

# **In the Matter of Kenneth Michael Trentadue Part III**

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By J.D. Cash, Third in a series

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Shortly after the bloody body of the inmate was discovered hanging from a bed sheet in a solitary confinement cell at the Oklahoma City Federal Transfer Center (FTC), over a thousand miles away an unsuspecting family received the shocking news that a loved one had committed suicide.

The dead man's brother, lawyer Jesse Trentadue, recalled the events for this newspaper.

"Acting Warden Marie Carter called my mother, Wilma Trentadue, at about 7 a.m. West Coast time on Aug. 21, 1995, and said my brother had committed suicide. She tried to get my mother to agree to cremate the body and even offered to pay for the cremation.

"We now know that BOP (Bureau of Prisons) regulations do not allow for cremation. My mother told Carter that funeral arrangements would be the decision of Kenney's wife, Carmen. When Carter heard that she went ballistic, telling my mother that Kenney did not have a wife, my mother told Carter he did and that I would be contacting Carter to deal with funeral arrangements and that I was a lawyer.

"Carter lost it again, telling my mother that Kenney did not have a brother. My mother said yes, he did. He had two brothers and a sister."

"About 8 a.m. on the 21st, Trentadue continued: "My mother calls and tells me about Kenney's death. I was stunned. I had just spoken with him the evening of the 19th and nothing was unusual. I was immediately suspicious. So, too, was everyone in our family. I contacted Carmen to tell her about Kenney's death, but first called Carmen's sisters so they would be there when the bad news arrived. Kenney's son was about 2 months old at the time.

"Later that morning, I called Carter, who seemed very defensive. I kept asking for an autopsy and she refused, saying that my mother would have to ask for one in writing. I explained to Carter that I was a lawyer and represented my family and that we wanted an autopsy. She still refused. I had to prepare written authorizations for an autopsy, have my mother sign them and send them to Carter."

What the Trentadue family and possibly even the acting warden at the Oklahoma City Federal Transfer Center didn't know was at that moment an autopsy was already under way.

"We did not know that an autopsy was being done as Carter and I spoke," Jesse Trentadue commented. "I don't believe she knew either until later that day. After I told Carter we wanted my brother sent home, not cremated, I subsequently learned that Carter called the medical examiner's office to ask what she needed to do to have the body cremated.

The medical examiner's investigator, Kevin Rowland, told Carter she would need our consent. It was then Carter learned of the autopsy and sent over a request to the medical examiner to do an autopsy that had already been done. All Carter or anyone would say was that he had killed himself."

When the medical examiner's report of investigation was eventually released, Dr. Fred B. Jordan listed more than two-dozen injuries to the body of Kenneth Trentadue. Literally from his feet to the top of his head, Trentadue received a large number of bruises and lacerations before he took his last breath, experts said.

What the experts don't agree on is who was responsible for the remarkable condition of the inmate's body.

The Trentadue family and their experts say their loved one was tortured and killed by the government.

The government takes the position the inmate spent a considerable amount of time and energy trying to kill himself that night in the cell.

Both theories are bizarre and both sides have spent huge sums trying to establish the more convincing case.

During the autopsy examination, Dr. Jordan photographed three large wounds to Trentadue's skull, injuries consistent with blows from a blunt instrument.

Also, Jordan noted that Trentadue's throat had been slashed. All this the staff at the center claimed the 44-year-old parole violator accomplished before he supposedly hanged himself.

For nearly three years after this autopsy, the Oklahoma chief medical examiner refused to issue a final determination on a cause of death for Kenneth Trentadue. Instead, Dr. Jordan's initial finding was death by asphyxiation, "cause unknown."

As a result of his reluctance to agree with prison officials that the case was suicide and therefore close the investigation, as well as the Trentadue family's belief that their loved one was murdered, years of investigations have followed and millions of dollars expended trying to determine, or some would say cover up, what really happened that night in cell 709A at the FTC in Oklahoma City.

Federal refusal to cooperate

Within 24 hours of receiving the bloody and battered body for autopsy, an assistant medical examiner called the Oklahoma City FBI office and reported that Trentadue's injuries were consistent with a beating and murder - certainly not a suicide. The medical examiner's office also advised the FBI to treat Trentadue's death as a homicide.

Special agent Jeff Jenkins recorded this exchange in an FBI report obtained by the McCurtain Daily Gazette.

"A subsequent autopsy by the State Medical Examiner in Oklahoma City revealed that (Trentadue) had been severely beaten prior to death by asphyxiation."

However, the FBI was not talking to the family at this time and the report was not available in the days following Trentadue's death. Certainly the Bureau of Prisons had not disclosed the extent of the inmate's injuries or any other information to the family regarding Trentadue's final days in federal custody.

