

**The 2004 Wisconsin gun deer season began just like any other. Although there was no snow on the ground, the woods were full of blaze orange clad hunters embarking on the sacred November ritual that brings both family and friends together. Little did anyone know that before the opening weekend was done, the hunting world would be forever shattered by the shooting deaths of six people in southern Sawyer County.**

My administrative area in Rusk County, located in northwest Wisconsin, is about 930 square miles and mostly a rural area. The largest town is Ladysmith, which boasts a population of about 3,900. In the southern part of the county farmlands dot the landscape with timbered edges while the northern part is comprised mostly of large blocks of big timber. Several thousand acres of this part is either county or state owned and is open to the public. This results in a deluge of hunters during the deer season. Motel rooms are all booked up and normally vacant hunting cabins are abuzz, as hunters stake out their spots on the public land.

One such area in the northwest part of the county is known as the Blue Hills. This area is made up of large blocks of timber with the occasional logging road transecting the block. Many members of the Asian community from the Twin Cities, Minnesota area frequent these woods. One such individual was Chai Soua Vang, a 36 year old truck driver, father and husband who sought out the solitude of deer hunting to get away from the busy city life. Vang, a Hmong immigrant had lived in the United States since he was 12, served as a member of the California National Guard, and earned a sharpshooter distinction while in the military. Vang, however, was not a stranger to violence or breaking the law. On Christmas Eve in 2001, Vang was arrested by St. Paul police and charged with domestic assault. Vang also had not appeared for

a trespassing citation in the state of Wisconsin and there was an outstanding warrant for his arrest on that matter. On Sunday, November 21, 2004, Vang awoke from his camp in the Blue Hills and ventured into the woods, looking to bag a deer.

About 2 ½ miles away from Vang's campsite, members of the Crotteau/Willers hunting camp were rousing from their sleep to organize their traditional deer drive for the afternoon. Their camp is located about one mile north of Rusk County into Sawyer. This camp sits on about 400 acres of land owned by Robert Crotteau and Terry Willers, two long time friends and hunting companions. The cabin sat at the end of a long two-rut mud road that twists and turns for about 300 yards from the gravel road. Their eastern boundary joins part of the county owned public hunting land.

Along with Robert and Terry at the cabin were 27 year old Jessica Willers, Terry's daughter, Mark Roitd, a 28 year old friend of the family, 43 year old Allan Laski, Denny Drew, 55, Lauren Heseback, and 20 year old Joey Crotteau, Robert's son. They were among other family and friends that gathered at the cabin each year to socialize and hunt. Everyone, except for Jessica who worked as a nurse in Green Bay, was from Rice Lake, a town about 25 miles west of the cabin.

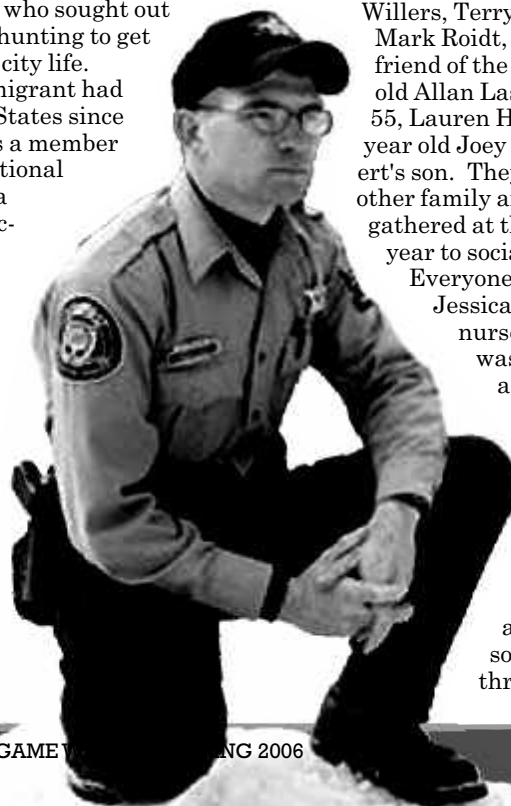
As most of the hunters were slow to get started in the morning, Terry woke up and decided to try some still hunting through the prop-

# MADMAN IN THE WOODS

by Jeremy Peery,  
Wisconsin Conservation  
Warden

erty. Terry worked along the eastern edge of his property, toting his tried and true 30/06 rifle and came to a permanent tree stand that the group had named Carter's Stand. Terry noticed that there was an orange hunter sitting in this stand. Knowing that no one left the cabin that morning, Terry called back to the cabin on his two-way radio and asked if anyone was supposed to be in the stand. When he received the answer that no one was supposed to be there, Terry knew that he caught another trespasser on his land. As Terry approached the trespasser, who was wearing a facemask, Robert, Denny, Joey, Lauren and Mark headed to Terry's location.

