

A Puzzling Descent

Bombing suspect Lucas John Helder couldn't outrun his
demons — or the law

Henry K. Lee & Stacy Finz

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Lucas John Helder, the college student accused of planting pipe bombs in mailboxes across the heart of America, came across in rambling letters as an anti-government extremist who was sure of his mission.

However, in two encounters with law enforcement as he headed west, Helder seemed more like a frightened young man scared of getting caught, court documents released Wednesday showed.

“Mailboxes are exploding,” said a seven-page letter signed by Helder and received by a university newspaper before he was arrested Tuesday east of Reno.

“Why you ask? You have been missing how things are, for very long. I’m obtaining your attention in the only way I can.

“I’m dismissing a few individuals from reality,” Helder added, “to change you all for the better.”

But as he drove from town to town across the Midwest and into Colorado and Texas allegedly planting explosives, Helder showed a different personality to officers who stopped him for traffic violations.

“I didn’t mean to hurt anybody,” the 21-year-old University of Wisconsin student blurted out when he was stopped Saturday near St. Edward, Neb., before federal authorities issued an all-points bulletin for him. The officer replied that he had merely been pulled over for speeding and let him go.

A pipe bomb was found later that day in Albion, about 12 miles away.

The next day, when he was stopped for speeding in Fowler, Colo., Helder appeared nervous and looked like he was about to weep, said the officer. On Monday, a pipe bomb was found in a mailbox in Salida, Colo.

Fan of Kurt Cobain

Friends and schoolmates have said Helder, who grew up in a small farming town near Pine Island, Minn., 70 miles southeast of the Twin Cities, seemed to be a gentle soul. He played guitar and sang in a rock band called Apathy and loved the Seattle grunge group Nirvana. He especially admired Kurt Cobain, the band’s lead singer, who committed suicide with a shotgun in 1994. Helder was wearing a shirt with Cobain’s face on it when he was arrested.

But in recent years Helder had become fascinated with astral projection and out-of-body experiences and talked of death as another stage of life, friends told investigators. His adoptive father, Cameron Helder, said he believed his son was disgruntled with the government, but he couldn’t believe he would use violence.

Helder, an art and industrial design student at the University of Wisconsin-Stout campus in Menomonie, was arrested on Interstate 80 about 50 miles east of Reno after a five-day, cross-country trek in his 1992 Honda Accord.

He had left home May 2, telling his roommate in a note that he was going to a party in Madison and planned to call in sick to his part-time job.

Over the next several days, FBI agents say, Helder went on a sinister odyssey.

He told investigators that he had taken eight pipe bombs he had assembled in his apartment in Menomonie, Wis., and put them in mailboxes in Iowa and Illinois along with anti-government letters, according to a criminal complaint filed by federal authorities. Four mail carriers and two residents were injured when the bombs exploded.

Second Set Didn't Explode

Helder allegedly said he had assembled 16 more bombs in a motel room in Omaha, Neb., using metal pipe, paper clips and Christmas tree bulbs. He planted 10 of them in mailboxes in Nebraska, Colorado and Texas, according to the documents. Those bombs never went off. Six explosives were found in Helder's car when he was arrested, investigators said.

During his time on the road, Helder called friends, encouraging them to watch the news, court papers show. He also allegedly sent off two letters — one to the Badger Herald newspaper at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, the other to his dad. Both notes railed against the government and spoke of death and dying.

The letter to the paper read: "I'm taking very drastic measures in attempt to provide this information to you. I will die/change in the end for this, but that's OK, hahaha paradise awaits! I'm dismissing a few individuals from reality, to change you all for the better, surely you can understand my logic."

The letter added, "Conforming to the boundaries and restrictions imposed by the government only reduces the substance in your lives. When 1 percent of the nation controls 99 percent of the nation's total wealth, is it a wonder why there are control problems?"

The letter to Helder's father said his family was strong enough to deal with his beliefs and suggested that he might be in trouble.

"If I don't make it through this ordeal (if the gov't doesn't realize I can help) then I'll have to get out of here for a while," Helder wrote, according to authorities.

Father Got Letter, Called Cops

After getting the letter Monday, Helder's father contacted police and called his son's roommate.

The roommate searched Helder's bedroom, where he found a bag containing a box of nails, a box of paper clips and two black plastic bottles of gun powder — one full and one nearly empty, according to court papers.

While Helder talked to police, his son called a friend in his hometown, according to investigators. "Change of plans," he told the friend. "I may have to blow myself away."

The neighbor quickly conveyed the message to Cameron Helder, who told police.

The next day, Cameron Helder spoke with FBI agents, who issued an all-points bulletin for the young man. Less than eight hours later, a motorist spotted him on Interstate 80 in Nevada and called police. Investigators say Helder zoomed away from officers at speeds reaching 100 mph.

As he drove, Helder spoke to his family and an FBI negotiator on his cellular phone and pointed a shotgun to his head, said Pershing County Sheriff Ron Skinner.

Authorities persuaded Helder to put down the gun and surrender. First, they had to agree that they wouldn't tackle him.

On Wednesday, a weary-looking Helder appeared in federal court in Reno, glanced briefly at the horde of reporters and turned quickly back to his attorney.

Life Sentence Possible in Iowa

He faces charges in Iowa and Illinois of using an explosive to damage property used in interstate commerce and in a crime of violence. He also faces a charge in Nebraska of transporting an explosive with knowledge and intent that it would be used to kill or to damage property. The Iowa charges alone carry a potential life sentence.

During the hearing he agreed to be extradited to Iowa and through his attorney asked to be released into the custody of his parents. He said he would wear a home monitoring device until his trial, said his attorney, federal public defender Vito de la Cruz.

"It is probably beyond dispute that Cameron Helder will do everything to ensure the safety of his son and the safety of the community ... and ensure that his son shows up in court," de la Cruz said.

Craig Denney, an assistant U.S. attorney, scoffed at the idea, arguing that Helder should be held without bail. "Six individuals, both private citizens and postal workers, were injured," he said.

In the end, Magistrate Robert McQuaid Jr. denied bail.

The Ted K Archive

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