

**Case 43: Pentagon Shooter**

John Mueller

March 14, 2014

In late 2010, a 22-year-old Ethiopian-American, a member of the Marine Corps reserves, decided he needed to send a message protesting American involvement in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He wanted people to “be afraid for supporting the war,” he said, and, to carry out this task, he took a gun and, over the course of about two weeks and in the dead of night, took pot shots at a series of military targets in Northern Virginia: the Pentagon, a Marine Corps recruiting sub-station, a Coast Guard recruiting office, and, on two occasions, the Marine Corps Museum. He videotaped himself in action the second time he assaulted the Museum and can be heard proclaiming that he was trying to turn out the lights in the building.

A few months later, he was arrested for smashing the windows of 27 cars in the Leesburg, Virginia, area and stealing valuables from them, a caper that brought him dismissal from the Marine Corps reserves.

Out on bail and noticing that no one appeared to have gotten the intended message from his dedicated shootings (and perhaps aggrieved that the lights were on again), he decided to be less subtle and was planning, again in the dead of night, to deface gravestones—2,379 of them—in Arlington National Cemetery with provocative slogans in Arabic.<sup>1</sup> He was intercepted by the police when attempting to carry out this mission, and searches of his backpack and then of his apartment turned up the videotape (linked in Andrew Braun’s case study). This in turn led to a confession about the whole range of shootings.

The shooter had not been raised a Muslim, and he kept his conversion to Islam a secret even from his parents. He also acted entirely alone in his bizarre “lone wolf” terrorism efforts which inflicted some \$110,000 in damage, but hurt no one. Although deemed to be schizophrenic at one point in the judicial proceedings, his acts of focused vandalism earned him 25 years in prison. This suggests that, although his actions scarcely affected US policy in the Middle East, he was successful at least in frightening some people. The sentencing judge says that the case reminded him of the DC snipers of 2002 who, unlike the Pentagon shooter, had actually shot at people, killing ten.<sup>2</sup> The judge may also have been impressed by evidence that, if the cemetery vandalism, like his earlier ventures, failed to call sufficient attention to his cause, the Pentagon shooter was planning to do yet more shootings and/or somehow figure out how to blow up a military fuel tanker truck in nearby Maryland.

---

<sup>1</sup> Justin Jouvenal, “Yonathan Melaku, Who Fired at Pentagon and Other Military Facilities, Gets 25 Years in Prison,” *Washington Post*, January 11, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Jouvenal, “Yonathan Melaku.”

## Case 43: Pentagon Shooter

Andrew Braun

March 14, 2014

### 1. Overview

Yonathan Melaku, an Ethiopia-born naturalized U.S. citizen, was responsible for what became known as the Northern Virginia Military Shootings in which, between October 17 and November 2, 2010, he shot at the Marine Corps museum on two occasions as well as at the Pentagon, a Marine Corps recruiting sub-station in Chantilly, and a Coast Guard recruiting office in Woodbridge.<sup>1</sup> The 22 year old used a high powered rifle for all five of his attacks and forensic examination was eventually able to link all the bullets from the separate incidents to the same rifle.<sup>2</sup> All of these buildings were associated with the United States military. According to authorities, Melaku said that he targeted symbols of the military because of American involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>3</sup> He was 22 years of age at the time of the shooting series.

On October 17, 2010, Melaku committed the first shooting, aimed at the National Museum of the Marine Corps in Triangle, Virginia. The shooting occurred sometime between the hours of 12:30 and 7:00am, and ten .38/9mm rounds were fired from a range of approximately 150-250 yards away. Bullets holes were discovered in several windows as well as on the base of the building.

Although Yonathan Melaku first started shooting in October, he was not found until June 17, 2011. Moreover, he was arrested for other reasons. At 1:30am, he was approached by police from Ft. Myer but, instead of responding to the law enforcement officials, he ran from them, dropping a backpack in the process. Eventually he was taken into custody on the property of Arlington National Cemetery, where he was about to deface and defile the names of those who had died in combat.

