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Robbery Trial Is Latest Twist for Ex-LAPD Detective

Courts: Michael D. Brambles, accused in series of holdups and rapes, is calling himself a most unlikely defendant.

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The prosecutor noted right in opening statements how the calm, clean-cut gunman in the four-month string of robberies and sexual assaults "didn't look like a crook, if anybody looks like a crook."

Then the victims of those crimes--a parade of shopkeepers, dry-cleaning clerks and restaurant managers--told the same story, how an everyman assailant in a denim jacket and baseball cap entered their small businesses alone, at closing, to stick a snub-nosed .38-caliber pistol in their faces and clear out their cash registers. The witnesses, one after another, then pointed at the slender, dark-haired man at the end of the defense table, the one with his head buried in a legal pad, feverishly taking notes, and declared: Yes, that was him.

"Not a scary-looking person," one robbery victim said.

Finally, last week, the defendant took the stand to punctuate the point that he is, indeed, a most unlikely accused stickup man. For Michael D. Brambles used to put people on trial in the same high-security wing of the Criminal Courts Building.

For years, Brambles was a star detective of the Los Angeles Police Department: investigating mob figures, testifying before Congress about the collapse of the ZZZZ Best carpet cleaning company and serving as the LAPD's "handler" for the late "Beverly Hills Madam," Elizabeth Adams.

For those who knew him as a man on the edge, it was not so much the fact of his arrest two years ago but the small-time nature of the crimes that seemed so out of character for an officer drawn all his career to the sexiest of cases.

It was more in character when Brambles, 47, stepped up as the final witness in his own behalf Thursday--and cited the "No. 1 madam in the United States" as a core element of his defense.

Brambles, accused of committing the robberies soon after taking leave from the LAPD in late 1993 and moving to Las Vegas, told jurors that one reason he kept flying back to L.A. and renting cars at the airport--even though he still kept his vehicle here--was to do private detective work for the madam, spying on a rival who was taking away her "girls."

He did not deny that he was in town at the time of each of 18 similar stickups from Jan. 13 to

May 4, 1994, most along the Ventura Boulevard corridor of the San Fernando Valley and a few over the hill on the Westside. The defense was that it was a case of mistaken identity, with a few hints--but only hints--that LAPD rivalries may have prompted old colleagues to have it in for him.

"He was an LAPD officer for just in excess of 23 years and . . . received in excess of 40 commendations," defense attorney Anthony Brooklier told the jury in opening statements. "How could this be? . . . In terms of common sense, how [could] a respected police officer for 23 years . . . do this? . . . It borders on the absurd."

The jurors will begin deliberating such issues this week after closing arguments, which begin Monday. But under the strict rules of evidence, the panel got only a sanitized portrayal of the rise and fall of Brambles. Three weeks of testimony barely touched on the intrigue that accompanied him through the murky worlds of vice, organized crime and police politics.

To be sure, Brambles wanted to offer a conspiracy theory--to suggest he was framed by superiors bent on "retaliation" after he reported a sergeant's wrongdoing (the making of a videotape) during a private security job at the home of Bruce Springsteen.

But Superior Court Judge John W. Ouderkirk was not going to let the proceedings fall prey to innuendo. The judge noted that the witnesses at the center of this case--the succession of store clerk victims--hardly seemed like people with an "ax to grind." So he would not let Brambles float his ominous conspiracy theories before the jury.

Such restrictions, though, also benefited the former detective. For they meant that the prosecution could not stray from the robberies either--with evidence pointing out how Brambles' police career was hardly all commendations.

The jury thus never learned how he fell into disgrace in his last years, accused by a partner of rigging a lineup, transferred from the organized crime unit and sending a photo of his bare bottom to a female colleague.

Smart and fit--an avid surfer--Brambles began earning special assignments soon after graduating from the Police Academy in 1971. While on a child pornography unit, he met Adams, whose pricey call girls catered to the Hollywood crowd and foreign businessmen, especially visiting Saudis. Brambles said the LAPD tacitly allowed her to operate in return for sensitive "pillow talk" intelligence picked up by her women.

In 1984, he was assigned to the elite Organized Crime Intelligence Division, where he gained a high profile, leading the investigations into the collapse of the new ZZZZ Best carpet cleaning company. But he also drew complaints from suspects that he made up evidence.

It was not until a fellow cop accused him of rigging a photo lineup of suspects, however, that his fortunes took a turn: In 1989, a detective new to the organized crime unit told a grand jury that Brambles took "his finger and very deliberately [put] it under one individual" to coach a witness.

