US military veterans who fought as mercenaries for Ukrainian fascists indicted on double murder charges

Jacob Crosse
31 March 2020

After serving US imperialism first in the US military, then as volunteer mercenaries in the Ukrainian neo-fascist paramilitary organization Right Sector, Alex Zwiefelhofer, 22, and Craig Lang, 29, are awaiting trial, and in Lang's case extradition from Ukraine back to the US, for the 2018 double murder and robbery of Florida couple Deana, 51, and Serafin "Danny" Lorenzo, 53. If found guilty the two could face the death penalty under federal law.

Testimony obtained from Zwiefelhofer during an FBI investigation into the murders reveals that Zwiefelhofer and Lang orchestrated the robbery in order to fund a trip to Venezuela. Upon entering the country, the pair planned to join a right-wing anticommunist death squad with the explicit aim of overthrowing the bourgeois nationalist government of Nicolás Maduro and to kill "communists." This is just the latest example of US imperialism fostering fascistic and racist elements in order to carry out its strategic geopolitical aims.

Lang has also been named as a "mentor" in a criminal case involving US Army soldier Jarret William Smith, 24. Smith pleaded guilty this past February to two counts of "distributing information related to explosives, destructive devices and weapons of mass destruction." Smith, a self-described "anti-kosmick Satanist," joined the US army as an infantryman in June 2017. After completing basic training, Smith was stationed at Fort Riley, Kansas, where he was arrested in September 2018 after communicating instructions on how to make "improvised explosive devices" to an undercover FBI agent. Smith is currently scheduled to be sentenced on May 18, where he faces the possibility of up to 20 years in federal prison.

According to the plea agreement, Smith had provided a list of potential targets to the agent through the messaging app Telegram. Lang allegedly recommended former Democratic congressman and one-time presidential candidate Beto O'Rourke and a "major American news network," as well as the address of an alleged member of "antifa" in Michigan, as desirable targets for a right-wing terrorist bombing.

Prior to joining the US military in 2016, Smith had communicated with Lang over Facebook. At the time, Lang was in Ukraine, fighting in the Donbas with Zwiefelhofer. Both had joined the neo-fascist Right Sector, a far-right nationalist paramilitary organization with close ties to the current Ukrainian security state. Right Sector was instrumental in the 2014 right-wing NATO-backed putsch that ousted President Viktor Yanukovych and installed the US-friendly Petro Poroshenko.

Through Poroshenko, US imperialism funneled billions of dollars in military arms to organizations such as Right Sector and the Azov Battalion. Poroshenko was replaced by former comedian Volodymr Zelensky last year, who has continued to appeal to the far-right after failing to reach a cease-fire with Russian-backed separatists in east Ukraine.

Through Facebook, Lang assured Smith that if he wanted to fight in Ukraine, including with the fascist Azov Battalion, he could get him in contact with a screener for the organization. Lang warned Smith, however, "if you come to this unit and the government comes to shut down the unit, you will be asked to fight. You may also be asked to kill certain people who become on the bad graces of certain people." Lang and Smith continued to communicate over social media up until Smith's arrest last year.

Zwiefelhofer, a Wisconsin native, is currently awaiting trial in a Fort Myers, Florida, prison while Lang, of Ayden, North Carolina, is currently being held on a US extradition request in the city of Vinnytsya, Ukraine. Lang's lawyers have argued against his extradition back to the US as he is being charged with double murder which carries the possibility of a death sentence in the US under federal law.

In contrast to award-winning WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange, who has been denied bail even as the deadly coronavirus spreads throughout Belmarsh prison, Lang has been granted "house arrest" while he awaits further extradition hearings, which according to his lawyers could take "years" to resolve. In light of this, Lang's lawyers plan on submitting a request to reduce his current house arrest status to the more lenient "night-time house arrest" later this month.

In contrast to Judge Vanessa Barrister's courtroom, which is lined with US lawyers and attorneys, keeping an ever-watchful eye over the proceedings, the US embassy in Kiev couldn't be bothered to write out the extradition request for Lang in Cyrillic, prompting a delay that allowed Lang to be released for more than two weeks before he was rearrested in October of last year. For the US ruling class, the exposure of their war crimes is a much greater evil compared to wanton murder, in which they regularly indulge.

Zwiefelhofer joined the military in 2015 and was discharged in 2018 after going absent without leave from Fort Bragg shortly after completing basic and air assault training. Zwiefelhofer proceeded to fly to Europe where he planned on joining the French Foreign Legion. However, after he was denied entry into the Legion, he ventured to Ukraine where he joined Lang in the Right Sector. Together, the two became comrades in arms where, according to Zwiefelhofer's Instagram account, they committed "war crimes" resulting in a "price on my head in 7 countries."

By the time Lang was 22 years old he had already served two tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. He joined the military in 2008 when he was 17 years old, according to a 2016 interview with *Vice* magazine, to escape a dysfunctional home. When Lang was 12 years old, his father attempted to murder his stepmother, resulting in his father going to jail and Lang living with his stepmother.

During his last tour in Afghanistan in 2012, Lang's Humvee was struck with an improvised explosive device. The resulting explosion and

© World Socialist Web Site

traumatic brain injury left Lang deaf in one ear and severed several of the nerves connecting his irises to his brain, leaving him partially blind. Following the explosion, Lang was stationed at Fort Bliss in El Paso, Texas. While there, Lang's pregnant wife sent him videos of her sleeping with other men. The enraged Lang loaded his vehicle with military equipment including assault rifles, landmines and body armor and proceeded to drive non-stop to North Carolina, where he set up a perimeter of land mines around his wife's condominium and threatened to murder her.

