

SCREWY TERROR TALES

Hoax artists and bogus tipsters are driving cops nuts and wasting lots of money

By Chitra Ragavan

The phone calls were frightening. “There is a bomb on the train going to Chicago,” said the first one, last July, to 911 dispatchers in rural Wisconsin. “Wisconsin Dells—train bomb,” said the next call. “Bomb on train at Wisconsin Dells,” was the third, followed by “Letting train go . . . I don’t know why,” and then an ominous “Better stop that train.”

Officials reacted swiftly, ordering passengers on Amtrak’s Empire Builder from Seattle to Chicago off the train for nearly six hours. But when bomb-sniffing dogs found no explosives on board, it became clear that the calls, which AT&T traced to a passenger named Michael Conwill, were hoaxes. Turns out Conwill, 36, a fish processor from Alaska, is allergic to chili peppers and was steamed that Amtrak had forgotten his request for a chili-free meal, making him sick and delaying his trip to Kentucky to visit his mother. So he decided to phone in a few bomb threats.

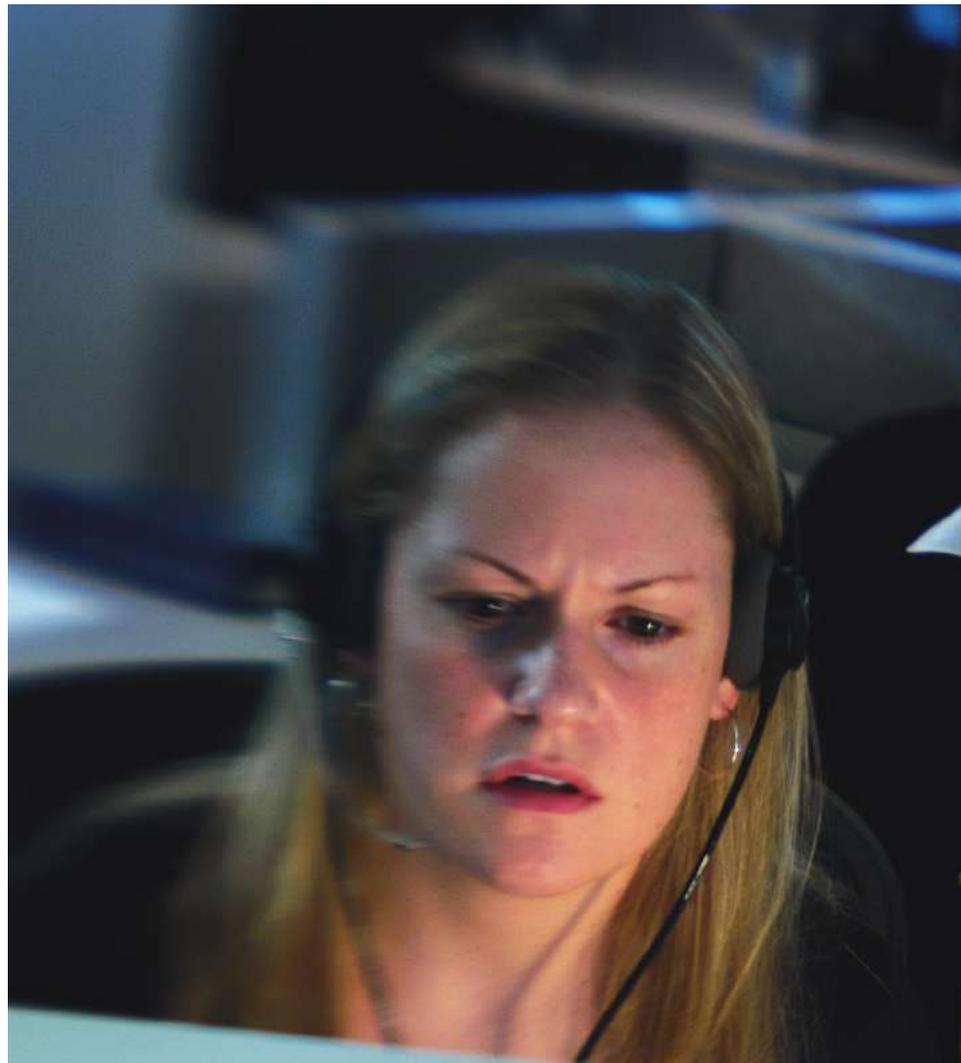
No one is keeping exact numbers. But the Conwill case is just one of hundreds across the country since the 9/11 attacks involving bogus tips about terrorist attacks, many invoking Osama bin Laden’s al Qaeda network. “They know that all they have to do is say ‘terrorism,’” says Marcy Forman, who heads the Office of Investigations at U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), “and they certainly have gotten our attention.”

But now the federal government is striking back, invoking laws that toughen penalties for those who lie about terrorism threats or make threats against mass transportation—both, felony counts. State and local governments also are suing perpetrators in civil courts to obtain restitution. Conwill, who pleaded guilty to making false statements, is serving a prison term of nearly four years and was assessed more than \$28,000—a pittance, given that Amtrak’s costs stemming from the threat reached about \$100,000.

