

## TOP STORIES

### Is a bombing suspect living in Houston? 📺

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For more than two years, Philippine officials say they've wanted to arrest Michael Meiring. The problem? They couldn't find him, but then the 11 News Defenders took a look.

Michael Meiring is a man at the center of a mystery, a fugitive from justice, a man who may be closer than you think. And it began in 2002 in Spring and half a world away in the Philippines where Davao City was fighting its own war with terrorism and losing.

First there was an explosion at the local airport, then another bomb at the city's wharf. In all, 37 people died and 170 were injured.

For Mayor Rodrigo Duterte it was already too much. He asked, "How can this thing happen?"

Officials laid the blame with the Islamic rebel groups that often terrorize the southern Philippines. Their common goal is independence from the predominantly Catholic country.

But then there was a crime committed, says Duterte, in May and yet another explosion.

This time at the Evergreen Hotel, damaging the building and leaving a victim, Michael Meiring, a South African-born American citizen and self-proclaimed treasure hunter.

He was rushed to the hospital where doctors soon realized he would lose his legs.

But in the meantime, police authorities soon found not all was as it appeared.

Davao City's Police Chief Conrado Laza, said that Meiring alleged that a grenade was thrown in his room.

Laza says Meiring claimed he'd been attacked. "That was disproved by our explosives experts," said the chief.

And what did they find?

Police bomb experts determined the center of the blast came from a metal box, now destroyed, that Meiring had been keeping in his room.

And affidavits from hotel employees state Meiring told them for weeks not to touch the box when cleaning the room and to not to use any chemicals either.

So what was inside?

First, a lab report showed the explosive was ammonium nitrate.

Then a bomb officer said they found the remains of two 6-volt batteries, an electric blasting cap, and other items including a circuit board.

Davao City prosecutor Raul Bendigo says the explosion was caused by an improvised bomb Meiring was keeping in his room.

"They had evidence to prove that the bomb was already assembled," he said.

And he added that, "If blowing up a building qualifies one as a terrorist, and I suppose that should qualify one as a terrorist, then Mr. Meiring would be a terrorist."

But that Davao prosecutor says even more disturbing was this: an ID card found in Meiring's room listing him as an officer in the Bangsamoro Armed Forces of the Moro National Liberation Front, or the MNLF, a sometime Muslim rebel army. Today, the MNLF has signed a peace treaty with the Philippine government, and is no longer on an official American terrorist watch list. However, it has historically been tied to kidnappings and bombings in the Philippines.

So arrest warrants were filed for illegal possession of firearm and ammunition since Meiring had no license for the explosives. Another warrant was issued for reckless imprudence resulting in damage to property.

Prosecutor Bendigo says both warrants are still active on those charges, and authorities are seeking the arrest of Meiring Thursday.

But authorities soon got a terrible surprise. The Davao police chief discovered Meiring was no longer in the hospital.

In fact, Michael Meiring was gone, vanished and eventually removed from the Philippines- allegedly with the help of officials from the United States Embassy which issued a denial of any involvement in Meiring's departure.

But Duterte says that however it happened, "He must pay for his crime, the wrong that he has done."

So where did Michael Meiring go?

11 News tracked him to the United States and believe it or not, eventually to Houston.

How do we know? The Defenders discovered a document from the Harris County family courts where in March of this year the same Michael Meiring was having his last name changed to Van De Meer for what he said was the purpose of remarrying.

And he even listed a Houston address of residence where he lived with a woman for several months.

"How is he able to do this?" asks Ron Hatchett, a world famous counter-terrorism expert formerly with the Pentagon and the Central Intelligence Agency. "How is he able to walk around freely within our society using the name that is on the arrest warrant for him."

"It's not somebody I'd like to have even in my state or my country," says Hatchett.

And why? Hatchett says there are too many questions, too many red flags.

First the explosion itself. "What we do know for sure is that he had a bomb in his hotel room that exploded," says Hatchett.

Then there's that I.D. card listing him as an officer in a Muslim rebel group "that is used to identify himself as a bonafide member who shares their objectives and shares their perspective in this war on terrorism," says Hatchett.

And Hatchett says that Meiring's group works with other more militant Muslim splinter groups like the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, and Abu Sayyaf.

"They share information, they share money, they share training," says Hatchett. And Hatchett says all of these groups, "use explosives against the Philippines government and against the U.S."

His conclusion regarding Meiring? Not enough answers but, "there is enough there that it warrants a closer look."

So where is Meiring now?

The Defenders tracked him to a phone number with a California area code. He denied the charges, refused an on-camera interview and would not comment on the record.

Except for this: "If this harms me in any way, you will find my power then, and you'll find out who I am. But I will come for you. You harm me I will not let you off the hook," said Meiring.

Other than that comment, Meiring would not comment on the record. But the Defenders did speak to a man who said he is a longtime friend of Meiring, Stephen Hughes.

"The man that I know is a generous man, one of the most brilliant minds that I have met. The man that I know does not fit the descriptions that I am reading and that I am hearing," said Hughes.

Hughes, a high school teacher at North Surry High School in Mount Airy, N.C., also said in his opinion, Meiring is innocent and that someone else must have put a bomb in his room. He said he was in Meiring's hotel room about an hour and a half before the blast and only saw documents, not explosives inside that box that eventually exploded.

"I was standing there beside him, he went through all of the documents and there were only documents in that footlocker that I could see. And I saw it from top to bottom," said Hughes.

The Defenders spoke with top justice officials in the Philippines and they say they've asked the U.S. government for help in locating Meiring, but have not received a response. A spokesman for the FBI in Houston, Bob Dogum, says they aren't aware of any Philippines request but that they are aware of the explosion at the Evergreen Hotel. They did not know Meiring was in Houston until now.