Police were later able to connect Melaku to the second shooting of the Marine Corps museum because after he was arrested police found a video when searching his residence in which Melaku had videotaped himself in his car shooting at the Museum, playing mujahedeen praising music in the background, and screaming things in Arabic such as "God is good."<sup>4</sup> After this video was discovered, Melaku confessed to the authorities about the other shootings.

He ended up agreeing to serve a 25-year prison sentence on three charges: destruction of U.S. property, use of a firearm in an act of violence, and intention to injure a veteran's memorial.<sup>5</sup> It is estimated that the total amount of damages

---

<sup>1</sup> Ryan J. Reilly "Feds: Reservist Recorded Himself Shooting At Marine Corps Museum. *Talking Points Memo*, October 17, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Kelley A. Clark, "Affidavit In Support of Criminal Complaint," June 23, 2011. <http://www.scribd.com/doc/58554233/Melaku-Complaint>

<sup>3</sup> "Profile: Yonathan Melaku," Adl.org, March 14, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Meta Pettus, "Yonathan Melaku, Accused of Firing a Gun at Marine Corps Museum, Pentagon, Pleads Guilty," January 26, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> "Pentagon Shooter Pleads Guilty, Agrees to 25 Years," FOX News Network, January 26, 2012.

he caused to all of the buildings was in excess of \$100,000.<sup>6</sup> No one was killed or hurt in the shootings.

## 2. Nature of the adversary

Yonathan Melaku was born in Ethiopia and moved to the United States in 2005. He and became a naturalized United States citizen in 2009.<sup>7</sup> He attended Thomas A. Edison High School located in Alexandria, Virginia, graduating in 2006. Melaku then decided to join the Marine Corps reserves in September of 2007. Marine Corps officials have disclosed that Melaku was never deployed overseas nor was he scheduled to deploy.<sup>8</sup> Though Melaku's choice to target military buildings in all of his five part potshot campaign might imply his dissatisfaction with his experience in the reserves, his defense attorney insisted otherwise. "I don't believe this was based on any grievance against the Marines," defense attorney Robert May said. "As far as I know he was happy with his Marine Corps service."<sup>9</sup> Melaku served for several years in the reserves as a lance corporal, which is a non-commissioned office rank just above private first class and below corporal.<sup>10</sup> His Military Occupational Specialty or MOS was 3531- a motor vehicle operator.<sup>11</sup> While in the reserves, Melaku won several awards including the National Defense Service Medal and the Selected Marine Corps Reserve medal.<sup>12</sup>

He was dismissed from the Corps in 2011 because of Grand Larceny charges after he broke into 27 different cars in the Leesburg, Virginia area, smashing windows and stealing valuables from inside the vehicles.<sup>13</sup> At the time of his arrest for larceny (a crime involving the unlawful taking of personal property), Melaku was being held on bond for \$5000 but the bond was revoked when the federal charges surfaced after his Arlington Cemetery arrest. A pretrial meeting for the larceny charges occurred in Leesburg. Six charges were held against him initially but prosecutors dropped four of the six larceny charges when Melaku agreed to waive his right to a preliminary hearing on the remaining two charges.

When Melaku's father was approached about his son, he replied that Yonathan Melaku is good person, who respects his parents and authority. In the courtroom, Melaku's lawyer read a statement that was prepared by Melaku's parents in which they said that while growing up in Ethiopia, Yonathan would always ask to give money to poor people. When he left the marines, he was "a

---

<sup>6</sup> "Man Pleads Guilty to Shooting Military Buildings in Northern Virginia Defense, Government Jointly Recommend Sentence of 25 Years in Prison." *FBI*, January 26, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> "Remember the Guy That Was Caught for Shooting at the Pentagon?" *NowPublic.com*, January 26, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> "Remember the Guy That Was Caught for Shooting at the Pentagon?" January 26, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> "Lawyer: Melaku Has No Grudge against Marines." *FOX News Network*, July 20, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> "US Marine Military Ranks, Lowest to Highest." *Http://www.militaryfactory.com*.

