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Gunfire Claims 2nd Prosecutor in Texas County

By MANNY FERNANDEZ, MICHAEL SCHWIRTZ and SERGE F. KOVALESKI

KAUFMAN, Tex. — After the daylight assassination of his deputy two months ago, Mike McLelland, the district attorney in largely rural Kaufman County, responded with a flash of angry bravado, denigrating the perpetrators as “scum” and vowing to hunt them down.

A former Army officer who served in Iraq during Operation Desert Storm, Mr. McLelland carried a gun and refused to be intimidated, according to a friend and the local news media, even as his wife expressed unease, worrying that her husband, too, could be in danger.

“I hope that the people that did this are watching, because we’re very confident that we’re going to find you,” he said at a news conference hours after his deputy was killed. “We’re going to pull you out of whatever hole you’re in. We’re going to bring you back and let the people of Kaufman County prosecute you to the fullest extent of the law.”

On Saturday evening, the authorities found Mr. McLelland, 63, and his wife, Cynthia, 65, shot to death inside their home in Forney, Tex., in Kaufman County. The killings galvanized law enforcement officials and frightened and bewildered local residents, many of them still shaken by the shooting of the deputy, Mark E. Hasse, 57, on Jan. 31. That case remains unsolved.

The police said Sunday that they had increased security for local elected officials and would tighten security at the county courthouse. The courthouse was scheduled to be open Monday, but Mr. McLelland’s office will be closed.

“It’s unnerving to the law enforcement community, to the community at large,” Sheriff David A. Byrnes said at a news conference on Sunday. “That’s why we’re striving to assure the community that we are protecting public safety and will continue to do that.”

The authorities said it was too early to say if the deaths of Mr. McLelland and his wife were connected to the shooting of Mr. Hasse, the county’s lead felony prosecutor. But the killings of two prosecutors in a county of 106,000 people in less than eight weeks appeared to many officials to be more than a coincidence.

“I’m really trying to stress for people to remain calm,” said Mayor Darren Rozell of Forney, about 15 miles northwest of Kaufman, the county seat. “This appeared to be a targeted attack and not a random attack.”

A law enforcement official said investigators believed that the shootings of the two prosecutors were related, but appeared to have been carried out by different people, perhaps from the same group or with the same affiliation. Shell casings were recovered in the shootings of

the McLellands, but not in the shooting of Mr. Hasse, indicating that his killer or killers had more experience, the official said.

Officials from several local, state and federal agencies — including the F.B.I., the Texas Rangers and the Kaufman County sheriff's office — were working on the case. Sheriff Byrnes told reporters that deputies had been called to Mr. McLelland's residence shortly after 6 p.m. Saturday, and that the bodies were discovered inside. He would not say if there were any signs of forced entry.

In the shooting of Mr. Hasse, the authorities said, one or two gunmen got out of a gray or silver sedan, opened fire and fled. Witnesses told investigators that the killer or killers appeared to have had their faces covered and wore black clothing and tactical-style vests. No arrests have been made, and investigators from nine agencies had been searching for leads.

Mr. McLelland told The Associated Press less than two weeks ago that he carried a gun at all times since Mr. Hasse's killing, even when he walked his dog. He said he had urged his employees to remain alert. "The people in my line of work are going to have to get better at it, because they're going to need it more in the future," he said in the interview with The A.P.

"I'm ahead of everybody else because, basically, I'm a soldier," he said, referring to his 23-year career in the Army.

Tonya J. Ratcliff, the Kaufman County tax assessor and a friend of the McLellands, said the couple was vigilant, but did not obsess over their security.

"I didn't have a sense that they were looking over their shoulders at any moment," she said.

The McLellands had five children, one of whom is a Dallas police officer.

Mr. McLelland was raised on a ranch in Wortham, Tex., and "learned to cowboy at an early age," according to his [biography](#) on the Kaufman County district attorney's office Web site. He studied history at the University of Texas at Austin. In addition to his Army service, he had been a criminal defense lawyer and a judge handling mental health cases.

Doug Lowe, the district attorney in nearby Anderson County, described his friend and fellow prosecutor as "one big, tough man" who loved his family, eating and justice, though not necessarily in that order. Mr. Lowe said Mr. McLelland's death had caused widespread shock, but not panic, among North Texas prosecutors.

