

Jacksonville Would-Be Terrorist Sentenced to 20 Years

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Assistant Attorney General for National Security John P. Carlin, U.S. Attorney A. Lee Bentley III for the Middle District of Florida and Special Agent in Charge Michelle S. Klimt of the FBI Jacksonville Division announced that Shelton Thomas Bell, 21, of Jacksonville, Florida, was sentenced to 20 years in federal prison for conspiring and attempting to provide material support to terrorists. U.S. District Judge Timothy J. Corrigan also ordered Bell to a lifetime of supervision following his release from prison. Bell pleaded guilty on March 19, 2014.

"We must be vigilant in investigating and prosecuting United States citizens who seek to travel overseas to assist terrorists," said U.S. Attorney Bentley. "Not only do these individuals present an obvious threat abroad, they could also return to the United States after being radicalized and trained in the use of firearms, explosives, and weapons of mass destruction. Cases such as these remain a top priority for the United States Attorney's Office and the Department of Justice."

"With our local, state and federal agencies working together through the JTTF, we're able to detect, deter and defend our nation from these types of threats," said Special Agent in Charge Klimt. "We're strongest working together and this is a perfect example of success through collaboration."

According to court documents, beginning in May 2012 and continuing through at least July 18, 2012, Bell conspired to train and prepare as a combatant for overseas violent jihad, then travel from Jacksonville to the Middle East for the ultimate purpose of providing the skills to terrorists, including members of Ansar al-Sharia in Yemen. Once overseas, the plan included receiving further training and deadly weapons from Ansar al-Sharia, and then engaging in violent jihad against, and killing, others in Yemen and elsewhere.

In May 2012, Bell recruited a juvenile for the purpose of engaging in violent jihad and inspired him with the teachings of an Al Qaida spokesperson, Anwar al-Awlaki. Bell suggested traveling to Yemen to fight because of al-Awlaki's teachings - that all young people should travel to Yemen to "take up the fight." Bell and the juvenile subsequently agreed to travel to Israel and then make Hajj. As part of the plan, the conspirators told others, including their parents, that they were traveling overseas to make Hajj, to study, and to get an education. By July 2012, the conspirators began taking actions to train for their unlawful activities by conducting mental training that included watching al-Awlaki videos and looking at images of dead Muslims.

Another part of the training took place on July 4, 2012, when Bell conducted a late-night "jihadi training mission" that involved the destruction of religious statues in a multi-denominational cemetery located in Jacksonville. In preparation for the mission, he dressed in all black clothing, wore tactical gloves, a mask, and wrapped his shoes in black duct tape to avoid leaving footprints. Bell brought a loaded 9 mm pistol with him on the mission to use "in case any kuffar want to cause any trouble." Other training sessions conducted by Bell included a homemade firing range and impromptu battlefield lessons intended for recording and uploading to the Internet, to be used in the recruitment of others in the "the actions of jihad." At the conclusion of one training session, Bell placed an American flag on a machete, burned it, and commented that the flag was "burning to the ground by the mujahidin's hands." To recruit other youth to travel and join in armed conflict, Bell and the juvenile also planned to take footage of

their participation in armed conflict in the Middle East, once they made it there and began fighting.

On Sep. 25, 2012, Bell and the juvenile left Jacksonville and flew to New York, Poland, and Tel Aviv, Israel, where they were detained by Israeli officials and deported to Poland. From there, Bell and the juvenile traveled to Jordan to stay with the juvenile's relatives. While in Jordan, Bell and the juvenile contacted another person to assist in their plan of joining up with Ansar al-Sharia. Bell and the juvenile also bought airline tickets to Oman, believing they would fly to Oman and walk across the border to Yemen and join the armed conflict there. During their overseas travel, Bell and the juvenile took steps to avoid detection by law enforcement.

Ultimately, Bell and the juvenile were deported from Jordan to the United States on Nov. 21, 2012.

This case was investigated by the FBI's Jacksonville Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF). The JTTF is a multi-agency task force comprised of full-time personnel from the FBI, U.S. Coast Guard Investigative Service, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Homeland Security Investigations, the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office, Florida Highway Patrol, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, and the Naval Criminal Investigative Service. It was prosecuted by Trial Attorney Mara M. Kohn from the Department of Justice National Security Division's Counter Terrorism Section and Assistant U.S. Attorney Mac D. Heavener III.

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