Because of the large area and numerous hunters in Rusk County, I normally get help from other wardens across the state who are stationed in urban areas where there is not much for deer hunting pressure. Conservation Warden Jon Hagen, stationed in Milwaukee, came up the Friday before to give a hand. Jon is originally from the Rice Lake area so I knew that he had some familiarity with the area and that was going to be a big



**Wisconsin Conservation  
Warden Jeremy Peery**

help. The opening day, Saturday, Jon and I made several cases on illegal bait piles that I had scouted earlier. Later Saturday night, Jon and I made a "cabin shooting" case on a group that I had been working for the past three seasons. This group used an artificial light to illuminate a bait pile behind their house to shoot deer at night. We caught them well after dark as they dragged the untagged freshly killed buck to their cabin.

We got a late start on Sunday due to being up late the night before dealing with the criminal deer case. Things set us back even further when we found that Jon's squad truck tires had been slashed as it sat in the motel parking lot. After some looking, we were finally able to find someone to come in and open the garage so that Jon's truck could get fixed. While that was going on, Jon and I partnered up again and began working our way to the southern part of the county.

After checking a few groups of hunters as they returned from their deer drives, Jon and I noticed that it was noon already and we had not had any breakfast yet. We decided that we would work our way back to Ladysmith. We started that way and had just finished checking a couple hunters sitting in a field in a truck for loaded rifles when Jon's cell phone rang. Jon answered the phone and from Jon's responses, it sounded like someone was joking around with him, as Jon was smiling and replied, "Yeah right, whatever." Then Jon's voice turned serious and he began to relate to me what his long time friend, Steve Crotteau, was telling Jon through a broken cell phone signal. There had been a shooting over a trespassing situation and several people had been hit. Then the cell phone signal was lost.

Jon and I both sat for a second in disbelief. Trespassing complaints are a dime a dozen during this time of the year. It is not uncommon for unpleasant words, or even the occasional fistfight, but never had anyone been shot.

As we waited for Steve to get the cabin's address, I radioed the Sawyer County Sheriff's Department and Warden Tom Heisler, who was responsible for the administrative area of the location of the shooting. After a few minutes, Steve called Jon back and although the signal was bad, Jon was able to get the road address of the cabin near Deer Lake. Just before the call was dropped again, Jon told Steve to call 911.

We started to head north towards the scene and I radioed the updated information to Sawyer County. In the midst of the drive, which was about 50 miles

away, we overheard Regional Warden Mike Bartz broadcast over the radio that the shooter had escaped and was in the woods.

With emergency lights and siren activated, Jon and I sped to the scene. During the 25 minutes high speed drive, we learned through the hectic radio traffic that at least three people had been shot and were being transported to the hospital in Rice Lake. Several other county sheriff's departments, local police agencies, EMT's, fire departments and state troopers were responding and setting up a staging area a few miles down the road from the cabin.

As we closed in on the area, Bartz, the ranking warden, notified us to set up a perimeter to the south of the scene. Being familiar with the lay of the land, I knew that if the shooter ran south from

him about trespassing. Even more chilling, they told Knepper that five people had been murdered and were lying in the woods.

The survivors showed Knepper a valuable piece of evidence, a number which was etched in the dried mud on the hood of a recreational vehicle. This number was the backtag identification number of the suspect. In Wisconsin, a person's deer hunting license contains a series of numbers that must be displayed prominently in the middle of a hunter's back. This series of numbers, when traced, comes back to the purchaser of the license. The witnesses stated that one of the victims had written the number down so that they could turn the information over to the sheriff's department and the trespasser would be cited. A records check of this number came back to Chai

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the location the next logging trail that he would encounter would be the Serley Camp Trail, a small two rut abandoned logging road that runs east/west about 1 ½ miles south of the shooting scene. If the suspect went straight south this trail would be the first that he would cross. Serley Camp Trail comes out to the Fire Lane road at the intersection of Dejung Road; both are gravel roads that do not get a lot of vehicle traffic. There we set up a road block so that no one could enter or leave any of the roads or trails. Wardens Russ Fell, Phil Dorn, Jesse Ashton, Rich Thole, and Special Warden John Brondson met me at this location. Fell, Brondson, Dorn and I set up here while Ashton, Thole and Hagen set up a perimeter on the next gravel road south of our location, where a cleared snowmobile trail exits. If the suspect went to the east he would find this trail and likely follow it to the road.

