# Case 57: Killings in Seattle and New Jersey

### John Mueller

November 28, 2016

During two months in 2014, a 29-year-old African-American with an extensive criminal record murdered four people in Seattle and New Jersey with a 9mm handgun stolen or borrowed from his girlfriend. After being caught, he justified his actions as "vengeance" for the millions of innocent Muslim lives "being taken every single day" by the United States in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan: "So a life for a life."

Although he called himself a "strict" Muslim, there is no proof, as Alex Iammarino reports, that he ever attended mosque or practiced the religion or had much connection with other Muslims. He also had no connection to any terrorist group, though he may have been something of a supporter of ISIS, then just emerging as a force in the Middle East. And his selection of victims, all adult males, was somewhat bizarre and inconsistent. The first was apparently selected at random, the second and third were killed execution-style after being lured through a gay dating app, and the fourth was murdered as part of a bungled robbery attempt. None had any connection to the hated American military.

He seems, then, not only to be a "self-styled jihadist" as one press report put it, but also something of a self-styled Muslim, and his outpourings about injustice in the Middle East may have been more nearly a convenient and trendy excuse for his killings than a motivation.

Since prosecutors had him on multiple criminal charges including murder, there was no particular reason, notes Iammarino, to also prosecute him as a terrorist. However, he also observes that once terrorism charges were made public, "the media began covering his story more frequently."

# **Case 57: Killings in Seattle and New Jersey**

### Alex Iammarino

November 27, 2016

#### 1. Overview

Between April 27 and June 25, 2014, Ali Muhammad Brown, a 29-yearold African-American and a U.S. citizen, went on a murder spree, killing a total of four people. The first victim, Leroy Henderson, selected apparently at random, was shot 10 times in the Skyway neighborhood in Seattle, Washington. The next two victims, Ahmed Said and Dwone Anderson-Young, were lured by Brown through Grindr, a gay dating app, and were shot execution-style in front of Anderson-Young's house in Seattle.<sup>1</sup> With a warrant out for his arrest, Brown fled, ending up in New Jersey where he allegedly had family. The final victim was a college student, Brendan Tevlin. As he was driving back to his home from a friend's house near midnight, Tevlin was approached while stopped at a stoplight by three men, one of them, Brown. A planned armed robbery turned homicidal as Brown fired ten shots through the passenger-side window, hitting Tevlin eight times and killing him. While the other men ran away, Brown entered the car, moved Tevlin's body to the passenger side floor, and drove to a nearby apartment complex, where he stole personal items from the victim.<sup>2</sup>

Brown then committed a series of robberies and on July 18 was caught by police at a makeshift campsite in New Jersey.<sup>3</sup> He was found with a diary detailing his desire to be trained by jihadists. Upon capture, he told authorities that his crimes were justified because his mission was "vengeance" for the "millions of lives" lost in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, "where innocent lives are being taken every single day…by America, by this government. So a life for a life."<sup>4</sup>

Brown was placed on trial for four counts of first-degree aggravated murder as well as aggravated robbery, and was sentenced to 36 years in prison for the robbery alone. Before he was convicted for the four counts of murder, the prosecutor brought Brown's diary into consideration. Its explanation for why he committed the crimes was used as evidence to convict him for terrorism under a statute that had been passed in New Jersey following September 11 and had never before been applied.<sup>5</sup> There was no concern that he would be released from prison in his lifetime, so it is possible that the prosecutor only brought these charges up for personal glory. Brown is currently in prison in New Jersey and will stay there for the remainder of his life.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Nicole Hensley, "Seattle fugitive suspected of killing two gay men nabbed in New Jersey," nydailynews.com, July 19, 2014.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> "Ali Muhammad Brown," wikipedia.com, November 16, 2016.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> "Ali Muhammad Brown," wikipedia.com, November 16, 2016.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Q13 Fox News Staff, "Cops: Self-styled jihadist admits to killing 4 people, calls it 'vengeance' for U.S. actions in Mideast," q13fox.com, August 20, 2014.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Darren Boyle, "Muslim accused of killing four people in protest against US foreign policy was an 'ISIS supporter on a one-man jihad' who featured on a 'terrorism watch list'," dailymail.co.uk, January 21, 2016.