While officials declined to speak on the record, the body was sent from the medical examiner's office over to a funeral home to be prepared for viewing and burial. It would take a lot of makeup to make the body presentable for the family.

Jesse Trentadue recalled the shipment of his brother home: "The body did not arrive in Orange County until the next Saturday. I had to repeatedly call the FTC to inquire about having the body shipped home. It took almost a week and many heated conversations with the FTC administration. They did not want to release him and I now know why.

"I was in Utah preparing to travel to California when his body arrived. My mother, sister and Kenney's wife went immediately to the funeral home and took a camera.

"The body was heavily made up so that all of the injuries were concealed except for his slashed throat. No makeup was placed on that wound; in fact, the collar on his shirt was deliberately turned down so that the wound was obvious. I suspect they wanted us to think that was a rope burn."

He explained that the women took the most important step in the family's early investigation. "My mother, sister and Carmen had Kenney's clothes removed and took a few photographs. They took the camera with them because we knew that if Kenney were murdered, he would go down fighting. When I arrived, we spent the better part of a morning photographing and videotaping Kenney's body. It turned out that we have the only photographs of many of his injuries."

The Trentadues contacted the Oklahoma chief medical examiner in person. Jesse Trentadue explained the revelations that emerged from this initial meeting.

"Jordan repeatedly told us this was a murder, but because the crime scene had been destroyed, he had to list the manner of death as unknown. He also looked my mother, Carmen and sister in the eye and told them he would never go back on them."

Bitter after years of disappointments, Jesse Trentadue recalls now, that, "In the weeks following Kenney's murder, I went to Dallas, Texas, to speak with the BOP's regional counsel Michael Hood. Hood told me the BOP investigation was over, but would not tell me the conclusion.

"Hood also suggested that we had done the injuries to Kenney's body. Hood made one comment that I will always remember. He said, 'The BOP, FBI and U.S. Attorney's Office - we're one big ole' Justice Department.'"

Trentadue explained his frustrations further: "But when I would ask for information, I was repeatedly told to file a Freedom of Information Act Request. No one within the government would talk to us. In fact, on Sept. 1, 1995, the BOP issued a press release saying that Kenney's death had tentatively been ruled suicide and that all of his wounds were self-inflicted. That press release occurred after my brother's body arrived home and after we had discovered the trauma."

The BOP's declaration of suicide had no legal effect. It was designed for the media. The person with the authority of determine the legal cause of death was with the Oklahoma medical examiner's office and Dr. Jordan was still uncommitted.

Jesse Trentadue said the next step was to lobby senior members of the Department of Justice.

"By early October, I had gone up the DOJ food chain to Janet Reno, because by early October, I knew the BOP was lying to me, but I did not suspect the FBI until later."

It would be more than two years before Trentadue would learn that the FBI had not even inspected the death scene in a timely manner after receiving the medical examiner's opinion that Kenneth Trentadue's case should be worked as a homicide.

Instead, more damning information concerning the government's questionable investigation of his brother's mysterious death would be investigated and confirmed by Justice Department officials, but no one would lose his job or be sent to prison as a result.

One sickening thing to the Trentadue family is the Office of Inspector General's findings that Federal Transfer Center staff admitted lying about important facts in the investigation. Beyond committing perjury, some staff members admitted destroying evidence in the case.

But most upsetting to the family are admissions from the staff that key medical personnel were not allowed to administer first aid to Trentadue during the first minutes after the inmate's body was found hanging in his cell.

Jesse Trentadue calls the whole thing a murder and sloppy cover-up that no one has paid for.

"My brother didn't have a reason to kill himself. Someone else did it. We want to know who and why!"

### The Ricks investigation

Oklahoma City FBI Special Agent-in-Charge Bob Ricks assigned the gruesome homicide investigation to an agent known to complain he couldn't bear to look at pictures of dead people.

In spite of the problem, Special Agent Jeff Jenkins was handed the case by a man only days from leaving the bureau.

Ricks had been ordered out of the FBI by director Louis Freeh only days after the Oklahoma City bombing.

Ricks now admits he stopped a raid that the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms had planned on a group of radicals at Elohim City, which Timothy McVeigh had contacted only a few days before the bomb blast in Oklahoma City left 168 dead, including 19 children.

Like Ricks, Jenkins' days at the bureau were numbered. Evidence suggests Jenkins' ouster was not linked to the bombing of the OKC federal building but problems with his handling of the Trentadue matter.

Instead of getting in his car and immediately going across town to the Federal Transfer Center to begin the crucial process of conducting interviews and collecting evidence while the scene was fresh, Jenkins stayed in his Oklahoma City office that afternoon and then went home to enjoy the next day off as paid leave.