<sup>11</sup> Eric Dondero, "Suspected Muslim Terrorist at Pentagon a Marine Reservist Failure?" *Libertarian, Republican*, June 19, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Esposito, Pierre Thomas, Sunlen Miller, and Huma Khan, "Marine Corps Reserve Corporal Arrested in Pentagon Bomb Scare," *ABC News*, June 17, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> "Yonathan Melaku Arrested in Leesburg Car Tamperings," *WJLA*, May 26, 2011.

different person.”<sup>14</sup> “Your honor, my son is sick. He is not a terrorist,” his parents said in their statement.<sup>15</sup>

Melaku’s motivation for shooting at the military buildings was to make a statement against the involvement of the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan. He appears to be religiously motivated by a radical interpretation of Islam and was described by prosecutors as a “self-radicalized lone wolf.”<sup>16</sup> Melaku filmed himself the second time he shot at the Marine Corps Museum.<sup>17</sup> He appeared to be alone on this night and positioned the camera in a way that made his shooting visible to the viewer, emphasizing how he acted alone in his actions. Melaku narrated the video, and at one point he points out the window and exclaims “That’s my target. That’s the military building. It’s going to be attacked ...Last time I hit them, they turned off the lights for like four or five days. Now, here we go again. This time, I’m gonna turn it off permanently.”<sup>18</sup> Some of the things he said in the video amplify his religious convictions and suggest that they play some part in his decision to perform these terroristic crimes. For instance, after the shooting, he repeatedly exclaimed “Allahu Akbar” which in Arabic means “God is great.” He starts out simply saying the phrase, but quickly starts to shout it out very emphatically and his religious zeal seems to take over as he literally screams the words. This would imply that he experienced some sort of personal satisfaction upon shooting at the museum and he justifies his actions in religion in saying “God is great.”

Melaku’s mental condition was initially called into question by his first defense lawyer, Gregory English. Melaku ended up pleading guilty to the federal charges that stood against him, avoiding an actual trial. He was sentenced to 25 years in prison as part of this plea deal. At the time he entered his plea, English requested a mental health evaluation in the hopes of placing Melaku in the federal medical prison in Butner, N.C.<sup>19</sup> However at this time, English took pains to say that “any mental health problems that plagued Melaku did not rise to the level that they called his competency into question.”<sup>20</sup>

It is unclear why, but for some reason (perhaps English’s weak attempt to lessen the plea because of mental illness) Melaku obtained a new set of lawyers later in the year: Geoffrey Gitner and Billy Martin. Gitner and Martin opposed English’s conclusion about Melaku’s mental health, claiming it to be “shocking” that “prior counsel failed to ever have Mr. Melaku examined by a psychiatrist or other mental health practitioner.” This shows that these two lawyers believe

---

<sup>14</sup> Mary Lopez, “Pentagon Shooter Yonathan Melaku Sentenced to 25 Years in Prison,” *Clarendon-Courthouse-Rosslyn Patch*, January 11, 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Lopez, “Pentagon Shooter Yonathan Melaku Sentenced to 25 Years in Prison.”

<sup>16</sup> “Combating Hate: International Extremism & Terrorism: Profile: Yonathan Melaku,” March 14, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> This video is posted at

<http://www.nbcwashington.com/video/#!/news/local/Video-Released-of-Marine-Corps-Museum-Shootings/138146668>

<sup>18</sup> Pettus, “Yonathan Melaku, Accused of Firing a Gun at Marine Corps Museum.”

<sup>19</sup> Arin Greenwood, “Yonathan Melaku, Ex-Marine Who Fired Shots At Pentagon, Claims Mental Illness,” *The Huffington Post*, July 11, 2012.

<sup>20</sup> Greenwood, “Yonathan Melaku, Ex-Marine Who Fired Shots At Pentagon.”