## 2. Nature of the adversary

Ali Muhammad Brown was born in New Jersey in 1985. He has a long history of crime. At the young age of 17, he became involved in a banking scheme led by his barber, Ruben Shumpert, that essentially consisted of depositing faulty checks to Bank of America, Washington Mutual, and Wells Fargo, and withdrawing money before the checks bounced. As Shumpert fled the country to Somalia (he pledged allegiance to, and fought for, Al-Shabaab), Brown was caught by authorities, convicted of bank fraud, and imprisoned. They were unable to prove that Brown was directly involved with fundraising for Al-Shabaab, so he was not charged with that specific crime. The prosecutor in the case said that Brown was on a federal watch list but did not elaborate, and Dave Joly, a spokesman for the FBI's Terrorist Screening Center, said that the agency does not publicly confirm or deny whether an individual is on its terror screening or no-fly lists.<sup>6</sup>

Brown's drifted from white-collar to more serious personal crimes. In 2012, he pleaded guilty to "communication with a minor for immoral purposes." When he was released from prison for this crime in 2013, he failed to register as a sex offender and warrants were put out for his arrest.<sup>7</sup> By 2014, his crimes escalated, and his murder spree began at the end of April. The escalation of his crimes may have been partially provoked by his time in prison, but there is no evidence to back this theory.

Brown is an African-American, U.S.-born citizen, who identified as a Muslim. He took his religion to an extreme and claimed the murders were done in the name of Islam. There is no information regarding Brown's childhood or family. In fact, even his exact birthdate is unknown. It is reasonable to assume, however, that his education did not reach the university level, and it is likely he did not graduate from high school since his life of crime began at such a young age. His economic status is also unclear, but with his crimes ranging from bank fraud to armed robbery, it is likely that he was struggling economically throughout his life. He had a girlfriend and used her car for the murders in Washington and her legally-purchased 9mm handgun for all four murders. It is unclear if he was straight or gay but he did use a gay dating app to lure two of his victims.

## 3. Motivation

Upon capture, Brown reportedly told authorities exactly why he murdered the four men: "My mission is vengeance. For the lives, millions of lives are lost every day. Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, all these places where innocent lives are being taken every single day …All these lives are taken every single day by America, by this government. So a life for a life." He stated his acts were just, explaining he only targeted adult males. He also claimed to be a "strict" Muslim which could possibly help explain why he targeted two gay men.<sup>8</sup> However, the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Boyle, "Muslim accused of killing four."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Wire Report, "Transient man charged for double murder at gay bar in Seattle," watermarkonline.com, July 7, 2014.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Q13 Fox News Staff, "Cops: Self-styled jihadist."

only evidence to suggest he is a strict Muslim is his own word—there is no proof he ever attended mosque or practiced the religion. No specific event triggered Brown into killing his victims, but instead he was motivated by concern about the general U.S. and Western occupation in the Middle East.

# 4. Goals

Based on Brown's own testimony in which he claimed his acts were just because the same acts are being committed by the U.S. against Muslims in the Middle East, it is safe to assume his goals were to continue his lone-wolf jihadist murder spree until he got caught. He did not go to extensive measures to cover his tracks though: his fingerprints were found on a wallet he left behind after a robbery as well as all over the crime scenes.<sup>9</sup>

His diary contained entries explaining the best ways to evade police, such as through the use of fake identification and camouflage, as well as plans to eventually be trained in jihadism.<sup>10</sup> However, it contained no explicit dates about when he wanted to travel abroad or receive the training, and he was in no apparent contact with anyone to assist or expedite this process. Because of the randomness of his acts, there is no telling if he was in the midst of planning an additional murder. It can be speculated that if he was planning to continue his spree, he would have done so at a similarly random schedule.

#### 5. Plans for violence

It is unclear just how long Brown planned his acts of violence. Based on the nature of the crime, it seems as if the murder of Leroy Henderson was random. Brown made contact with Said and Anderson-Young on the gay dating app, Grindr, and met them outside of a gay club.<sup>11</sup> They were shot execution-style in front of Anderson-Young's house in Seattle. It is unclear when the initial contact occurred, though it is speculated that his religious fanaticism drove him in the murders since the victims were gay.