Brambles was moved to the West L.A. station as a detective supervisor--in the auto theft unit.

A police board found that in 1992 he put an "obscene photograph" on the desk of a female

detective at the West L.A. station--showing him bending over.

Little of the unpleasant history made it before his jury. The panel heard only the basic resume--and that he took leave from the LAPD in November 1993 for what was declared a work-related illness. The next month he was married for the second time, to an airline employee who lived in Las Vegas. He moved to the Nevada city, hoping to get a hotel security job, he told friends.

Meanwhile, he used his new flight privileges to return time and again to Los Angeles--to see his children from his first marriage, finalize his retirement and do the private detective work for the madam, Brambles testified.

He told how Adams had finally been prosecuted--over his objections--and how the criminal case cost her most of her business. Though the tabloid mania was over how one of her call girls, Heidi Fleiss, tried to become the next great madam, Brambles said Adams most "feared" another "pimping and pandering" rival, TV and film director Ivan Nagy.

Nagy has denied being in the call girl racket, but Brambles testified that he in fact took "two-thirds of the [customer] book" from Adams. So the madam asked for help "to find out which girls were working for him"--and possibly get Nagy jailed, he said.

Brambles said he rented vehicles for surveillance because his own, a yellow Blazer, "would stick out like a sore thumb."

Of course, Deputy Dist. Atty. Michelle Daniels was skeptical. She noted that the alibi witness, the madam, is dead.

She told jurors Brambles actually used the rental cars to rob restaurants and small businesses--from a toy store to a florist--all over town.

He worked "like a broken record," she said, "entering each . . . close to closing . . . wear[ing] a jeans jacket, Levis and a baseball cap. . . . [And] when he found a woman alone. . . ."

Two clerks were sexually assaulted during the 18 robberies at issue. Brambles faces four more counts in Ventura County, store robberies near his ex-wife's home.

The prosecution has not tried to prove why Brambles stooped to robbery. But detectives have noted that he had child support to pay, a new household in Las Vegas and a less than lavish police pension coming in. And he would have known, they said, that small-time robberies do not draw big-time investigations.

Indeed, detectives admitted that the arrest was pure luck: On May 4, 1994, a clerk at a dry cleaners who was once robbed happened to be moonlighting at an Inglewood motel where Brambles was staying--and called police to say he was the gunman. A search of Brambles' room turned up his loaded .38-caliber pistol, and a search of his Blazer found a jeans jacket and white mesh gloves similar to ones described in the robberies.

In a case replete with ironies, one of the foremost is how the former detective once accused of rigging a lineup now makes his case--largely by challenging how the LAPD identified him.

Anthony Brooklier, the lawyer, has zeroed in on how victims' initial descriptions of the robber were "all over the place," one estimating that the man was 5 foot 6, another saying 6 foot 2. "The height varies significantly," the defense lawyer said, "the weight varies significantly, the eye color varies, the hair varies."

But troubling for the defense is the victims' reactions when they saw Brambles--first at lineups, then in court.

Typical comments? "I recognized him right away." "The second I saw him, I knew it was him." Or "when he was in the store robbing us, he had a nice bronze tan," though now "he looks tired and weathered."

Imprisoned two years, Brambles does look drawn in court. He rarely makes eye contact with witnesses or jurors.

He's also a lonely defendant. After his arrest, his new wife was always in court. "I love him and I believe in him," she said.

But there's been no family at the trial. Courtroom observers have speculated that the DNA tests may have been the turning point.

Semen was collected off the shirt of a clerk tied up and raped during a Jan. 13, 1994, clothing store robbery in Woodland Hills. When it was sent to Cellmark Diagnostics lab in Maryland, along with a sample of Brambles blood, tests found a "1 in 13 billion" match, according to Robin Cotton, the schoolteacher-like lab director who was making her first court appearance in Los Angeles since the O.J. Simpson murder trial. Brooklier clearly hopes that jurors remember that case's furor over DNA evidence.

The defense case includes one specific alibi--that Brambles was at his daughter's birthday party at the time of one robbery. Beyond that, attorney Anthony Brooklier has sought to convince jurors that the witnesses might have mistaken his client for a trio of more typical robbers--all heroin addicts--jailed for "ripping people off" in stores about the same time.

Yet pointing up such episodes carried risks for the defense--as when Brooklier called to the stand a store clerk last week to tell how he first identified a photo of one of the addicts as looking like his robber.

Brambles was never formally charged in that holdup. But as the victim completed his testimony, the judge asked him to look toward the end of the defense table, "at the man over there."

"Yeah," said the robbery victim, "he's the man."