

## **Confession a tale of horror - 18 murders, 5 states, 7 countries: Suspect tells Detroit police that lost love led to murder**

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DETROIT -- In a torrent of tears, John Eric Armstrong's gruesome secrets spilled out one by one.

The prostitutes he choked to death. The bodies he dumped and then returned to violate.

By noon Thursday, the 26-year-old Dearborn Heights man had confessed to 18 murders in five states and seven countries. All but one involved a prostitute.

It was a litany of horrors that placed the former sailor among the Jeffrey Dahmers and Ted Bundys of the world.

"When this is all and done, this guy will go down as one of the big ones," Dearborn Heights police Detective Sergeant Donald E. Riley said.

The multinational wave of terror began nine years ago in ports visited by a naval aircraft carrier and ended on Detroit's Michigan Avenue in a Jeep with a vanity tag that read "Baby Doll."

Armstrong, a North Carolina native, faces charges in the murder of five Detroit women. So far, police have confirmed at least 10 of the murders included in his confession .

After killing three of the women, Armstrong allegedly dumped the bodies near the Conrail tracks in a rundown southwest Detroit neighborhood.

Then he returned home to his wife, Katie Rednoske, and his 1-year-old son. Rednoske, a 1994 Dearborn High School graduate, is pregnant with their second child, investigators said.

If his wife had any suspicions, she's keeping them to herself. She declined to talk to law enforcement officials.

The people who knew Rednoske from her days on the high school swim team recalled a determined but aloof young woman whose dream was to join the U.S. Coast Guard. She was someone who was drawn to the peculiar.

Thomas Roy of Livonia used to drive his daughter, Amanda, and Katie Rednoske to swimming practice.

"If everyone liked green, Katie like red," Roy said. "She just played to the tune of a different drummer."

The Rev. Fred Zimmerman, minister of South Redford Christian Church, married the couple Sept. 25, 1998. "Katie Rednoske grew up in our church. We knew him as Eric and he was a nice guy, nothing out of the ordinary.

He said the wedding was typical, and Armstrong wore a white tuxedo.

"They seemed like a nice couple," Zimmerman said. "Katie was always a nice young lady. Somehow, some way ... he kept this from her. As tragic as this is, I can't believe Katie knew anything about it."

Detroit police homicide detectives said Armstrong's wife refused to believe that her husband was facing charges in the slayings of the prostitutes. In New Bern, N.C., a gritty inland town, people recalled Armstrong as a loner.

"He was very quiet and didn't have a lot of friends," said former New Bern High School classmate Sami Marsh. "He was an introvert."

His mother, Linda Pringle, maintained her son's innocence.

Investigators believe the couple met at some point when Rednoske was in the Coast Guard and Armstrong was serving in the Navy aboard the aircraft carrier U.S.S. Nimitz.

The couple had lived in Metro Detroit since April 1999 when Armstrong received an honorable discharge from the Navy and moved in with his in-laws.

In that short time, Armstrong had been fired from a job at Target in Dearborn Heights and a security job at the Novi Detroit Medical Center.

Novi Police Chief Doug Schaefer said Armstrong placed a 911 call on Nov. 5 to report that he'd been cut on the hands and face while breaking up a robbery.

But police immediately suspected something was wrong with Armstrong's story. He finally admitted that he'd cut himself with a hospital scalpel and fabricated the story.

"Apparently he just wanted to attract attention to himself something sensational, which seems to be part of his makeup," Schaefer said.

Investigators said Armstrong had begun to reveal his motives for murder during his marathon **confession**. He told police his father had abused him.

But he said the main reason he'd begun to kill was his hatred for prostitutes.

The hatred started, he told investigators, when a high school girlfriend shunned him for a classmate, who showered the girl with gifts. Armstrong told investigators that he grew to equate his classmate's gift-giving with prostitution.

A least two people who survived his attacks -- a woman and a transvestite -- told police Armstrong muttered: "I hate whores" as he tried to choke the life out of them.

"Basically, he told us he either killed, or tried to kill, every prostitute he'd ever had sex with," Detroit Assistant Police Chief Marvin Winkler said. "He expressed remorse several times, and was crying like a baby."

He asked for psychological help, too.

If his story checks out, he will have killed more people than Milwaukee's Jeffrey Dahmer and Benjamin Atkins, who killed 11 women in Highland Park in the early 1990s.

In Armstrong's **confession**, which began shortly after he was arrested early Wednesday on Michigan Avenue, the dates and circumstances of murders from around the globe poured out in such a torrent that police postponed his Thursday arraignment in the murders of Wendy Jordan, Robbin Brown, Monica Johnson, Rose Marie Felt and Kelly Jean Hood.

"He's still talking, and we didn't want to interrupt him," Winkler said.

The bodies of three of the women dumped in southwest Detroit were discovered by homicide investigators who found a fourth, unrelated homicide victim.

Armstrong has been under police suspicion since January, following the discovery of Wendy Jordan's body in the Rouge River.