When Brown was in New Jersey, he met Eric Williams and Jeremy Villagran. There is no evidence that points to a specific date as to when they planned to commit robbery. However, based on the nature of this crime, it is evident that, at least to some degree, the crime was premeditated. Because Williams and Villigran were not involved with the actual murder of Brendan Tevlin, they were cleared of all charges.<sup>12</sup>

Just a few days after murdering Tevlin, Brown attempted an armed carjacking, but fled when he was unable to drive the car since it had a manual transmission. He was seen on a security camera at a convenience store the same day changing clothes, and then disappeared. On July 18, 2014, he was found by police in a makeshift campsite in the Watchung Mountains in New Jersey. Eight

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Christine Clarridge, "Defendant calls four slayings justified, charging papers say," *Seattle Times*, August 20, 2014.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Ali Muhammad Brown, counterextremism.com, November 16, 2016.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Hensley, "Seattle fugitive," nydailynews.com, July 19, 2014.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Dan Ivers, "Brendan Tevlin's accused killers: Charges dropped against 2, third indicted on terrorism," nj.com, July 4, 2015.

days before capture, he robbed a man near his campsite and put him in his trunk. He left the victim's wallet at the scene of the crime with his fingerprints all over it, and the victim was found shortly after by passersby.<sup>13</sup>

He pleaded not guilty to murdering Tevlin when he was taken to court in New Jersey. However, by August 20, he was charged with three cases of aggravated murder in the first degree in Washington state. On January 21, 2016, he was sentenced to 36 years for armed robbery.<sup>14</sup> Because of his apparent desire to be a jihadist and possible sympathies with ISIS and Al-Shabaab, he was also put on trial for terrorism, making him the first person to stand trial in New Jersey since its anti-terrorism statute that was put into place after September 11.

Based on the fact that Brown had a diary in which he allegedly wrote that he planned on joining ISIS one day, and his testimony that his acts of violence were vengeance for the acts that the U.S. Military commits against the Islamic world, it is justifiable to assume that he had been planning on killing American men for some time.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, the specific instances of his crimes have no logical pattern in terms of when they were committed or why he chose his victims as targets.

### 6. Role of informants

There were no informants or police operatives involved in this case.

#### 7. Connections

Because Brown was involved in a check kiting scheme with his barber, Ruben Shumpert, who then fled the United States in order to fight for Al-Shabaab, it is possible that he may have pledged allegiance to the Somalian terror organization, but this was never proven. Additionally, his journal revealed that "he was interested in receiving jihadist training" according to prosecutors.<sup>16</sup> Though it is not confirmed whether or not he was directly interested in receiving this training from ISIS, court prosecutors made the claim against him that he was an "ISIS supporter on a one-man jihad."<sup>17</sup> It is important to note that ISIS did not begin its offensive in Iraq until June 5, 2014, after the first three murders, and did not declare itself a caliphate until June 29, which was after the fourth and final murder.<sup>18</sup>

## 8. Relation to the Muslim community

Potentially because of the low coverage of his attacks in the media, there were seemingly no reactions or denunciations by Muslim leaders across the country in response to his crimes. Similarly, no terror group took credit for his attacks or praised them in any public way. The mayor of Seattle, Ed Murray, released a statement regarding the three murders that occurred in his city,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> "Ali Muhammad Brown," wikipedia.com, November 16, 2016.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Boyle, "Muslim accused of killing four."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Boyle, "Muslim accused of killing four."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Ali Muhammad Brown, counterextremism.com, November 16, 2016.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Boyle, "Muslim accused of killing four."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> 2014, wikipedia.com, November 16, 2016.

explaining that "While Brown invoked his faith, we must be clear that Brown's views and his actions do not reflect the values of Muslims," and condemned any retaliations against Muslims for his actions.<sup>19</sup> There is no evidence that he attended mosque or had any connections to other Muslims throughout his spree.

# 9. Depiction by the authorities

As of July 4, 2015, he was indicted on terrorism charges in New Jersey, becoming the first person ever to be indicted under the state's terrorism statute for a murder case.<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that the exact details regarding this indictment have not been released to the public, and it can be argued that Brown's murder spree was not terrorism. This raises questions about the accuracy of the authorities' depiction of Brown and his crimes, and suggests that he may have been charged with terrorism to fill some other agenda, such as a resume builder for a future political office run. This is speculation, though I believe this theory carries weight and is definitely a possibility.

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

The case surprisingly did not receive a lot of media coverage. When Brown was a fugitive, there was no talk about terrorism, which can be attributed to the facts that very little was known about him and that the police did not know of his diary describing his desire to be trained in jihadism. Additionally, even after he was caught, the authorities and media still had very little information about him, including such common things as his birthdate, family, and economic status.

