

Slain FBI woman apparently mistaken for fugitive's girlfriend, police say

By Larry Oakes
Staff Writer

Shots that killed an FBI agent originally from Hudson, Wis., were fired by two other agents who apparently mistook her for a dangerous fugitive's girlfriend, Phoenix, Ariz., police said Sunday.

Special Agent Robin L. Ahrens, 33, a 1970 graduate of Hudson High School, died early Saturday after being shot late Friday as about a dozen FBI agents arrested a robbery suspect at an apartment complex.

Seeing a gun in Ahrens' hand in dim

light, two agents opened fire, striking her in the hand, arm and eye, said Phoenix Police Chief Ruben Ortega.

Ahrens, whom friends described as athletic and full of energy, was the first female agent to die on the job since women joined the FBI in 1972, and the first agent killed since 1979, said FBI spokesman Thomas J. Deakin in Washington, D.C.

The FBI declined comment on the police report that she was mistakenly shot by two fellow agents, saying that probably won't be addressed until a press conference Thursday.

In Phoenix, FBI agent Herb Hawkins said: "We know what happened. I just am not permitted to tell you what happened until this inquiry is over." A bureau investigation was expected to be completed Tuesday, he said.

Phoenix Police Sgt. Tony Kruczynski said a city investigation also was under way.

"The problem is that there were lots of shots fired," said James Bolenbach, an FBI spokesman.

Ahrens was raised in Hudson with six other children, said her step-



Robin Ahrens

mother, Gerry Ahrens, Hudson. She was a Utah State University grad.

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"I think she wanted to go there to be near the mountains and away from where everyone else was going," said Barb Starr, who graduated from high school with Ahrens. "She was an excellent skier."

Ahrens' first career was as a physical education and audio-visual teacher, at schools in Utah and Virginia, said her stepmother.

None of her friends in Hudson were surprised when they heard Ahrens was becoming an FBI agent at age 32, said Starr.

"It was typical Robin — she was always free-spirited, independent and adventuresome," she said.

Starr said yesterday that Ahrens cited conflicts with her new FBI job in explaining why she couldn't make it to her 15-year class reunion this summer. Hudson was preparing a final welcome home for Ahrens, with a funeral scheduled Wednesday.

Ahrens died almost seven hours after FBI agents arrested Kenneth Don Barrett, 27, a suspect in a Sept. 20 robbery of an armored car driver at a Las Vegas department store. In the Nevada incident, a shot was fired that barely missed several customers. A California police officer was shot and wounded several hours later.

Barrett was considered armed and extremely dangerous, Hawkins said. Las Vegas police said they found a storage shed with 25 stolen weapons believed to be linked to Barrett, and police said they believed Barrett had one or two submachine guns.

Ortega said that shortly before 11 p.m. Friday about a dozen FBI agents gathered outside the apartment complex, where Barrett was staying in a girlfriend's apartment, until Barrett came out and was confronted by an agent.

There was a struggle and a gun was fired, the chief said, and some of the other agents ran toward the scuffle.

While helping to subdue Barrett, two agents saw an armed woman, Ahrens, coming through a dimly lit passageway between two buildings, Ortega said. They opened fire on her, believing she was Barrett's girlfriend, he said.

No other agents were injured.

Phoenix police were not involved in Barrett's arrest, but arrived at the scene after the shooting.

City police at first refused to give information on the incident, saying all reports would be made by the FBI. Ortega decided to release details late Saturday when the FBI refused to do so, officials said.

Barrett was being held in the Maricopa County Jail on a warrant from Nevada.

Friends said Ahrens was twice divorced and had no children.

"She was absolutely a great person and a great friend," said Starr. "I'm real sad this happened to her."

"She was in love with life," said her stepmother. "This is not only a great loss to us, but to the world."

(This reports includes material from the Associated Press.)

Ex-FBI agent appeals firing in fatal shooting of colleague

Associated Press

PHOENIX, Ariz. — A former Phoenix FBI agent, appealing his firing in the shooting death of fellow agent Robin Ahrens, claimed he was made a scapegoat in the incident, the Arizona Republic reported Sunday.

In a copyright story, the newspaper quoted an appeal filed by former agent Douglas Harada, 32, as saying that errors by Ahrens, a na-

tive of St. Paul who grew up in Hudson, Wis., may have helped lead to her own death. In addition, the appeal contended that agents other than Harada and Thomas Fernandez, who resigned after the incident, may have fired the first shots at Ahrens.

Ahrens, 33, was killed Oct. 4, 1985, at a northwest Phoenix apartment while agents were arresting a suspect in a Nevada

armed robbery. She was the first woman agent to die in the line of duty and the first agent to be killed by shots fired by colleagues.

The newspaper said Lane Bonner, an FBI spokesman in Washington, and Herbert Hawkins, special agent in charge of the Phoenix office, refused to comment on the appeal.

Harada's appeal, filed with the
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Ahrens

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U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board in Denver, seeks a reopening of the investigation and reinstatement of Harada to his job, according to the newspaper.

Harada's dismissal letter said he was fired for "lack of judgment" in using deadly force.

However, the appeal filed by attorney Jeffrey Boiler said, "Tragic errors of carelessness were made by many, and the bureau must face the fact that serious errors were made by the victim herself."

"An agent has died in tragic circumstances, but the remedy is not to offer up agent Harada in reparation," the newspaper quoted the appeal as saying.

The appeal contended that Ahrens was known "to act zealously and sometimes endanger her-

self" and that she left her assigned post twice against orders the night she was shot.

Also, it said it was Ahrens' duty to identify herself when she approached the arrest scene from a dark alleyway with her gun drawn. Harada said he could not identify her but saw only a "silhouette ... which showed an individual approaching at a slow run with gun drawn and pointing forward."

The newspaper quoted the appeal as saying the confusion at the arrest site was the responsibility of agents other than Harada. Without identifying them, it said supervisory agents should be fired or disciplined for their roles in the shooting.

Before the incident, the appeal said agents were given only a "fragmentary briefing" regarding Kenneth Don Barrett, the suspect being arrested.