Meanwhile, Bartz, Heisler, Wardens Brian Knepper, Dave Swanson, Warden Supervisor Dave Zebro and Recreational Safety Warden Mike Smith arrived at the cabin. Knepper, along with sheriff's department and police investigators, was first at the scene. They were met with a chaotic scene at the hunting camp. The shaken members, some of them family members of those who were shot, stated that a trespasser had opened fire on them as they confronted

Soua Vang of St. Paul, MN.

Knepper, along with the investigators, went back to the crime scene to check for survivors. They came to two bodies, a male and a female, lying next to each other along the trail. Al Laski and Jessica Willers had been shot from ambush as they rode on an ATV to help those who had been shot in the initial confrontation. They found Mark Roidt lying next to his ATV, dead from a gunshot wound to his head. Into a thick stand of trees they found Robert Crotteau who had died from a gunshot wound to his back. About 150 yards away from this area, they found the body of young Joey Crotteau, who had been shot three times in the back as he ran from the area. None of the victims were armed.

By this time the three wounded survivors were being interviewed by investigators at the hospital in Rice Lake. Terry Willers had been shot through the neck and was in critical condition. Denny Drew was in the same condition with a bullet wound through his stomach. Denny would later die from that wound. Lauren Hesebeck had been shot through the shoulder and was able to tell the investigators what happened.

When Terry radioed back that there was a trespasser and that he was going to confront him, the group rode down to Terry's location on ATV's, unarmed, and confronted the trespasser. They told the

## I had the suspect of Wisconsin's largest mass murder in custody.

man that they were tired of trespassers and were going to turn him into the DNR. They scribed his backtag number on the hood of the vehicle and the man turned around and began to walk away. When the man, later verified to be Vang, got about 40 yards from them, he knelt down and took the scope off his semi automatic rifle. In the next instant, he turned around and began firing on the group. He first shot Terry, as he was the only person who was armed. Next, Vang turned his sights on Hesebeck, chasing him around one of the recreational

woods sensed that something was amiss. One such hunter told us that he was startled to see an Asian man, wearing camouflage, approach him and ask the hunter how to get out of the woods. When the hunter told him the way, the hunter was puzzled when the man walked in the opposite direction. When the hunter saw the plane, he left the woods and ran into us at the road block. With a topo map spread on the hood, we began to plot out the course that Vang could be taking from these observations as they became available.

the information and decided that since we were now about five hours into the search and darkness only a few minutes away, to go in one last time at a log landing area where a vehicle was parked. According to our estimates, Vang could possibly have gone through that area very recently and the K-9 might be able hit on a scent. So, again, the team was loaded up and this time both Dorn and I transported them over the rocks, logs and ruts to the landing area.

Once there, the K-9 started south on a track and the team tactically followed with Dorn and I following up. We had only gone about 150 yards when my portable radio battery died. Knowing that communications were essential, I returned to my squad truck and searched for another battery. My search was in vain as I could not find one and I started back to inform the group.

I had only walked a few yards when I observed a truck bouncing my way along the two-rut road. I flagged it down and the driver asked me if what he heard on the radio was true. When I inquired about what he heard on the radio, he stated that there was a man out shooting people and that 15 people had already been shot. I told the man that was not exactly true but we were looking for a guy who had shot some people. A quick search of his truck for the suspect and the guy continued to the perimeter.

Again, I had only walked a few yards when I heard an ATV coming toward me. The ATV pulled alongside my squad truck and the driver got off and walked toward me. The elderly operator asked me what was going on with the airplane and such. I told the man that we were looking for an Asian man wearing camouflage clothing as he was involved in a shooting. The elderly man had not seen anyone matching that description so I told him that he should leave the area. The man said that he would, but that he needed to wait for his friends who would be along shortly.

I placed my shotgun near a tree and helped the gentleman load his ATV into a trailer. By now, darkness had set in and it was difficult to see without a flashlight. We just finished securing his ATV when I heard another ATV approaching from the same direction. This ATV pulled alongside my squad truck and I could dimly see that there were two people on the machine. One was wearing blaze orange while the other one was in dark drab clothing. I turned my flashlight towards the two when the operator got off the ATV and stated, "This guy is lost, can you help him?"

When I trained my flashlight on the other man, I observed that he was an

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**Shooting survivor Terry Willers testifies at Vang's Trial.**

vehicles before hitting him in the shoulder. Roidt was next, followed by Drew and with both of them crumpled on the ground, Vang chased after Robert who tried to escape by running into a thick stand of brush. When Robert was down, Vang pursued Joey, running him down for more than 600 feet and shooting him several times in the back. Vang would later admit that as he was chasing and shooting at Joey, Joey was screaming for help. Vang then turned his blaze orange coat inside out to camouflage himself so that he could better hide in the woods.

