Both lied to the authorities about the list, and on July 10, 2010, they were arrested.⁷ In a plea bargain arrangement, Rockwood was sentenced to eight years in prison, the maximum allowable for the charge of giving false statements to a Federal agent in a matter involving domestic terrorism. His wife, then five months pregnant, was given five years probation and was allowed to serve the sentence in England.⁸

With one exception, the names on Rockwood's hit list have not been made public, although it has been reported that none of them are in Alaska.⁹ The exception is Tom Bolinder, vice president of the Military Combat Defense Fund, a non-profit organization that believes that "our fighting men and woman deserve nothing less than our undying gratitude and unwavering support" and who, "if the need arises," also "deserve the best legal counsel available." The organization is accordingly devoted to "raising funds to assist in the defense of U.S. Military Personnel, regardless of branch of service, charged with alleged crimes of violence arising from a combat situation while serving in Iraq or Afghanistan" except for "crimes against fellow Americans or coalition forces."¹⁰

Bolinder's Fund is based in another small town, one with only 10 times the population of tiny King Salmon: Avon, Massachusetts. It is fairly near Boston, the city the Rockwoods were planning to visit on their way to the United Kingdom. Bolinder had been told by the FBI in April 2010 to be wary of suspicious packages in the mail, and that "there was also a possibility that the person(s) might make a trip east."¹¹ This "possibility" may have triggered the Rockwoods' interdiction and arrest in Anchorage. The authorities had apparently become convinced that "the further Paul Rockwood got away from King Salmon, Alaska, the more operational he was to become."¹² That key proposition seems, at a minimum, to be debatable.

Diverting time from a fishing trip to Alaska that, he says, had been previously planned, Bolinder made an appearance at the Rockwoods' sentencing on August 22, 2010, to provide a victim impact statement.¹³ Choked with emotion, he said that he had stayed up many nights in the dark waiting for Rockwood to show up. Although he had vowed after his experience in the Vietnam War never to take another life, he predicted that an encounter, given his

⁶ Kim Murphy, "Terrorism case baffles remote Alaska town," *Los Angeles Times*, July 23, 2010.

⁷ Murphy, "In Alaska, becoming the militants next door."

⁸ Mary Pemberton, "Alaska pair pleads guilty to lying about hit list," AP, July 22, 2010. Sentencing Memorandum.

⁹ Murphy, "In Alaska becoming the militants next door."

¹⁰ www.militarycombatdefensefund.com

¹¹ www.militarycombatdefensefund.com Pemberton, "Alaska man gets 8 years."

¹² Sentencing Memorandum.

¹³ www.militarycombatdefensefund.com

military experience and his 34 years as a police officer, would not have turned out well for Rockwood—and then added that, actually, it might not have turned out well for either of them. “I have forgiven you,” he concluded, “My prayer is that someday we will live in peace.”¹⁴

How peaceful Rockwood is in the cell he now occupies in a New Jersey federal prison has not been disclosed. When interviewed there he said, “it was all talk” and “pure fantasy,” insisting “I knew I was never going to do anything. I knew I was going to go to England and not come back.”¹⁵ The investigators had a different take: “This was not a case of ‘if’, but a case of ‘when’ with the ‘when’ becoming more likely with Rockwood’s departure from King Salmon.”¹⁶

A year and a half after the arrests, Rockwood’s wife sought permission to return to the United States to visit him at his prison so that he could meet his new daughter. The request was denied.¹⁷

This full study for this case is yet to be written.

¹⁴ Mary Pemberton, “Alaska man gets 8 years,” AP, August 23, 2010.

¹⁵ Murphy, “In Alaska, becoming the militants next door.”

¹⁶ Sentencing Memorandum.

¹⁷ Murphy, “In Alaska, becoming the militants next door.”