“Nuts.” The motives for such hoaxes vary. Some tipsters have criminal records, others a history of mental problems. Still others are just average citizens reacting to personal setbacks and crises. Federal

officials say there has also been a spike in false threats by drug dealers or illegal-immigrant smugglers seeking vendettas against rivals or to extort payment. Last January, an anonymous caller told a 911 operator near El Centro, Calif., that he was an alien smuggler who had recently gotten two Iraqi men and four Chinese chemists into the United States. The tipster said that his organization was planning for the chemists to take possession of a nuclear device smuggled in from Mexico and that they would be “setting it” in Boston. He even dropped off a bag containing photos and the names and passport numbers of the Chinese chemists.

The information sent ICE and police in New York and Boston scrambling while the FBI frantically enlisted the help of the Mexican and Chinese governments to pursue leads. But when Mexican police arrested the tipster, Jose Ernesto Beltran Quinones, 34, he confessed that he had made the whole thing up. U.S. law enforcement sources said Beltran wanted revenge against his former boss. Mexican authorities said Beltran was gunning for the Chinese illegal immigrants, who may have hotfooted it over the border without paying his smuggling fee. They later said Beltran thought up the story as a “joke” while under the influence of drugs and al-



cohol. He was released after interviews. "The nuts are always going to be with us," says Thomas Trier, supervisory special agent at the FBI's resident agency in Madison, Wis. "But whether it's a nut or it's al Qaeda, what chance can you take when you get a threat like this? . . . We have to run this stuff down."

So when Ahmed Allali offered up a tip about al Qaeda's plans to attack the United States, federal agents were all ears. According to an FBI affidavit, Allali, a 36-year-old Algerian national and illegal immigrant facing deportation, said that in 1997 he had traveled from Algeria to Kuala Lumpur, where he roomed with two members of al Qaeda, whose names he provided. Allali said the three men then traveled to Bangkok, where Allali observed his room-



"The nuts are always going to be with us. But... what chance can you take?" —Thomas Trier, FBI

TRAIN MAN. Michael Conwill was jailed for nearly four years for his Amtrak caper.

mates conducting surveillance of the American, British, and other embassies. As FBI agents pressed him, however, Allali's story changed—several times. First, he said he had lied about the names of the al Qaeda members. Then, he said he had traveled to Chicago and stumbled on an al Qaeda plot to detonate bombs at government facilities in five U.S. cities. Finally, he confessed that everything he had

said was a lie, concocted to avoid deportation. "When you get information that's that specific," says Keith Lourdeau, the special agent in charge of the FBI office in Indianapolis, "a lot of people get spun up." Allali has pleaded guilty to lying to federal agents and will be sentenced this month. "He's still hoping not to be deported," says Allali's attorney, Bill Marsh. "Hope springs eternal."

"Brain cramp." Disputes and rivalries between criminals or coworkers have triggered several major terrorism investigations. On Feb. 3, 2003, the FBI office in Rockford, Ill., received an anonymous letter saying that a Chinese woman traveling from Hong Kong to Chicago had terrorist intentions. "She will be carrying with her an extremely deadly kind of biological virus," the letter read, according to an FBI affidavit. "Once this virus starts spreading it will be impossible to stop it." The letter concluded: "When millions of Americans die don't say that you were not alerted beforehand."

In fact, the woman posed no threat. "She had a legitimate reason for being over-

seas; she was visiting relatives," says Special Agent Ross Rice, spokesman for the Chicago FBI field office. "She wasn't part of a terrorist group." The tipster was Nouman Khan, 32, a computer programmer who had worked with the woman and who was, according to the FBI interviews with the woman, miffed that she had replaced him on a big project. But Khan told the FBI

he was mad that she had complained about him to their boss. Khan's lawyer, Thomas Tyrrell, says his client is no terrorist: "I came to believe that he was a very kind and gentle young man, who just had a brain cramp." Khan was sentenced to two years' probation.

A Chicago investment banker named Zubair Ghias, 28, carried out perhaps the most bizarre hoax of all. When Ghias disappeared on Valentine's Day, 2004, his pregnant wife hired a private detective named Ernie Rizzo to track him down. When police found Ghias's abandoned Range Rover on Chicago's gang-infested South Side, it was filled with flowers, and Ghias's credit cards, along with a receipt for Cartier jewelry, were on the front seat. Rizzo knew the couple had had a tiff. "If you are a wife on Valentine's Day," says Rizzo, "and your husband buys you 10 dozen roses, you wouldn't leave the roses in the car." There was also a handwritten note in the car: "Call the police, I'm being kidnapped." Five days later, Ghias called his wife from aboard a Royal Air Maroc flight, en route to Morocco. Some Arab men had kidnapped him, he said, and were forcing him to fly to Casablanca. Rizzo alerted federal authorities, who diverted the plane to an airport in Maine. Eventually, Ghias confessed to FBI agents that he had invented the whole story after quarreling with his wife. Ghias must now complete two years of probation and has paid Chicago police \$13,000 in restitution. His attorney, Mark Rotert, says Ghias and his wife "still are together; they still are happily married." In a bizarre twist, Ghias had traveled from Chicago to New York with no identification, then had his birth certificate faxed to him there. "Then he goes to the passport office in New York," Rizzo says, ". . . he gets his passport and pays cash for a one-way ticket to Morocco. And it was, no questions asked, 'Have a nice flight, sir.' You talk about national security!" ●

With research assistance from Carol Hook and the U.S. News Library staff



Incoming at a Homeland Security office in Vermont

SCOTT GOLDSMITH FOR USN&WR