

Photograph by Karen Meyers



Revisiting the Trail of a TERRORIST

By Kelli McElhinny

IN March 1973, a Palestinian terrorist group hatched a plot to detonate car bombs outside of two Israeli bank branch locations in Manhattan and at the El-Al airline terminal at Kennedy International Airport in New York. Their plan fizzled, however, when faulty wiring thwarted the explosions.

Flyers retrieved from one of the cars implicated Black September, a group that also was responsible for the murder of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics, in the attack. The Federal Bureau of Investigation issued a warrant for a Black September member known as Khalid Duhham al-Jawari shortly after the attack, but he became a fugitive and no perpetrators were taken into custody at the time.

The case remained dormant until 1988, when a young FBI agent who had been recently promoted to the New York Police Department-FBI joint terrorism task force found its 20 volumes of files on his desk one morning. That agent was Michael Finnegan.

“I honestly don’t think [the supervisor] assigned me the case to find him. I think he did it to make my life uncomfortable,” said Finnegan, who is now an assistant professor in the School of Arts and Sciences Department of Criminal Justice and Intelligence Studies.

Finnegan was up to the challenge. After re-interviewing some 300 people who were originally questioned in the days and weeks immediately following the plotted attack, he

constructed a 30-page personality profile on the suspect. He also had colleagues in Washington alter the driver’s license photo from the rental car company’s files to reflect the suspect’s appearance after 15 years.

His efforts paid off in late 1990 when his review of the evidence and a strong network of contacts led him to a Cyprus-based official of the Palestine Liberation Organization. Unfortunately, the suspect got wind that the FBI was on his trail and fled to Baghdad.

The suspect stayed under the radar until the following year, when he surfaced in Rome. Finnegan had issued a provisional warrant for Al-Jawari’s arrest in Italy, among other countries, so Italian authorities detained him.

After an extradition process that dragged on for 18 months, much longer than the typical 30- to 90-day window, Finnegan flew to Italy himself in order to make sure that the handoff didn’t get botched.

“That was an unreal experience,” Finnegan said of the harrowing trip. “Switzerland banned us from their airspace on the way back, and other countries wouldn’t let us land, so we had to refuel in midair.

“They missed on the first try, but, fortunately, it worked the second time.”

Incidentally, the United States might have missed a much earlier opportunity to take Al-Jawari into custody. The suspect, who has also been referred to in published accounts as Khaled Mohammed El-Jassem, had previously been arrested in 1978 in Germany but released by German authorities shortly thereafter, although he was found with over 100 pounds of plastic explosives, detonators and eight forms of photo identification under different names.

“To this day, I still don’t know what his true identity is,” said Finnegan, who continues to refer to the man as Al-Jawari.

Upon Al-Jawari’s arrival in the United States, he was charged with three counts of attempted bombing, with each count carrying a 10-year sentence. Delays and continuances requested by Al-Jawari’s legal team pushed his trial back until March 1993, just days after the first bombing of the World Trade Center. At trial, prosecutors produced all three intact explosive devices recovered in 1973 as well as Al-Jawari’s 1973 international driver’s license which he used to rent the three vehicles used to plant the bombs. However, only one piece of evidence directly tied Al-Jawari to the actual devices—a lone fingerprint lifted from a propane tank attached to a bomb inside one of the rental cars—Al-

Jawari was convicted after a trial that lasted less than a week. The trial judge sentenced Al-Jawari to the maximum term of 30 years in prison (three consecutive ten-year sentences) with a recommendation that he serve the entire sentence. However, under the federal sentencing guidelines operative at the time of the offense, a 30-year sentence can be reduced with good behavior in the prison system.

Now 61 years old and 16 years later, Al-Jawari has nearly completed his sentence and is scheduled to be released from prison in February.

Throughout the entire process, as Al-Jawari changed legal teams and transferred between different prisons, Finnegan remained the lone constant in his life. Over time, the two men developed a friendship of sorts.

“It was never a hostile situation,” Finnegan said. “For us, it was professional courtesy. I was always respectful toward him.”

For several years after his conviction, Al-Jawari would occasionally call Finnegan collect from the Federal Correctional Institution where he was lodged. However, after Al-Jawari’s transfer to the United States Supermax Federal Prison in Florence, Colo., all telephonic contact ceased. Finnegan is not aware of Al-Jawari’s post-prison plans.