Dearborn Heights Police Sgt. James Serwatowski said that Armstrong was spotted by witnesses gazing at the body in the water.

He denied any involvement in the woman's death.

When police interviewed Armstrong, Serwatowski said he told them he was getting sick over the bridge and would deny that he had anything to do with Jordan's death.

But other times when he was confronted with information, he would hang his head and close his eyes.

"He'd never admit anything, but he wouldn't argue either," Serwatowski said. "He was an oddball, you know."

The prosecutor's office continued to answer questions about why the homicide section didn't approve an arrest warrant in late March after preliminary DNA tests showed a match between Armstrong and the death of Wendy Jordan, 39.

The homicide section didn't get the final DNA report until late Wednesday evening, although the prosecutor's office wouldn't comment on the timing of the report.

Robert Agacinski said a test completed Feb. 10 of fibers taken from the women's body matched those taken from the Jeep.

But he said the state police crime laboratory said it needed to do more work before it made the final report.

Still, Armstrong was under close police scrutiny and he knew it.

His neighbor, Aoun Aoun, said police came to his house in January and questioned him and his fiancée about Armstrong.

Aoun, whose bedroom window is next to Armstrong's driveway, told them that he heard Armstrong leave in his Jeep around 5 a .m. on New Year's Day and then came back about an hour later.

"They said, 'We're going to be watching him,' Aoun said. Police asked him to call if they saw him leaving with a lot of luggage.

Aoun said his fiancée wouldn't sleep over after that.

Police have identified three people who they say survived Armstrong's attacks.

Wilhemenia Drane, 42, accepted a ride from Armstrong two weeks ago as she waited for a bus along Michigan Avenue near 51st Street.

She told police that Armstrong stopped on a side street and said that he needed to get his coat from the back seat.

But Armstrong's hand went for her throat instead.

"His hand reached out and grabbed my neck. I was lucky I had on a scarf that saved me -- he got my scarf instead of my neck," Drane told The Detroit News. "But he still had ahold of me real tight."

But unlike so many other women who were simply overpowered by the 6-foot-4, 300 pound Armstrong, Drane fought back. Hard.

"I grabbed his glasses and pulled them off. I had a can of Mace in my pocket, and I was trying to get it, but his fingers were around my windpipe" she said.

"I finally got the Mace and sprayed him in the face with it. Then I jumped out of the car."

Monica T. Johnson, a 31-year-old mother of four, was not so lucky. Police found her body dumped near two others on Dec. 3.

Her mother, Beatrice Johnson, 52, was sickened to learn that Armstrong admitted to killing so many other women in addition to her daughter.

"My heart is hurting," she said. "I feel sorry for all **of** their kids and mothers, too. I feel better he was caught but I don't know why he did what he did."

One **of** the prostitutes Armstrong tried to kill was **a** transvestite, Winkler said.

In addition, Armstrong told police that in 1993 in Seattle, he fatally bludgeoned **a** man with whom he had an argument.

"He got mad at him and hit him in the head with **a** pipe," Winkler said. Police were unsure why the two men were arguing.

"I think he subconsciously wanted to be caught," Winkler added.

For the past month, Armstrong worked **as** an aircraft fueler at Detroit Metropolitan Airport. He began working for Signature Flight Support on March 15, said spokesman Gary Boekenkamp **of** the Florida-based company.

The company turned employment records over to the police.

"He has only worked for us for **a** little over three weeks," he said. "We are surprised and dismayed by this."

Amanda Roy grew up with Rednoske and attended the same schools from kindergarten through 12th grade. The pair were on the Dearborn High School swim team and carpooled to practices together.

"She was very quiet, but determined," Roy said. "She said in high school she was going to join the Coast Guard and she did."

Rednoske did not pal around with the rest **of** the swim team, and usually kept to herself.

Roy said Rednoske did not attend **a** high school reunion about **a** year ago.

Meanwhile, the news has attracted attention worldwide. News organizations from **as** far away **as** Hong Kong and Singapore have contacted Detroit police, seeking information about the killings.

The Navy released more information about Armstrong, but declined to say whether he was honorably discharged or ever investigated in connection with any murders on the tour **of** duty on the Nimitz.

In April 1992, he enlisted and Armstrong went aboard the U.S.S. Nimitz in November 1992 and stayed until he was discharged in April 1999 **as** **a** third-class petty officer.

The FBI's Tim Munson said the Naval Investigative Service would be flying into Detroit today. He said FBI profilers would work to ensure the validity of Armstrong's **confession** .

Detroit News Staff Writers Santiago Esparza, Mike Martindale, David Shepardson, Norman Sinclair, Charles Hurt, Oralander-Brand Williams and Ron Hansen contributed to this report. Caption: John Eric Armstrong lived in this ranch home on a Dearborn Heights street with his wife and son. His wife is pregnant. John Eric Armstrong drove this Jeep Wrangler with the vanity plate "Baby Doll" on the front. Police say he strangled prostitutes in the vehicle before dumping their bodies. Hood Jordan

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