Lang was eventually detained by SWAT and dishonorably discharged from the military. He spent less than six months in jail, in part because he says of his documented history of post-traumatic stress disorder as well as the fact that he warned his chain-of-command of his impending actions. Lang told *Vice* , "I told my commanders repeatedly that I was going to murder her. The motherfuckers thought I was bluffing." Lang lost all disability payments and military benefits as well as his home and vehicle following his incarceration and subsequent divorce, leaving him six figures in debt.

Unable to find and keep steady work, including a short-lived stint in the Bakken oil fields of North Dakota in 2015, Lang returned to the only job he had ever held for more than six months his whole life. After being rejected by Blackwater, Lang found a welcome home with the Right Sector. Writing in a June 2016 Facebook post, Lang looked forward to fighting in Ukraine so that "my children...may they be able to walk in the streets of Kyiv having known what their father defended and the struggle of our second home" and to fight "the communist Putin."

After a year of fighting together in the Donbas, which Lang described in a British documentary as mundane "trench warfare," Zwiefelhofer and Lang flew to Kenya, where they planned on sneaking into South Sudan to allegedly fight the al-Shabaab terrorist network. They were both apprehended by Kenyan authorities at the border and deported back to the United States.

On August 1, 2017, upon arriving in Charlotte, North Carolina, after being deported, Zwiefelhofer was interviewed by Customs and Border Protection and an FBI agent. They searched his phone and allegedly found child porn, which resulted in Zwiefelhofer spending three months in jail before he bonded out, returning to Wisconsin to live with his father.

He proceeded to skip out on his bail hearing, which resulted in an arrest warrant being issued in April 2018. A cursory search of Zwiefelhofer's public Instagram page, which he's had since at least April 2016, reveals his intimate ties to Right Sector; there are several photos of Zwiefelhofer brandishing machine guns alongside fellow fascists in Right Sector.

Despite being out on bail, Zwiefelhofer was able to board a Greyhound bus from Minneapolis to South Florida, where he reunited with Lang at a La Quinta hotel in Miami on April 5, 2018. It was during this time, according to documents submitted by the government, that the two planned their robbery to fund their paramilitary excursion to Venezuela.

An FBI review of Zwiefelhofer's cell phone revealed "multiple searches of videos to include a particular scene from a movie in which subjects were shown inside a vehicle and then ambushed by multiple shooters," as well as the query on "how to smuggle yourself into South America."

On April 7, 2018, Zwiefelhofer listed several pistols and AR-15 components for sale on the website *Armslist*. The next day, Danny Lorenzo texted Zwiefelhofer in regard to the weapons, and a $3,000 sale price was agreed upon. Lorenzo withdrew $3,000 from his bank account the same day and shortly after 7:00 p.m., the Lorenzos left their home outside of Tampa, Florida, to meet Zwiefelhofer and Lang at the agreed-upon rendezvous point—a church parking lot south of Fort Myers, roughly two hours away.

Cell phone tracking data obtained by the FBI shows Zwiefelhofer's cell phone messages correspond to "Jeremy" the seller listed on *Armslist* whom Danny thought he was talking to. At 10:37 p.m., Danny texted "Jeremy" advising that he had arrived at the church; 18 minutes later, emergency services received multiple calls of gunfire in the parking lot.

Sheriff's deputies located the Lorenzos' vehicle along with 63 shell casings in the church parking lot. Danny was shot seven times, while his wife Deanna, who had never left the passenger seat, was shot 11 times, a majority in the face, neck and chest. According to ballistic evidence gathered by the state, there were two shooters firing different weapons of different calibers at the same time.

According to the FBI affidavit, Zwiefelfhofer and Lang fled the state after the murder/robbery, but not to Venezuela. Instead, Zwiefelhofer returned to Wisconsin, where he was arrested almost a year later for attempting to purchase a weapon without a license. Eventually, investigators linked his cell phone footage to the murders, and he was formally charged in September 2019 along with Lang with robbery and the double murder of Serafin and Deana Lorenzo.

An April 8, 2019, Instagram photo features Zwiefelhofer with a Adolf Hitler mustache, one year after the alleged shooting took place, along with an April 14, 2019, self-portrait of Zwiefelhofer, pistol in hand, with the caption, "Feeling cute, might join and [sic] ultra nationalist militia or make the army times later, idk."

Instead of returning to North Carolina or proceeding to Venezuela, Lang was able to travel to the Pacific Northwest where he sold some of his guns at a pawn shop before fleeing the country, first to Colombia and then back to Ukraine to join up with the Right Sector again, demonstrating the ease with which fascists can travel around the world under the watchful eye of the US intelligence agencies. While in the Ukraine, he managed to get married and, according to his lawyer, Lang "has found a new life, a new love, a new family."

During his October 8, 2019, extradition hearing, Lang was asked by the judge why he had returned to Ukraine: "I wanted to help, you still have a war going on…there are still people dying."

It isn't surprising that the US and Ukrainian governments have been slow to process Lang's extradition. The ultra-nationalist government in Kiev, with the full backing of US, German and French imperialism, has welcomed the return of fascism to prepare for war with Russia. The government of President Zelensky has remained silent even as associates of the Right Sector are implicated in political murders across the country, including the gunning down of children and acid attacks on politicians. As long as Lang, and any other fascists are willing to fight for Washington's imperialist interests, their heinous crimes will be ignored or downplayed to facilitate their quick return to the front lines.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site