

Whidbey News-Times

Whidbey's neo-Nazi shootout

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An armed-and-dangerous neo-Nazi leader was holed up in a cabin. FBI agents, shivering in the cold rain, surrounded the home in an ever-tightening noose, expertly pumping bullets and tear gas inside.

This was the scene on Smugglers Cove Road in Greenbank, 24 years ago this week. It didn't end well for the suspect, 31-year-old Robert Mathews, who died inside the cabin after agents accidentally started it on fire.

The shoot-out was portrayed in both a book and a movie told at the viewpoint of the man who "betrayed" Mathews, but now a first-hand account of the mini-siege is available.

An FBI agent involved in the incident devotes a chapter to it in a new book, "Bullets, Bombs and Fast Talk," which is out just in time for the notorious anniversary. James Botting was a hostage negotiator and SWAT team member.

Members of local law enforcement were also involved — though none have written a book about it — but Cmdr. Chris Ellis with the Island County Sheriff's Office may be the only still-working deputy who remembers what it was like. He actually was an officer in the Langley Police Department in 1984 and helped deputies by taking their shifts while they were at the standoff.

To him, a skinhead protest four years later was more memorable. A large group of neo-Nazis and two national white supremacist leaders — Richard Butler and Thomas Metzger — held a rally at South Whidbey State Park in support of Mathews, their martyred hero. But their numbers were dwarfed by a counter protest against the skinheads.

"We geared up because we thought there was going to be trouble," Ellis said, explaining that deputies from neighboring counties converged on Central

Whidbey. “But nothing much happened. The people protesting the skinheads were actually more vocal.”

In the ensuing 20 years, skinheads and sympathizers continued marking the anniversary with brief gatherings, wreaths and even a burning swastika on the road. But Ellis said that the effort trailed off into nothing over the last decade or so.

Botting’s new book, published by Potomac Books, offers some interesting details on a part of Whidbey Island history. Mathews and a handful of his followers were hiding on Central Whidbey after escaping from the FBI. Mathews and members of his white supremacist group, The Order, had robbed banks and counterfeited money.

On Central Whidbey, Mathews told residents that he was a divorced writer. Agents arrested his followers, but Mathews refused to go down easy. Botting writes that he admired Mathews’ “balls” in being able to keep dozens of armed officers at bay for so many hours. Gunfire was exchanged many times and Mathews came close to hitting agents, as well as a helicopter.

“Mathews seemed determined to shoot it out and take as many agents with him as possible,” Botting wrote. “He had constantly told them so. He seemed determined to become a martyr for The Order and white racism.”

In the pre-Waco days, FBI members were apparently more freewheeling about shooting at suspects. Botting describes Myron Hitch, the leader of the FBI SWAT team in one passage.

“Frustrated by his measured methodically firing, Hitch pushed Ayers out of the way and jumped into the open, a 9mm semi-automatic in one hand and a .357 revolver in the other. Reminiscent of the gunslingers in the old West, Hitch fired both guns alternately until they were both empty, screaming, ‘Take that...’” Botting wrote.

While deputies with the Island County Sheriff’s Office were involved, Botting only briefly described their participation in an incident he describes as “foolish.” The Sheriff’s Office decided to send a dog after Mathews. The handler and the dog crept up to the cabin.

“He pushed the dog into a window on the first floor, only to have the dog jump back out a few seconds later,” he wrote. “He repeated this a couple more times and finally gave up. That German Shepherd had no interest in meeting Bob Mathews.”

The agents fired round after round of tear gas into the cabin and Mathews responded with an estimated 1,000 rounds of gunfire. Botting writes that the wind coming off the water quickly dispersed the gas. Botting eventually gave up on the gas and started shooting rifled slugs “for penetration.”

The former agent writes that the cabin quickly became an inferno after agents started a blaze by firing several M-79 illumination rounds inside. Mathews never got out.

Botting claims that an autopsy on Mathews' burned body found that he died from several gunshot wounds, but numerous newspaper accounts at the time tell a different story. The King County medical examiner told a Whidbey News-Times reporter that there were no bullet wounds on Mathews' body and that the cause of death was smoke inhalation.

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