English failed Melaku as a lawyer in his trivialization of what they saw as mental health issues particularly because he never actually sought professional diagnoses of Melaku and instead just assumed normality. Gitner and Martin took the steps necessary in seeking a professional evaluation of their client and had had psychiatrist Neil Blumberg examine Melaku. After reviewing medical records and interviewing Melaku for five hours in jail, Blumberg concluded that Melaku suffered from schizophrenia. Gitner and Martin motioned for a court-ordered mental examination, but the motion did not seek to overturn Melaku's conviction and it was not clear at the time if any determinations about Melaku's mental health could affect his guilty plea. The diagnoses of schizophrenia did not deter prosecutors and Melaku ended up with the same plea deal of 25 years in prison. The prosecutors said that the report from officials identifying Melaku as schizophrenic gave no real indication that Melaku was unfit to be sentenced or that the diagnoses interfered with this competence or ability to make the decisions he made to make those military buildings his targets. In other words, despite the schizophrenia diagnoses, there is no indication that this deficiency draws any conclusions about Melaku's mental health at the time of the shootings and whether he could be deemed legally insane. Prosecutors said that the 25-year term was quite reasonable especially when compared side-by-side to the potential mandatory minimum sentence of 85 years that Melaku could have faced in trial.<sup>21</sup>

One very interesting thing about Yonathan Melaku is the ambiguity of his religious involvement. Although it is clear that some of his motivation involves his personal interpretation of Islam, nobody actually knew that he was a Muslim, not even his parents. It is unclear the degree to which he self-radicalized and converted to Islam after the Iraq war and it is also unclear how open he was to others about his religious convictions. It appears however, that he tended to keep this information to himself, or at least away from his parents. Melaku's defense attorney stated that Melaku's family is of the Coptic Christian faith and they were completely stunned to learn about the crimes their son committed and about his relationship with Islam and personal Jihad: they claimed that they observed no signs that Yonathan had any involvement with the Islamic faith at all.

Melaku serves as another example of a lone-wolf terrorist. He took it upon himself to make a statement against the United States that he disagreed with its involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan and used his personal dissatisfaction, political perspective, and newly found religious identity as fuel to propel himself into his terroristic actions.

### **3. Motivation**

Melaku was primarily motivated by U.S. foreign policy. After being convicted, he told the FBI that he self-radicalized after the Iraq war and committed the shootings as a means to send a message to the United States Government that they should not participate or engage in wars against Muslims in Iraq and Afghanistan. He also told the FBI that he ended the shootings because his message was not being communicated. This is definitely true as nobody understood the purpose of the shootings and they occurred without any evidence

---

<sup>21</sup> "Yonathan Melaku, 2010 Pentagon Shooter, Deemed Schizophrenic," *WJLA*, January 14, 2013.

for motivation, but simply as isolated incidents of shootings at military buildings. In fact, Melaku said that he was planning to deface graves in Arlington Cemetery as a means to up his message and make it more clear and penetrating. Apparently, had he not been caught, Melaku had intended to hijack a military fuel truck and set it on fire in Maryland.<sup>22</sup>

#### 4. Goals

Melaku shot at the Marine Corps Museum, Pentagon, and the two recruiting stations with the intention of sending a message. Because all of the shootings happened very early in the morning when nobody inhabited these facilities, it is unlikely that Melaku had a goal in mind of murdering U.S. citizens. For example, the first time Melaku shot at the National Museum of the Marine Corps, the event occurred sometime between 12:30 and 7:30am. When he shot at the pentagon, the Pentagon Force Protection Agency reported audible shots around 4:57am. Similar early morning times were also the case for the other shootings, reinforcing the unlikelihood that killing was a goal of Melaku's. Rather his intention was simple in that it was only to send a message about U.S. meddling in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, randomly shooting at these five buildings did not clearly communicate this to anyone and instead caused a lot of confusion and panic. Melaku intended to amplify his message by defacing the graves of veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, but was caught the night he attempted to commit this crime.<sup>23</sup>

#### 5. Plans for violence

Melaku's plans were not so much about violence or hurting others as they were about the big picture ideals he was trying to get across. Melaku told investigators that he wanted people to "be afraid for supporting the war," which led him to commit the shootings.<sup>24</sup> Since nobody seemed to be heeding his message due to the extreme ambiguity and uncertainty surrounding the shootings, he tried to more clearly communicate his message by defacing the graves of those who had died in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars by spray painting statements in Arabic across the markers.<sup>25</sup> When Melaku was initially approached by law enforcement when he was on his way to do this, he fled on foot and dropped the backpack that he was carrying.<sup>26</sup> He was eventually taken into custody on the property of Arlington National Cemetery but had no identification on his person and initially refused to supply it.<sup>27</sup>