At about this time, Vang spotted Al and Jessica riding together on an ATV as they came to help some of the wounded. Vang opened fire on them from only a couple feet away, hitting them both in their backs, Al three times and Jessica twice. Jessica was hit in the leg and tried to crawl to safety before Vang approached and shot her in the base of the neck. Then Vang returned to the site where he first shot Terry. By this time, Lauren was able to help Terry stop the bleeding in his neck and obtain Terry's deer rifle. Lauren then tried to help Denny, who asked Lauren to give him his Last Rites as Denny felt his life slipping away. All of a sudden, Lauren heard Vang yell, "Your not dead yet?" and a couple more shots rang out towards Lauren. Lauren pointed Terry's rifle at Vang and shot once, missing Vang. Vang then fled south into the woods.

Back at the perimeter, we began to obtain intelligence information from people leaving the area. With the Department of Natural Resources plane flying low overhead looking for the suspect, people who were hunting in the

The large hills and trees made communications was a problem. As law enforcement vehicles patrolled the surrounding roads continuously we could not hear their radio traffic until they came close to our location. Luckily, the plane would relay information to us and others as it became necessary. Because of this, we, at the perimeter, did not have any definite suspect description. So I left the perimeter and went to the cabin area. There I met with Bartz who confirmed, to my horror, that five people were in fact dead in the woods.

After discussing the layout of the land and the known Asian campsites I left the cabin knowing that we should have all the likely escape routes covered. Bartz indicated that a helicopter from the Minnesota State Patrol, which was equipped with a FLIR system, would be enroute shortly. Darkness would soon be upon us.

Meanwhile, the wardens at the perimeter check point continued to gather information from people exiting the woods. A clear line of travel had been established on the map and we had a good general idea of where Vang could be. When I arrived back at the perimeter the Sawyer County SWAT Team with the Washburn County K-9 arrived and prepared to go into the forest. We briefed them on the information that we had, showing them the map locations and suspect information. Warden Dorn transported them into the area and dropped them off in a location where the plane earlier observed someone in orange lying on the ground.

After about an hour, the team made its way back to the perimeter without coming across anyone. We re-evaluated

Asian male, wearing camouflaged clothing and carrying a black colored semi-automatic rifle. As the man stood there behind the ATV, I also noticed that his finger was on the trigger of the rifle as he held it across his body.

Immediately I drew my handgun and announced myself. "Police! Do not move or you will be shot! Do you understand?" The suspect did not move but answered, "Yes". I then had him place the rifle at his feet while I moved closer to him, near cover, and kept my flashlight on his face. He placed his hands above his head and walked a few feet away from the rifle at my direction.

I stepped up behind him and holstered my handgun. It was then that I realized that I had picked up the sear on the trigger (the point at which the Glock was ready to fire). I handcuffed him and told him that he was not under arrest, but that I was detaining him for investigative purposes. He stated that he understood and I asked him for his identification. The man told me that it was in his inside jacket pocket. I reached inside his pocket and observed that the inside of his jacket was blaze orange. I pulled the jacket over his shoulders and found his backtag still pinned to the jacket. The backtag identified the man as Chai Soua Vang and the tag number matched the backtag number that was etched into the recreational vehicle. I had the suspect of Wisconsin's largest mass murder in custody.

At this time, I looked back to see the two hunters standing near their covered trailer and watching what was transpiring. I cannot imagine what was going through the ATV operator's head knowing that he had just given a ride to a killer.

I completed a quick search for other weapons and secured Vang's rifle in the squad truck. I was able to radio the plane from my truck that I had Vang in custody and we were coming out to the



**Shooting victim Lauren Hesebeck testifies at Vang's trial.**

perimeter. I loaded Vang into the passenger side of the squad and the SWAT members climbed into the bed of the truck a short time later. The ride out to the perimeter took about ten minutes and the whole



time Vang stared straight ahead not saying a word. His demeanor was eerily calm.

Once at the perimeter, we met with several law enforcement officers. We took Vang from the squad truck, verified his identity and made a complete search of his belongings for weapons. We did not find any contraband or additional ammunition. Only then did we find that his rifle was empty.

Vang was transported to the Sawyer County jail by a Wisconsin State Trooper. The wardens held a short debriefing and then left for home. It was about 6:00 in the evening.