"We're a tightknit group," Mr. Lowe said. "It's a blow not just to Kaufman, but to all Texas prosecutors. I don't think anyone in my group will be in fear. We're not going to let this stand in the way of getting the bad guys."

But in Forney, a town of 15,000 about 20 miles from downtown Dallas that is known as the antiques capital of Texas, many residents were on edge. Amid the greenery of Mr. McLelland's neighborhood, one man who lived a block from the prosecutor's house said he had known

Mr. McLelland well, but did not want to talk to a reporter out of fear for his safety.

Rebecca Bennett, who also lives in the area, said: “This is a very lovely, very peaceful neighborhood. If you hear a gunshot, it’s the Fourth of July or someone killing a snake.”

One of several angles investigators have been exploring is whether Mr. Hasse’s killing involved members of the Aryan Brotherhood of Texas prison gang. Prosecutors in Mr. McLelland’s office had assisted in investigations of the gang, including a recent case that had dealt a major blow to the group’s leadership.

In that case, federal authorities announced in November that a grand jury in Houston had indicted more than 30 senior leaders and other members of the whites-only gang on charges of conspiring to participate in a racketeering enterprise. Federal officials said the defendants were also charged with involvement in three murders, multiple attempted murders, kidnappings and assaults and conspiracy to distribute methamphetamine and cocaine.

The indictments stemmed from an investigation led by a multiagency task force that included Kaufman County prosecutors and three other district attorneys offices. In December, the Texas Department of Public Safety issued a statewide bulletin warning officials that the Aryan Brotherhood was planning retaliation against law enforcement personnel who had helped secure the indictments.

Mr. Hasse was shot the same day that two members of the Aryan Brotherhood of Texas — Ben Christian Dillon, also known as “Tuff,” of Houston, and James Marshall Meldrum, also known as “Dirty,” of Dallas — pleaded guilty to racketeering charges in Federal District Court in Houston.

Mark Potok, a senior fellow at the Southern Poverty Law Center, a nonprofit organization in Alabama that tracks hate groups, described the Aryan Brotherhood of Texas as probably the most violent white-supremacist gang in the country. It is known to have carried out about 100 killings and 10 kidnappings since it was founded in the 1980s, he said. Leaders of the gang, which is not directly related to the larger Aryan Brotherhood, have instructed members to kill other members who have cooperated with law enforcement, and to bring back a finger to prove that it had been done, Mr. Potok said.

The authorities said there was no evidence so far that the group had been involved in the deaths of Mr. Hasse and the McLellands.

Investigators had also been pursuing any possible links between Mr. Hasse’s killing and the death of Tom Clements, the Colorado state prison chief, who was shot and killed at his home on March 19.

The suspect in Mr. Clements’s killing, Evan S. Ebel, 28, died after a high-speed chase and shootout with Texas police officers and sheriff’s deputies northwest of Dallas on March 21. There were a number reports that Mr. Ebel had joined a white-supremacist gang while in a Colorado prison, but the authorities said they were still investigating possible connections.

Law enforcement officers in Colorado Springs spoke Sunday with investigators in Texas, but officials said it was too early to tell whether the Colorado and Texas killings were connected. Still, Paula Presley, the undersheriff in El Paso County, Colo., called Mr. McLelland's death "very, very concerning" and said it had raised an already heightened sense of alert in parts of Colorado.

Here in Kaufman, concern will now turn to personal safety like never before, some residents, said, particularly for government officials.

The prosecutors "were always involved in dangerous cases," said Ms. Ratcliff, the McLellands' friend. "That's just part of everyday business for them."

Now, she said, the question everyone seems to be asking is, "Who's next?"

Manny Fernandez reported from Kaufman, and Michael Schwirtz and Serge F. Kovalski from New York. Reporting was contributed by Jack Begg from New York, Michael S. Schmidt from Washington, Jack Healy from Denver, and Lauren D'Avolio from Kaufman.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: March 31, 2013

An earlier version of this article, in a quote taken from The Associated Press, misspelled the surname of the Forney mayor. He is Darren Rozell, not Rovell.