The contents of the backpack were examined and found to contain four clear Ziplock bags containing a powdery substance marked as "5 lbs AN", numerous 9mm shell casings, one can of black spray paint, two cans of Rust-Oleum, work gloves, a headlamp, and a spiral notebook containing numerous

---

<sup>22</sup> "Yonathan Melaku, 2010 Pentagon Shooter, Deemed Schizophrenic."

<sup>23</sup> Justin Jouvenal, "Yonathan Melaku, Who Fired at Pentagon and Other Military Facilities, Gets 25 Years in Prison," *Washington Post*, January 11, 2013.

<sup>24</sup> Jouvenal, "Yonathan Melaku, Who Fired at Pentagon and Other Military Facilities."

<sup>25</sup> "Man Pleads Guilty to Shooting Military Buildings in Northern Virginia."

<sup>26</sup> Clark, "Affidavit In Support of Criminal Complaint."

<sup>27</sup> Clark, "Affidavit In Support of Criminal Complaint."

Arabic statements referencing the Taliban, al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, other individuals associated with foreign terrorist organizations, and “The Path to Jihad” including “defeat coalition and allies and America.”s. An FBI forensic chemist analyzed the powder and found it to be ammonium nitrate (corresponding to the “AN” marked on the bags), with minor amounts of other inert material. Ammonium nitrate is a common component of homemade explosives. In order for homemade explosives to function properly, one needs an oxidizer to provide oxygen to the explosive reaction and a fuel. Ammonium nitrate is an easily obtained oxidizer because it is sold in the form of fertilizer. Any fuel can be combined with ammonium nitrate to create a high explosive known as ammonium nitrate fuel oil or ANFO. The necessary proportions of ammonium nitrate to fuel oil are readily obtained via the internet.<sup>28</sup>

ANFO is a very powerful explosive, and was used in the 1995 Oklahoma City Bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah federal building. Apparently, in addition to spray painting the graves of the deceased, Melaku intended to leave the four bags of ammonium nitrate nearby as part of a solitary campaign of “fear and terror” that included the earlier shootings.<sup>29</sup> However the powder was discovered to be inert as it was just ammonium nitrate, and not ANFO. This was confirmed by special agent in charge of counterterrorism for the FBI, Brenda Heck, who said “There was not a device and the products found are determined right now to be inert.”<sup>30</sup> It should be noted that upon arrest, Melaku allegedly disclosed to police that other devices were at bay in the neighboring area.<sup>31</sup> He also told them the location of his car, and police investigated a red 2011 Nissan which ended up containing materials that were reportedly neutralized, according to law enforcement.<sup>32</sup> Police searched for other devices, creating serious traffic congestion in the neighboring area, but no such devices were discovered.

Later, on June 17, 2011, Melaku’s residence in Alexandria was searched for more evidence. Law enforcement found a typed list in Melaku’s bedroom closet that was titled “Timer” and had the following items:

1. 9 volt alkaline [sic] battery
2. Battery connector for 9 volt
3. 20 gauge insulated stranded wire
4. Electrical tape
5. Epoxy or super glue
6. Digital kitchen countdown timer
7. Bulb
8. LED light
9. Transistor<sup>33</sup>

Items 1, 4, 5, and on the list were already crossed off. According to an FBI bomb technician, the items on this list line up with the items required to make a time

---

<sup>28</sup> Clark, “Affidavit In Support of Criminal Complaint.”

<sup>29</sup> Josh White, “Yonathan Melaku Admits Shooting at Pentagon, Military Buildings,” *Washington Post*, January 26, 2012.

<sup>30</sup> Esposito et al., “Marine Corps Reserve Corporal Arrested in Pentagon Bomb Scare.”