While the official case agent lollygagged, inmates were transferred from the Oklahoma City prison, and the cell where Trentadue is believed to have died was scrubbed clean.

When Jenkins did finally manage to make it to the facility on the 24th - a full three days after the death was reported - the agent failed to conduct a single interview with an inmate, nor did he bother to visit the cell where the body was reported to have been cut down.

Instead, Jenkins spent the first day at the facility with the acting warden and two members of her staff. What evidence Jenkins collected that day he later admitted was either placed under his desk or left in his car trunk.

A subsequent investigation by the Office of Inspector General for the Justice Department concluded that pieces of blood-soaked evidence that might have yielded DNA evidence linking other persons to the scene putrefied in the agent's car trunk in the stifling hot August Oklahoma weather.

By the time the evidence was turned over, it was impossible for the FBI lab to examine for clues of other suspects.

The FBI said nothing of this to the family. Evidence of the extraordinary amount of missing and destroyed evidence in the case would keep FBI and BOP officials busy explaining for years to come.

In the meantime, the Trentadue investigation languished.

However, brother Jesse refused to wait. The lawyer began a national campaign for justice, lobbying hard for answers - coast to coast.

"I had to beg to get the FBI to send anyone to our home to interview us about Kenney. Finally I flew to Oklahoma and took the pictures of Kenney we took after the body arrived in Utah. I knew we were in a lot of trouble when Jenkins said he couldn't look at those pictures, because he might get sick."

Jordan frustrated, too

Eventually the Oklahoma medical examiner became enraged over the FBI's lack of interest in the case, too. Like Jesse Trentadue, Dr. Jordan decided to make some phone calls. He took his complaints to the Justice Department, just as Trentadue had been doing.

Sensing the pressure, the case agent on the investigation, Jeff Jenkins, wrote that he believed the medical examiner would eventually conclude that Trentadue was murdered.

Jenkins notes' include references to the building media interest in case. His handwritten notes obtained by this newspaper describe Jordan to his superiors as: "A loose cannon." And in those same notes, Jenkins warns:

"CBS been to ME's office earlier today. Talked to OC media rep and gave standard no comment on pending investigation. Things at the prison seem to have gotten a little more tense."

Certainly the FBI had plenty of reason to worry about the media and Jordan.

On Dec. 20, 1995, Dr. Jordan placed in his file a memo obtained by this newspaper listing efforts he was making to urge the FBI and Bureau of Prisons to do a proper investigation into Trentadue's death.

In that memo, Jordan records that he placed a call to Eric Holder, a top official in Janet Reno's Justice Department in Washington, D.C.

After failing to make contact with Holder, Jordan notes that he turned next to Asst. U.S. Attorney Arlene Joplin in Oklahoma City.

"I advised her that I felt the Trentadue problem was a very serious issue that needed full support of the investigative services of the FBI. I believe I further informed her that last week in frustration I indicated to Agent Hunt of the FBI that it could not help but occur to me that perhaps the FBI and the BOP were not expediting this investigation as quickly as we hoped would occur. I told her I thought there was a very serious problem at the prison. And about that time, Mr. Ryan (U.S. Attorney for the Western District of Oklahoma) got on the line. I indicated that I felt Mr. Trentadue had been abused and tortured and at this point was not sure whether his death could be explained as a suicide or whether it should be regarded as a homicide."

The memo concludes with Jordan's comments that Ryan thanked him for the information and gave him his pager number.

Festering with rage, Jesse Trentadue felt the local FBI had no intention of conducting a real investigation, either. The Salt Lake City attorney began a letter-writing and information campaign of his own, sometimes even plastering gory pictures of his bloodied brother at bus stops and posting them on the Internet.

In a letter accusing the BOP of murder, Trentadue wrote: "I will always be grateful to my brother for his love of life, great heart and strength. Had my brother been less of a man, your guards would have been able to kill him without inflicting so much injury to his body. Had that occurred, Kenney's family would forever have been guilt-ridden over his death. Each of us would have lived with the pain of thinking that Kenneth took his own life and that we had somehow failed him. By making the fight he did for his life, Ken has saved us that pain and God bless for having done so!"

After years to reflect on his ordeals and his loss, Trentadue told this newspaper: "The only other thing I remember saying during those early days was in response to a question: Why should people get upset over the death of a parole violator?"

"My response: Because the Department of Justice did this and that should scare the hell out of every American. I believe that now more than ever!"

In the next installment: The pace of state and federal government investigations pick up only after the Trentadue family and the media begin asking questions. At

**this same time, pressure is brought by local and federal law enforcement officers on the state medical examiner to change his opinion of Trentadue's death from "unknown" to "suicide."**