

# Klan Terrorists Drive

*Early in the morning of June 30, 1968, police in Meridian, Miss., ambushed and killed a Klanswoman, Kathy Ainsworth, and wounded Klansman Thomas Tarrants III while the two apparently were preparing to bomb the home of a Jewish businessman. It was the climax of a series of unsolved killings and bombings of Negroes and Jews in that area. This is the final article on the case.*

By Jack Nelson

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On Saturday night, June 29, 12 Meridian policemen dressed in black waited in the darkness for the terrorists' arrival. Also stationed at strategic points in the general area—for observational purposes, not for participating in an arrest or gun battle—were eight to 10 FBI agents.

About midnight, Tarrants and Mrs. Ainsworth picked up Raymond Roberts and drove by the Meyer Davidson home for a final check-out, then let Roberts out at a nightclub so he would have an alibi. Roberts, a fellow klansman hired as a police informer, obviously was surprised to see Mrs. Ainsworth instead of Joe Danny Hawkins, believed by the FBI to be a top klan "hit man." When Roberts was let out at the nightclub, he quickly called the police at a special telephone installed in a house near the Davidson home.

Hawkins apparently decided against participating in the bombing attempt because he felt he was under close FBI and police surveillance, and Tarrants decided to take along Mrs. Ainsworth instead. She was a woman who many people later described as a dedicated school teacher, well

liked by students and their parents—apparently a Jekyll and Hyde personality—a teacher by day, a terrorist by night.

By the time Roberts notified the police that a woman was in the car, the plan was so far in motion, Meridian detective L. L. Scarbrough said, that the decision was made to go ahead. At that time, he said, neither the police nor the FBI knew anything about Mrs. Ainsworth's background.

Tarrants drove up and parked near the Davidson home about 12:55 a.m., got out and walked toward the short driveway. With him he carried a bomb made of 29 sticks of dynamite.

What happened next is a matter of dispute between the police and Tarrants. Tarrants claims he was fired upon without warning.

Detectives L. A. Willoughby and Ralph McNair, testifying at Tarrants' trial in November, 1968, said that Tarrants got out of the car, a pistol in one hand, the bomb in the other, and walked to the driveway where he put down the bomb. They said that an order to "halt" was shouted and that Tarrants whirled and fired twice in their direction.

Scarbrough said he shouted the order to halt, then saw "two flashes—he (Tarrants) shot twice."

Scarbrough, Willoughby, McNair and another officer opened fire from an embankment 35 to 40 feet from Tarrants. Scarbrough said Tarrants was still holding the dynamite, but then dropped it on the driveway.

Although badly wounded, Tarrants managed to get back to the car. Police said Kathy Ainsworth was killed

when she leaned over to open the door for Tarrants and a bullet struck her spine.

Tarrants sped off in his bullet-riddled car but crashed less than a mile away. He jumped from the car as a pursuing patrol car pulled up, according to police, and opened fire with a sub-machine gun, hitting Officer Mike Hatcher in the heart and also seriously wounding a sailor who stepped out on a porch of a nearby house.

Tarrants then dropped the tommy gun and ran behind a house, where pursuing officers opened up on him at close range with shotguns. In an interview, Sgt. L. D. Joyner, who has been given community awards and honored by the International Association of Chiefs of Police for playing a leading role in springing the trap, said that he and three other officers chased Tarrants behind the house. Joyner said they saw Tarrants try to climb a fence, hit an electrically charged top strand and dive into a clump of bushes.

"We figured he still had the machine gun and a hand grenade," Joyner said, "and we opened up on him. All four of us were firing shotguns from about 15 feet away. We had in mind killing him, I don't mind telling you. We dragged him out of the bushes and figured he was dead, but the son of a gun was still alive."

"We knew we had to stop them," Joyner said of the encounter with the Klan members. "We knew they were planning to bomb synagogues with people in them. We had no intentions of losing the shootout with them."

Joyner confirmed that the

# Into Ambush—One of Them Is a

police harassed Klan members, explaining, "We harass 'em all, that's our job.

"They're in constant fear we got somebody set up now," Joyner said. "We keep 'em scared to death."

Joyner was interviewed jointly with Officer Hatcher, who returned to duty after recovering from the bullet wound in the heart. Both officers agreed that fear of police was a factor in the decision of Raymond Roberts and his brother, Alton Wayne, to cooperate in arranging the trap—for a price.

Hatcher said, "That's what broke the case—fear—not the money." Joyner agreed. "He (Raymond Roberts) believed we were going to kill him," Joyner said. "We helped him believe it. We acted like we were going to do it."

On July 2, two days after the shootout, Scarbrough filed a report saying the Roberts brothers had contacted Sam Bowers (imperial wizard of the Klan), in Laurel, Miss., and "Bowers stated that he had lost a good soldier—Kathy Ainsworth. He stated that she was as good as Tarrants or anybody else he had." (Bowers, like Alton Roberts, is under a 10-year federal sentence in the Philadelphia, Miss., lynching case.)

The Scarbrough report noted that the informants "were highly upset" because they did not get the \$79,000 put up by the Jewish community as a reward, but he added, "I gave them \$10,000 as we started to leave.