<sup>31</sup> Esposito et al., “Marine Corps Reserve Corporal Arrested in Pentagon Bomb Scare.”

<sup>32</sup> Esposito et al., “Marine Corps Reserve Corporal Arrested in Pentagon Bomb Scare.”

<sup>33</sup> Clark, “Affidavit In Support of Criminal Complaint.”

power unit and firing mechanism of an Improvised Explosive device or IED.<sup>34</sup> The video discussed earlier was also found in this search, and this is how authorities tied Melaku to the museum shootings and then to the other shootings as he eventually confessed.

In addition to the shootings and vandalism, Melaku had further plans to send his message and inspire fear. These included shooting at more buildings and then blowing up a military fuel tanker truck in Maryland, according to court documents.<sup>35</sup> Luckily, Melaku was caught and sent to prison before he commit to any of these other further plans of violence. Details of how he planned to carry out such measures of violence were not found, and it was unclear whether these future plans involved physical harm or killing of individuals.

## 6. Role of informants

Yonathan Melaku acted alone and was not found to be associated with any particular terrorist network, nor was he found to have had any personal interaction with anyone within a terrorist organization. He had not been talking to any informant during any part of his plans of terror, and it is likely that he would have been found a lot earlier if he had been in contact with an informant. Instead, he was not captured until eight months after he began his shooting spree in 2010.

Melaku can be considered to be a lone-wolf terrorist, which many believe is a new wave of terrorism. This growing phenomenon is attributed in part to the United States crackdown on foreign terrorist networks, something that has prompted these now-decentralized groups to encourage individuals to act on their own in a kind of “leaderless resistance.” For example, in 2006 al-Qaeda leader Abu Jihad al-Masra issued a call to arms entitled “How to Fight Alone” which was widely circulated in jihadist networks and beyond.<sup>36</sup>

## 7. Connections

Although federal investigators never found any evidence that Melaku was linked to any terrorist organization, he at the very least seemed to be inspired by al-Qaeda as pro-al-Qaeda statements were discovered in his backpack when he was arrested. These statements were found in a spiral that consisted mainly of notes for a financial class. There was a page that contained the words “al-Qaeda,” “Taliban rules,” “mujahidin,” and “defeated coalition forces.”<sup>37</sup> These statements do not indicate an immediate association with any terrorist organization. But they do indicate a sort of fascination with these networks and with the concept of jihad. It appears that Melaku was inspired by the goals of these radical terrorist networks without actually having any contact with them. This type of lone wolf terrorism is exactly what these networks were aiming for in their call for Muslims to rise up independently without instruction. This type of encouragement has eliminated the need for one to belong to a terrorist network to commit acts of

---

<sup>34</sup> Clark, “Affidavit In Support of Criminal Complaint.”

<sup>35</sup> Jouvenal, “Yonathan Melaku, Who Fired at Pentagon and Other Military Facilities.”

<sup>36</sup> Edwin Bakker and Beatrice De Graaf. “Preventing Lone Wolf Terrorism: Some CT Approaches Addressed,” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 5, No. 5-6, 2011.

<sup>37</sup> Esposito et al., “Marine Corps Reserve Corporal Arrested in Pentagon Bomb Scare.”



terrorism. Melaku's self-radicalization and self-motivation is what led him to engage in these attacks, independent of any help from a terrorist organization.

### **8. Relation to the Muslim community**

Melaku was characterized by his neighbor as "a person that doesn't really talk a lot, a quiet man."<sup>38</sup> This is certainly true in that Melaku was not an active member of the Muslim community in Alexandria. He claimed to have been self-radicalized and kept to himself to the degree that not even his parents, Coptic Christians, knew that Melaku identified as Muslim. However, he did identify his religion as Islam in military documentation.<sup>39</sup> Melaku's lack of communication with members of the Muslim community limited the reaction of community members to his acts of violence. Also, the authority's reluctance to initially label the shootings as acts of terrorism and the ambiguity surrounding Melaku's religious affiliation likely led to lack of information available on any link between Melaku and the Muslim community.

