

Family recounts terror at hands of ATF agents

Answers sought for no-arrest gun raid

By Michael Hedges
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

The hilltop home of gun-show promoter Harry Lamplugh in the wooded central Pennsylvania town of Wellsboro was raided by several agents of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms last May.

The encounter was a nightmare out of a Gestapo handbook, say Mr. Lamplugh and his wife, Theresa: Agents waved automatic weapons in their faces, damaged their property, took medical and family records, seized guns and \$2,000 in cash, and even caused the death of pets.

In court papers, the federal government has called the charges of harassment and brutality "outrageous and utterly false."

But no one in the Lamplugh

family has been charged with a crime. And ATF doesn't dispute that at least \$18,000 of the Lamplugh's property was seized and listed for forfeiture and that personal documents have not been returned.

The couple and their attorney, Robert Sanders, have been unsuccessful in trying to open a court affidavit justifying the search and describing why the Lamplugh's were being investigated. With federal income taxes due Monday, the Lamplugh's have not regained any business records.

Their story is achieving the status of underground classic among gun owners, pro-gun groups and other anti-ATF organizations. The National Rifle Association's Ginny Simone has prepared a videotape

see ATF, page A6

ATF

From page A1

on the case, and other organizations are telling their members about it.

It is beginning to rank with such cases as the ATF and FBI raids on the Branch Davidian compound near Waco, Texas, in 1993, which left 96 sect members and four ATF agents dead, and the Randall Weaver case in Idaho, which began as a minor weapons case and ended with a federal agent and the wife and son of the white separatist dead.

The Lamplugh case has become another rallying point in a growing protest over what gun groups say are unconstitutional assaults on their rights.

In an interview, Mr. Lamplugh said the federal agents were "on a fishing expedition."

He thinks ATF was searching for records of people who sell guns through the 40 shows he promotes in the Eastern United States each year and for the names of the 70,000 members of the Borderline Gun Collectors Association, which his family runs. "They want me to be a rat and do their dirty work," he said. "I want no part of it."

Another motive hinted at in court papers filed by the family in an effort to get property back is political retaliation against Mr. Lamplugh for setting up gun shows at which "cruel and personal" criticism of the Clinton administration and ATF is exchanged.

"As part of the freedom to assemble, associate and exercise free speech, it is not uncommon to see prominently displayed posters ... and other media scolding and ridiculing political figures and executive-branch officials," the Lamplugh court brief says.

"At a typical gun show you will hear things like 'The president has committed cowardice and treason for protesting against America on foreign shores,'" Mr. Lamplugh

said.

Mr. Lamplugh, a 51-year-old Army veteran, was a licensed gun dealer but gave up his license to promote gun shows held by groups such as the Lions Club, the American Cancer Society, the Marine Corps League and the American Legion.

He denied committing any crime to warrant the search and seizures. "Common sense will tell you if they had something on me, they would have filed charges long ago to shut me up," Mr. Lamplugh said.

On May 25, he said, his family was visited by the full wrath of a powerful and angry group of federal agents.

"The first thing I saw was a guy running across the yard with a machine gun pointed at my son. If he would have tripped, he would have killed him," Mr. Lamplugh said. "I had a guy put a machine gun, an MP-5, in my face and tell me to shut up. ... I asked if he had a warrant, and he emphasized with his gun and his mouth that I better shut up or else."

Over the next eight hours agents thrashed about the family home, at one point pausing to have a "pizza party," Mr. Lamplugh said.

Private mail was opened and read, food was taken and eaten, and a hole was burned in the carpet by an agent's casually discarded cigarette, according to a brief filed in the couple's lawsuit to regain their property.

Mr. Lamplugh is a cancer patient. Powerful prescription drugs were strewn on the floor, giving family pets a fatal snack, he said. And a female ATF agent kicked a kitten, then stomped it to death, the family said.

The federal government denies the killing of the pets and other harassment. In a countermotion to the Lamplugh suit, Assistant U.S. Attorney Wayne P. Samuelson said, "The search was conducted in a low-key, orderly and professional manner."

But a veterinarian has confirmed that the day of the search

the Lamplugh's brought him a kitten that had suffered blunt-force trauma and soon died.

"Either this couple who loved animals killed their own kitten or someone else did that day," said Mr. Sanders, the Lamplugh's attorney.

Most of the weapons seized by federal agents were well-known models of hunting rifles and shotguns made by companies such as Winchester, Marlin and Remington. They also took a few pistols — commemorative World War I and World War II Colt .45s.

The U.S. Attorney's Office for central Pennsylvania refused to discuss the case this week, saying the raid was part of an ongoing investigation.

In a briefing paper on the case yesterday, ATF in Washington said, "As a convicted felon, Mr. Lamplugh is prohibited from lawfully possessing firearms."

Mr. Lamplugh denied he is a convicted felon.

"I made a diligent search," Mr. Sanders said. "I had an attorney search, and a private investigator who is a former ATF agent search, and I can find no record that Mr. Lamplugh was convicted of a felony."

ATF refused to specify or produce records of any felony charges against Mr. Lamplugh. In court papers, Mr. Samuelson said, "The specific alleged criminal violations were expressly made known to Mr. Sanders."

Mr. Sanders said he was told his client was being investigated as a former felon who illegally owned guns and engaged in gun dealing without a license. Mr. Lamplugh said he has not sold guns since voluntarily giving up a gun seller's license a couple of years ago.

The government ran an ad in USA Today to sell the \$18,000 worth of guns taken from Mr. Lamplugh's private collection. He was not informed but happened to see the ad. To prevent the sale, he had to post a bond equal to the guns' value.

FROM PAGE ONE

The Washington Times