"Informers are unhappy at this point," the report continued, "and stated that they will not talk any more unless we keep our end of the bargain and for us not to contact them again un-

less we have the money. An offer of \$150,000 was made for testimony—and refused."

In an interview Scarbrough said that Jewish interests had pledged to make \$150,000 available for testimony linking Bowers to the terrorist attacks.

The receipt for the July 2 payment read: "Received this date from Luke Scarbrough, the sum of \$10,000 for services rendered." It was signed, "Al Rosenbaugh," a pseudonym used by Raymond Roberts.

On July 10 Scarbrough paid out an additional \$10,000—\$8,000 to Raymond Roberts, who signed the receipt "Alfred Rosenburg," and \$2,000 to the intermediary, who signed the receipt "James Overlaugh."

The FBI and the police were still using the Roberts brothers as informants at this time, but the two were becoming increasingly irritated because they had not been given the money they claimed they had been promised.

An Aug. 12 memo by Scarbrough noted that he persuaded the intermediary to talk with the informants in an effort to get them to testify in court against Bowers. But the memo continued, "Upon interviewing informers they were very hostile because we did not have the long promised money for them. Informer stated that he was going to call the Jews and also that if he were Meyer Davidson he would get his money and go back to Israel.

Scarbrough wrote that it was decided each informer should be paid \$10,000 for testimony and "if they were not agreeable to this there would be no further money paid to them."

The intermediary also be-

came upset and on Aug. 27 Scarbrough wrote that "he wanted his money . . . and felt that he had been double-crossed."

Although the intermediary never received another payment, three Jewish businessmen from Jackson drove to Meridian and gave the Roberts brothers \$17,000 as a final payment, according to Scarbrough.

In November, 1968, Tarrants pleaded innocent by reason of insanity, but a Meridian jury found him guilty of placing a bomb. Sentenced to 30 years, he appealed the case to the Mississippi Supreme Court.

Several days ago Tarrants, who is confined to the state prison at Parchman, wrote a letter to the Supreme Court asking that his appeal be withdrawn and that his attorneys, Roy Pitts of Meridian and Thomas M. Haas of Mobile, be dismissed. The attorneys told the court that the appeal should not be withdrawn, that they should not be dismissed, and that the court should not consider the request of an "insane man." The court has the matter under consideration.

Meanwhile, Danny Joe Hawkins remains free in Jackson, but his activities are under intensive investigation.

Since the Meridian incident, Hawkins has been arrested and tried twice—once for bombing a Jackson real estate office and once for robbing a Memphis bank. The Jackson trial resulted in an acquittal, the Memphis trial in a hung jury and mistrial.

The Roberts brothers still live in Meridian, where they sometimes lead an anxious life. When Tarrants escaped from Parchman last July 23,

Raymond Roberts frantically called the Meridian police for protection. (Tarrants was recaptured two days later.) Raymond Roberts lives in a house surrounded by a high chain-link fence and well-illuminated at night by several bright outside lights. A huge sign on the gate warns: "Beware of dog." The fence was erected about two months after the Meridian incident when Roberts began to get nervous about his role as an informant.

The police and the FBI had cautioned the Roberts brothers not to immediately spend much of the money they had been paid ("Hell, we preached to the informants day and night not to do it," Scarbrough said). But Raymond bought a Thunderbird and Alton bought a Cadillac, which made other Klansmen more than a little suspicious.

Tarrants' father, who still is trying to prove his son was entrapped, has run afoul of the law in Meridian three times since the bombing attempt.

On July 14, 1967, he was charged with driving under the influence after his car was involved in an accident. After arresting Tarrants, the police went to his hotel room, searched it, and went through his briefcase.

In early July, 1968, Sgt. Joyner arrested Tarrants at his motel in Meridian and charged him with "disorderly conduct." In mid-July, Tarrants returned to Meridian to search for additional evidence and to stand trial on the "disorderly conduct" charge.

The night before the trial was to be held, Officer Hatcher, who had returned to duty after being injured

# Woman

in the gun battle, appeared at Tarrants' motel in plain clothes and tried to arrest Tarrants. Tarrants resisted and was badly injured in a struggle with Hatcher and several other officers.

[In an interview, Meridian Police Chief Roy Gunn said that Tarrants had been "mouthing off" about the police and causing trouble and that Hatcher "beat hell out of him at the Downtowner."]

Tarrants, who before his Meridian experiences had no police record except for traffic violations, was treated at a hospital in Meridian then jailed on charges of disorderly conduct, disturbing the peace and resisting arrest. He was released on bond, then entered a Mobile hospital, where he remained for a week recovering from injuries suffered in the scuffle with police.

City Court Judge Roscoe Nettles heard the evidence against Tarrants and found him guilty on all charges. He was fined \$50 on each charge. The verdict was appealed to the county court.

Tarrants' attorney in Meridian, Roy Pitts, said that when he went to the City Hall to get Tarrants released on bond on the charges resulting from the arrest by Hatcher, Meridian Mayor Al Key, Chief Gunn and Sgt. Joyner called him into the chief's office for a conference.

"They were real nice about it," Pitts recalled, "but they urged me to get Tarrants to stay out of town because he was going out causing trouble and threatening the policemen and somebody was going to get hurt. I told them I would urge him to try to avoid any controversy with the police."