### **9. Depiction by the authorities**

Initially, authorities were not anxious to label the attacks as acts of terrorism and were very reluctant to provide any information as the case was still unfolding, developing, and evolving before them.

When the shooter of the military buildings was still unknown, law enforcement did not single out any certain description or mold of the perpetrator but rather kept its options open to a wider range of possibilities. "It could be someone who holds a grudge against the military. It could be someone who believes by targeting military facilities they will get a lot of attention. It could be someone suffering from PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] who believes someone in one of those buildings is responsible," Stephen Weber, professor of political science at University of California, said. "Or it could be none of those things."<sup>40</sup>

The authorities handled the situation very well: their reaction was not alarmist and they did not try to spread any hysteria about the nation being under attack by radicals. Rather, they maintained a controlled response, got a hold of the situation, and reacted responsibly by only providing facts to the public on the case rather than biased opinions.

### **10. Coverage by the media**

The media was similar response in that they did not immediately label the events as acts of terrorism. Rather they handled the situation well by not reacting negatively to Melaku's religious affiliation, in fact most news outlets neglected to bring up Melaku's religious background at all. Whether this happened because the information was not yet available or because reporters were trying to avoid associating a connection between potential terrorism and Islam is unclear. Fox

---

<sup>38</sup> Esposito et al., "Marine Corps Reserve Corporal Arrested in Pentagon Bomb Scare."

<sup>39</sup> "Va. Man Charged in 2010 DC-area Military Shootings," FOX News Network, June 23, 2011

<sup>40</sup> White, "Yonathan Melaku Admits Shooting at Pentagon, Military Buildings."

news channel was the first to report Melaku was indeed a self-proclaimed Muslim.

Overall the media did a great job of examining the facts of the case from the shootings to Arlington National Cemetery. One of the more useful documents is the affidavit of Kelley A. Clark, a Special Agent with the FBI Washington Field Office, which is lengthy and full of detail.

Although the media were effective in honing in on the facts of the case, I feel they could have done a better job in trying to form a fuller picture of who Yonathan Melaku is as an individual. Instead, finding any kind of background on Melaku or really finding any information outside the direct scope of the case was very difficult. It would have been easier to characterize him if more information on his upbringing, high school experiences, and time in the marine reserves, was readily available.

### **11. Policing costs**

Since Melaku acted alone in this case and never communicated or had any contact with any informant or terrorist and was thus not being tracked by police, no surveillance costs were incurred. However, the total cost in damage to the four buildings was approximately \$110,000. The cost to repair damage to the windows and exterior of the Pentagon just by itself was \$15,144. In addition, the cost of the damages to the Museum exceeded \$93,000 and the Coast Guard office damages came out to \$1,800.

### **12. Relevance of the internet**

When authorities went to Melaku's residence to gather evidence and to make sure there were no other potential explosive threats, they investigated his laptop and found that he had used the internet to look up numerous documents concerning bomb-making and explosives.<sup>41</sup> He used it to look up how to make up improvised explosive devices and the list of items required to make a timer, listed above, was taken from the internet. Though these items were found on his computer, no evidence was found that he had been chatting with anyone in any kind of terrorist network--reinforcing the conclusion that he acted on his own for the purpose of supporting his own personal terror campaign. Melaku was also reported to have been researching what jihadism was on his computer. The internet played a role in allowing Melaku self-radicalize by allowing him to look up as much information as he wanted about jihad and about making explosives. It seems to have been the primary means for Melaku to get information, especially since he had no contact or communication with anyone else during the conjuring of his plans. This makes the importance of the internet very high in this particular case.

### **13. Are we safer?**

The answer to that question is yes. Melaku intended to blow up a fuel truck in Maryland and carry out more shootings. Although none of his shootings at that point had hurt anybody, it is possible that the next round of shootings

---

<sup>41</sup> Clark, "Affidavit In Support of Criminal Complaint."

would have targeted more than just buildings. Thus with Melaku behind bars, we are certainly safer as he cannot fulfill any of these alternative plans to further communicate his message.