After Brendan Tevlin's murder, the media became more intrigued. This was seemingly an incredibly random murder, occurring at a stoplight with no apparent ties between victim and murderer. Tevlin also was a wealthy, suburban, white college student, and there was noticeably more media coverage over his murder than over the others. The large majority of the articles about Brown were from Seattle or New Jersey news companies.

Once the courts opened up the possibility that Brown would be charged with terrorism, and subsequently after his indictment, the media began covering his story more frequently. However, many discrepancies still remain in the news media about the exact details of his court cases and decisions and about his. For example, though authorities suspected he was sympathetic to terror groups in Somalia, namely Al-Shabaab, the *Daily Mail* of London headlined an article describing him as "an ISIS supporter."<sup>21</sup> A discrepancy also existed about the terrorism statute in New Jersey, and whether or not it was the first time the statute was used for a murder or just in general. Finally, one website mentioned that he was convicted on charges of assault in Washington in 2008, though no other sources mention this conviction.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Q13 Fox News Staff, "Cops: Self-styled jihadist," q13fox.com, August 20, 2014.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Ivers, "Brendan Tevlin's accused killers" nj.com, July 4, 2015.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Boyle, "Muslim accused of killing four."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Ali Muhammad Brown, counterextremism.com.

#### **11.** Policing costs

No police were injured or killed during his spree or during his capture. There is no information regarding the estimated monetary costs involved with his capture.

# **12.** Relevance to the internet

The only connection to Brown's murders and the internet was his use of the gay dating app Grindr to lure Said and Anderson-Young at the Seattle nightclub.

#### 13. Are we safer?

It is highly likely that had the police not caught Brown, he would have continued his murder spree targeting adult males. Brown did have a history with Shumpert who eventually joined al-Shabaab. And he allegedly was placed on an FBI watch list.<sup>23</sup> If that is true, it is possible that intelligence agencies could use this case as a lesson to keep a closer eye on those placed on the list. At the very least, that piece of evidence could have potentially been used against him in his court cases prior to 2014.

An important question to consider is whether or not this was actually terrorism. Brown was arrested and put on trial for armed robbery and four murders and accordingly was already set to be locked away for the rest of his life. By turning his trial into a terrorism case, authorities risked many effects that often happen after a domestic terrorist attack: increases in Islamophobia and retaliation against the Muslim community.

Essentially, it is safe to claim that we are safer by locking up a murderous criminal. However, claiming we are safer from terrorism is at best overreactive and at worst naive and dangerous.

### **14.** Conclusions

Ali Muhammad Brown spent most of his life committing crimes. At the age of 17, he became involved in a fraudulent banking scheme, and his crimes became ever more depraved and violent. By 2014, he began to kill. His targets were American adult men, and his justification was the continued presence of the United States in the Middle East and actions committed by the military against the people there. In addition to homicide, Brown committed many robberies throughout 2014, leaving fingerprints and other clues that led to his eventual arrest. By the end of his murderous campaign, four innocent men had lost their lives, spreading from Washington to New Jersey.

Brown had no ties to any terror organizations with the exception that his barber, the leader of the banking scheme, fled the U.S. to fight with Al-Shabaab in Somalia. However, authorities were unable to connect Brown to Al-Shabaab or any other terror organization, and it can be concluded he was not in contact with any at the time of his arrest.

While Brown stood trial for the robberies and murders, his journal, which detailed his hope to someday be trained in jihadism, was used as evidence to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Boyle, "Muslim accused of killing four."

convict him under a terrorism statute. Because of the several life sentences he was going to receive from his other crimes, the terrorism indictment was not intended to ensure his imprisonment. Instead, I speculate there must have been some other agenda the prosecutor had in which he stood to gain glory or strengthen his reputation by locking up a "terrorist." No terror organization claimed responsibility for his crimes, and the only proof that convicted him was his diary entries and his claim that his murders were just and in response to the killings by the United States of people in the Middle East. It is also possible that he only used that as an excuse for his crimes and that in reality he was just a criminal, not a terrorist. It can be concluded that, although he is currently considered a terrorist and is therefore included in this book, this characterization rests on a naive assumption and sets a potentially dangerous precedent for convicting Muslims of terror crimes in the future.