While Al-Jawari may have been the highest profile criminal in Finnegan’s arrest portfolio, he was one of many captured in the illustrious FBI career of a man who at one time thought his poor vision would preclude him from pursuing law enforcement as a vocation.

After all, Finnegan had been rejected for employment by a number of local police departments before he decided to enroll in law school at the University of Pittsburgh. Nonetheless, when the FBI sent a recruiter to Pitt, he went to hear her speak. The recruiter was a former Catholic nun, and that piqued Finnegan’s curiosity.

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When the recruiter listed off the bureau’s physical fitness requirements, Finnegan realized that, with corrected vision, he would qualify. Then, he had a question for her.

“I was sort of a smartaleck, so I asked her how an ex-nun could possibly meet those requirements,” he said.

She showed him, dropping to the ground to do pushups, and thus began Finnegan’s 20-year FBI odyssey. His work took him to Wisconsin, West Virginia and eventually back to Pittsburgh in addition to his tenure in New York, and he pursued cases ranging from public corruption to gang violence.

When Finnegan retired from the bureau in 2004, he was ready for a new adventure. He tried his hand at writing screenplays and television shows, and while some of them garnered interest in Hollywood, nothing ever came to fruition. A few years into his retirement, a chance encounter led him to Point Park.

Finnegan was on his way home from the gym one day when ran into an acquaintance who was on the Point Park faculty and encouraged him to think about coming on board as an adjunct professor. The idea wasn’t a completely foreign one for Finnegan.

“My wife always told me I should teach, so I told him I would go in for an interview. They gave me the job,” he said.

The following semester, he landed a full-time faculty position at the school and is now on the tenure track. He teaches undergraduate and graduate courses, along with a popular course on federal test-taking.

The opportunity turned out to be a perfect one for Finnegan, whose passion for his work becomes clearly evident within the first few minutes of a conversation with him.

“I love my students,” Finnegan said. “I respect and admire them for trying as hard as they can, and I do my best to prepare them as well as I can.”

His real-world experience in law enforcement is a particularly valuable asset to his work in the classroom, noted Karen S. McIntyre, dean of the School of Arts and Sciences.



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“Professor Finnegan knows what kinds of competencies will be expected of his students, and he stays very well-connected,” McIntyre said. “He is able to keep the coursework real and relevant to the students.

“He’s also able to use examples from his professional career to show why they need to succeed even in courses that aren’t related to their major.”

Finnegan puts a great deal of effort into staying current and keeping abreast of developments in the FBI and in law enforcement in general. He maintains a law license and occasionally practices in the Pittsburgh area. He also recently presented a paper on pre-9/11 intelligence failures at a conference at Oxford University in England.

For criminal justice students who may find themselves tracking down terrorists or drug dealers someday, Finnegan’s classes present a healthy dose of realism and preparation for their future careers. Even his colleagues pick up a few things from him.

“You definitely read a newspaper differently after you talk to him,” McIntyre said.

For more information related to this article, visit the Point Extras page at pointpark.edu/pointextras.

Cold Case Crime Scene COMES TO LIFE



Photograph by Tom Bell

On Tuesday, Nov. 11, a model of the Lizzie Borden house was unveiled by Steven Koehler, Ph.D., adjunct faculty member in the School of Arts and Sciences Department of Criminal Justice and Intelligence Studies, in the lobby of Lawrence Hall. Students and faculty gathered to see the miniature crime scene created by David Presnell and James Hudak, students at the Pittsburgh Art Institute. Koehler conceptualized the replica as a teaching tool for visual and hands-on learning and collaborated with Bill Mitas, professor of industrial design at the Pittsburgh Art Institute.

“This will provide a scaled version of a real crime scene which will make the students think of different forensics available for analysis,” Koehler said. “This step-by-step examination of evidence allows for a unique hands-on approach for the students.”

The model of the Borden house includes furnished bedrooms where the murders took place, bodies, blood splatter and removable floor levels for easy access. The model is a 1/12 scaled replica of the house as it was when Lizzie Borden was tried and acquitted of the stabbing deaths of her father and stepmother in Fall River, Mass. in 1892. While she was the only suspect and was in the home at the time of the murders, there was not enough evidence to convict Borden of the crime without modern forensic technologies.

The model will be used in forensic science classes in the spring of 2009. Koehler said another collaboration with the Pittsburgh Art Institute is in the works for a model of the John F. Kennedy assassination.