#### **14. Conclusions**

Even though there were no people injured in these shooting attacks, an important lesson here is that lone wolves are incredibly hard to prevent and a serious threat to our nation's national security operations because if they communicate with nobody else, nobody can stop them from carrying out their plans but themselves. Melaku told no one about any of his plans. The only reason he was caught was because of his suspicious behavior in the early hours of the night. Although national security efforts are somewhat capable of finding lone wolves by tracking who visits certain types of websites, the potential for a lone wolf to slip through the government's hands is considerable. What is incredible is how easy it was for Yonathan Melaku to terrorize the D.C. area. He was able to shoot at such high profile buildings as the pentagon and suffered no consequences or repercussions until 8 months later when he was arrested for something else entirely in Arlington National Cemetery. It is possible to shoot at and damage one of the world's most heavily protected facilities and get away with it scot free.

How much fear he instilled in people is uncertain but, because these incidents were eerily reminiscent of those perpetuated by the Washington, D.C., sniper several years earlier, the public safety and homeland security challenges associated with responding to this series of incidents were still of high significance. In addition, the timing of these events fell in line with several important events including the Marine Corps Marathon (in which security was heavily beefed up), Veteran's Day, and the Marine Corps Birthday. This heightened concern for the response requirements for law enforcement.<sup>42</sup>

What is interesting about this case is that Melaku was not immediately caught after any of the shootings and instead was only taken into custody after being arrested for another crime. This raises the question of what did investigators know about him (as the mystery shooter) in the months leading up to arrest and what leads were being investigated, if any. The difficulty of tracking down a lone wolf is considerable, and new ways to counteract these individuals must be found to deal with the problem lone wolf s present. Otherwise, instead of plans to attack buildings, plans to attack people may easily be put into place.

#### **Appendix: Timeline of the shootings**

October 17, 2010: Melaku committed the first shooting, aimed at the National Museum of the Marine Corps in Triangle, Virginia. The shooting occurred sometime between the hours of 12:30 and 7:00am. Ten .38/9mm rounds were fired from a range of approximately 150-250 yards away from the museum. Melaku was believed to have been shooting from the general vicinity of

---

<sup>42</sup> Colleen McCue, Lebew Miller, and Steve Lambert, "The Northern Virginia Military Shootings Series: Operational Validation of Geospatial Predictive Analytics" *The Police Chief*, February 2013.

Interstate-95, which is west of the museum. Bullets holes were discovered in several windows as well as on the base of the building.

October 19, 2010: Melaku shoots at the Pentagon. The Pentagon Force Protection Agency reported hearing shots in the vicinity of the Pentagon South parking lot, which faces I-395, at approximately 4:47am. Three impact marks consistent with bullet holes were discovered on the Pentagon's south side exterior. In addition, there were bullet holes in individual windows on both the third and fourth floors. Although the bullets had hit the protective windows, they were trapped and did not penetrate to the inside. Also, these windows were to offices that were being renovated and so were not in use at the time of the shooting.<sup>43</sup>

October 25-26, 2010: Sometime between 7pm and 8am, two shots were fired at the Marine Corps recruiting sub-station in Chantilly, Virginia. The bullet holes were found by two marine recruiters at 8am on October 26. Another bullet hole was found in the business to the left, a nail salon, but this was likely an accident as the target was indeed found to later be the recruiting office.<sup>44</sup>

October 29, 2010: At approximately 6:30am employees of the National Museum of the Marine Corps found new bullet holes in an area similar to that of the previous shooting that had taken place just a few weeks prior. Like this last shooting, the trajectory appeared to be coming from Interstate-95.

November 1-2, 2010: Sometime during the night and early morning hours at least one shot was fired at the U.S. Coast Guard recruiting office in Woodbridge, Virginia. The front door frame and locking mechanism were damaged in the shooting.

---

<sup>43</sup> Jerry Markon and Julie Tate, "FBI Links Shots Fired at Pentagon and Marine Museum." *Washington Post*, October 27, 2010.

<sup>44</sup> "Bullet Holes Found at Corps Recruiting Office," *Marine Corps Times*, October 26, 2010.