

Alexandria Man Sentenced to 25 Years for Shooting Military Buildings in Northern Virginia

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ALEXANDRIA, VA—Yonathan Melaku, 24, of Alexandria, Virginia, was sentenced today to 25 years in prison, followed by 10 years of supervised release, for damaging property and firearm violations involving five separate shootings at military installations in Northern Virginia between October and November 2010 and attempting to injure veterans' memorials at Arlington National Cemetery.

Neil H. MacBride, U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia, and Debra Evans Smith, Acting Assistant Director in Charge of the FBI's Washington Field Office, made the announcement after sentencing by U.S. District Judge Gerald Bruce Lee.

On January 26, 2012, Melaku pled guilty to a three-count information that included injuring property of the United States, use of a firearm during a crime of violence, and attempted injury to veterans' memorials on U.S. property. The defense and government jointly recommended in the plea agreement a sentence of 25 years in prison.

"Yonathan Melaku is a self-radicalized terrorist who carried out a campaign of fear that escalated until his arrest," said U.S. Attorney MacBride. "He took calculated steps to target specific military buildings, cover up his crimes, and plan even more destruction should his message not be heard. This sentence is just punishment for the danger he poses to our community."

"The partnerships and resources shared on the FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF) enhanced the investigation into the multiple shootings that threatened our region and ultimately resulted in today's sentence," said FBI Acting ADIC Smith. "I want to thank our law enforcement partners who make up the JTTF, including Prince William County Police, Virginia State Police, Fairfax and Arlington Police, the Naval Criminal Investigative Service, the Coast Guard Investigative Service, U.S. Park Police and Pentagon Force Protection Agency, as well as the Military District of Washington and the U.S. Marine Corps for their dedicated work throughout this investigation."

According to court records, Melaku carried out a series of five shootings from October 17, 2010 through November 2, 2010, at the following locations in Virginia: the National Museum of the Marine Corps (twice), the Pentagon, a Marine Corps recruiting sub-station in Chantilly, and a U.S. Coast Guard recruiting office in Woodbridge. Each shooting took place late at night or early in the morning and involved multiple 9mm rounds fired at each building. The cost for repairs at the facilities exceeded \$100,000.

During the second shooting at the National Museum of the Marine Corps, Melaku set up a video camera within the interior of his vehicle to record the shooting incident. The video shows Melaku repeatedly firing a handgun out the passenger-side window, and he narrates the incident on the video and states, among other things: "That's my target. That's the military building. It's going to be attacked," and at the conclusion of multiple shots, exclaiming, "Allahu Akbar" repeatedly.

Melaku attempted to flee law enforcement after being spotted on the property of Ft. Myer in Arlington, Virginia, at approximately 1:30 a.m. on June 17, 2011. During the pursuit, he dropped a backpack that contained numerous spent 9mm shell casings; four bags containing ammonium nitrate; and a spiral notebook with numerous Arabic statements referencing the Taliban, al Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, "The Path to Jihad," as well as a list of several other individuals associated with foreign terrorist organizations.

At the time of his apprehension, Melaku was attempting to enter the area of Arlington National Cemetery containing graves of deceased Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans, intending to desecrate and injure the grave markers by spray-painting the markers with Arabic statements and by leaving the ammonium nitrate he was carrying at the sites of the grave markers.

On June 17, 2011, during a search of his residence, FBI search teams found Melaku had stored within the bedroom closet of his residence a typed list titled "Timer" that included nine items that Melaku admitted are consistent with what would be required to construct the firing mechanism for an explosive device. Four of those items had been crossed through.

In interviews with law enforcement after his arrest, Melaku said he targeted military-associated buildings to send a message that the U.S. should not be involved in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars and to intimidate those who supported U.S. involvement. He planned to desecrate nearly 2,400 grave markers at Arlington National Cemetery and leave ammonium nitrate at the scene to instill fear in the public. He stated that he planned further crimes, including blowing up a military fuel truck, if his message was not heard.

The investigation was conducted by the FBI Washington Field Office's JTTF, including the police departments of Arlington County, Fairfax County and Prince William County, Virginia; the Pentagon Force Protection Agency; the Virginia State Police; the Naval Criminal Investigative Service; the Coast Guard Investigative Service; the U.S. Park Police; U.S. Marine Corps Base Quantico; and the Military District of Washington Provost Marshal Office.

Assistant U.S. Attorneys Daniel Grooms, Neil Hammerstrom, and Lynn Haaland of the National Security and International Crime Unit are prosecuting the case on behalf of the United States.

A copy of this press release may be found on the website of the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of Virginia at www.justice.gov/usao/vae.