In early September 2005, Vang stood trial for his crimes. He was charged with six counts of first degree intentional homicide and three counts of attempted homicide. Two of the attempted homicide counts came from Vang shooting at Hesebeck on two separate occasions. For five days the Wisconsin Attorney General laid out the state's case. AG Lautenschlager called several witnesses to the stand, including Hesebeck, Terry Willers, Adam Laski (Al's 16 year old son), Carter Crotteau (Robert's son and Joey's brother, who was the first to check on his father and brother only to find them shot to death), Steve Crotteau, Mike Bartz, Brian Knepper and myself. The state's case was clear, Vang intended to kill everyone that he could when he crouched down and removed the scope from his rifle.

On the last day of testimony, Vang took the stand in his defense. Vang told of a different story, a story in which he feared for his life. Vang felt threatened as the large group of people surrounded him, called him racial names and threatened to beat him up. Vang claims that he only went after the group after Willers first shot at him. That is when Vang began shooting at the men. Vang said that he knew no one else had a gun but that he thought they were going to get a gun and that was why he shot them. "If I didn't shoot them, they would shoot me." Vang stated that he ran off into the woods and decided that he did not want to shoot anyone else, so

**In early November, 2005, Judge Norman Yackel sentenced Vang to six consecutive life sentences plus 30 years for using a dangerous weapon. Yackel further sentenced Vang to 40 years in prison with 20 years of extended supervision for the three attempted murder charges. Vang will have no possibility of parole.**

he threw his remaining ammunition into a swamp.

Under cross examination, Vang was asked by AG Lautenschlager if the victims deserved to die. Vang stated that all of them deserved to die except for Jessica. According to Vang, Joey deserved to die because Joey accused Vang of flipping Joey the bird and cussing at him. Robert deserved to die for cussing at Vang and calling him names. The testimony closed with Vang saying that he had "to do what was necessary to stay alive."

After three and a half hours of deliberations, the jury found Chai Soua Vang guilty of all charges. While friends and family of the victims felt relief, Vang's family outcried statements such as, "I'm glad my brother did it, to stand up with pride and defend himself." Another statement from Vang's uncle was, "I feel Mr. Vang is a hero, to be able to defend himself and now he is alive."

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In his ruling, Yackel stated that the victim's families deserved to live in peace after this tragedy and not have to worry about re-opening old wounds should Vang ever come up for parole. "The defendant's conduct is not a product of a troubled mind, but an explosive temper," Yackel stated, noting that Vang was not likely to be rehabilitated.

Since then, I have been asked numerous times, "What was it like? You must have been scared. You should have just shot him and saved the taxpayers money. There are lots of emotions and ideas that go through your mind when you are faced with a high profile arrest like this. First of all, I really did not think at the time when I recognized that the man standing in front of me matched the description of the man that had just shot eight people. My training took over immediately and I reacted based upon that training. It

wasn't until about four hours later that I looked down and noticed that my hands were shaking. That is when the "what if" scenarios began to run through my head. What if he would have pointed that rifle at me? What if he did not listen to my commands? What if he tried to take the ATV operator as a hostage? My answer to those questions are the same as it was in the real situation. I would have reacted based upon my training. There was no time to be scared or worried, or for hesitation. There was only time to act and neutralize the threat as quickly as possible with the least amount of force as possible.

Because of this incident, our department has moved forward with issuing warden rifles as part of their standard equipment. Our training has really emphasized more hands on training and simulations. And overall, we learned that taking our training seriously is

vitaly important to making the right decisions in given situations as well as making it home safe and sound, which is the most important thing in any wildlife officer's career.

Brutal calculated violence wrought by a madman in the woods of northern Wisconsin shrouded hunters in a veil of disbelief as they struggled for some semblance of understanding while attempting to continue their hunt. How?

Why? Many questions were asked, absent clear answers, families without loved ones, friends missing friends — an incomprehensible tragedy. As in nature when seasons change, winter into spring, summer into fall, time forever trudges on; for the deer hunters of Wisconsin the next deer season inevitably arrived. Hunters sought the solace of the woods, interacting with nature, sharing the deer hunting tradition with family and friends. The tragedy of the deer season past, a wound, though healed, inexplicably scarred to remind us violence has no place in the tradition of hunting.

*Jeremy Peery has been a Wisconsin conservation warden since 1999 and stationed in Ladysmith for the past seven years.*

**Editor's note:** I contacted Jeremy when it became known that a conservation officer had arrested Vang for his heinous crimes. He was unable to tell his story until now as he was under order not to speak to the media until after Vang's trial was concluded.



**Left: Memorial gathering in Birchwood for the victims**

**Below: Memorial magnet on a truck in Rice Lake**



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