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"Drug Dealers Are Domestic Terrorists"

Local cops are employing laws inspired by global events in a war much closer to home.

By Steve Volk

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First, they shot the dog--a pit bull that came charging at them. Then they found their man in a garage behind the house, opening a 1-pound package of high-grade crystal meth worth \$106,000 on the street.

Inside the house on Torresdale Avenue in the Northeast they found an amazing stash of weapons. "The way he had them lined up," says undercover narcotics cop Anthony Parrotti, "he could have just moved from room to room grabbing rifles and shotguns. They were loaded and ready."

If the suspect had been in the house, the cops may have been outgunned. "It would have been a firefight," says Sgt. Stephen McCusker. "There were more of us, but his stuff would've gone through walls and vests and everything."

Parrotti found the explosives. At that point the cops evacuated the house and called for the bomb squad, which discovered the makings of one bomb and another already assembled.

Parrotti and McCusker say 42-year-old James Hogeland, an alleged meth dealer, handled his arrest like a seasoned veteran. He just kind of nodded his head and asked for his lawyer.

Next thing they knew, they were involved in a *second* piece of Pennsylvania legal history.

In the wake of 9/11 the Pennsylvania Legislature passed a weapons of mass destruction law intended to increase penalties for terrorists caught in the act of plotting attacks on American soil.

The law made storing WMDs a second-degree felony and using them a first-degree felony. In the months since the law was passed, it's been used twice--both times in Philadelphia narcotics cases.



The first case, slated for a September trial, boasted a plot line like a gangsta version of *Bonanza*.

An alleged drug-dealing family, the Bellmons, started looking for street justice after one of the Bellmon boys was murdered. Benjamin and Harry Bellmon and their then-60-year-old father Johnnie acquired a machine that enabled them to make their own ammunition. They had five or six silencers, two sniper suits and numerous guns, hand grenades, military-grade bulletproof gear, even an armor-piercing rocket.

The rocket fit the bill for a WMD, but assistant district attorney Scott Sigman, who's prosecuting both WMD cases, decided to hit the North Philly men with the charge based in part on their stockpiling of other weapons. "These guys went *way* beyond the usual," says Sigman. "They were intent on building up their own armory to make war on a rival drug gang."

The defense challenged his use of the law, arguing that the Bellmons weren't exactly Al Qaeda. But judge Carolyn Temin, usually considered pro-defense, ruled for the commonwealth.

Sigman recognized that the ruling meant he'd acquired a new weapon as a prosecutor. When a bomb was found waiting behind a pit bull at James Hogeland's home, the attorney didn't hesitate to seek the WMD charge a second time.

As bombs go, the device Hogeland allegedly built ain't much.

There was no nuclear material and no biological agent. There *was* wax, matches, a long fuse, gunpowder and 20 bullets packed around a quarter stick of dynamite. And that's enough.

The new state law defines WMDs as biological agents, chemical agents or a bomb, further defined as an "explosive device used for unlawful purposes." The Bellmons' rocket fell under explosive devices. And Hogeland's crude Wile E. Coyote-like construction would definitely have exploded--scattering bullets in every direction.

Still, the DA's application of the law will likely be applauded by citizens and appealed by the defense lawyers who encounter it. The stakes are high: The extra charge could mean up to 20 additional years in prison for Hogeland or anyone else who keeps a WMD. Hogeland is currently being held on bail set at a staggering \$10 million. Sigman seems ready for the debate.

"Terrorists don't have to be affiliated with Al Qaeda," he says. "Drug dealers 'terrorize' neighborhoods. What we're saying is that if you are stockpiling or building weapons that threaten the community on a large scale, we will use what we have at our disposal to bring you to justice."

Sigman also says the connection between drugs and violence helps his case. "If you consider that both times this law has been used, it's been in Philadelphia narcotics cases," he says, "we'd argue that *supports* our use of it. Drug dealers are domestic terrorists."

The new WMD charge could be used fairly frequently here, particularly in meth cases. Last year *PW* reported that police narcotics inspector Joe Sullivan believes the drug is creeping into the Philadelphia area.

Meth dealers, manufacturers and users are notorious for booby-trapping their stashes. "One of the drug's

effects is that it makes people paranoid," says Sullivan. "These people are looking over their shoulder, thinking someone is out to get them. It takes a toll on their psyches."

Parrotti and McCusker, of Narcotics Field Unit North, weren't familiar with the WMD law until the Hogeland bust. With guns stashed everywhere, they say, Hogeland's place looked like a "survivalist's." His eyes showed signs of a meth dealer who'd started using his own product. "He looked like he hadn't blinked in about four years," says Parrotti.

Their hope is the law might deter some dealers and manufacturers from using booby-traps. "We've seen [a deterrent effect] a little bit with guns," says McCusker. "Once it became known that the combination of drugs and guns means a mandatory prison sentence, dealers made an effort not to get caught with both at the same time."

Parrotti seconds him. "They are businessmen," he says. "When they know they can get hit with an extra 20 years for having a bomb, they might figure it isn't worth it."



Steve Volk (svolk@philadelphiaweekly.com) writes about media treatment of Teresa Heinz Kerry's slip of the lip on p. 13.

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