

The FBI's secret weapon: women

This legendary old boys' club desperately needs more female agents to fight crime and terrorism. Meet Jennifer Coffindaffer, one of their toughest, as she busts the bad guys—in heels, no less! By Emily Benedek

The note found aboard American Airlines flight 306 while it was traveling en route from Dallas to Boston in May 2004 was chilling: “There’s a bomb...in cargo,” it read. “Live Saddam.” Escorted by fighter jets, the plane screeched to an emergency stop in Nashville.

Only there was no bomb. And no obvious suspect. When some of the crew members were flown back to Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport, 38-year-old FBI Special Agent Jennifer Coffindaffer was waiting to question them. Coffindaffer had a hunch about Gay Wilson, an off-duty flight attendant who’d discovered the note folded into a tissue in the plane’s bathroom—and she decided to play it. “Could you show me what the note looked like?” she asked Wilson, who took the sheet of paper Coffindaffer handed her, folded it and trimmed it to size. “She was *very* specific,” says Coffindaffer. “Also, she gave me too much information: ‘I went to the bathroom. You want to know why? I was going to brush my teeth. But first I had to wash my hands.’ That was a red flag.”

Coffindaffer searched Wilson’s luggage and turned up something else: “Two blank pieces of paper”—folded the same way as the bomb threat—“tucked inside a magazine.” That was suspicious, but not conclusive. Coffindaffer also found personal notes Wilson had written describing her despair over friendships that had gone sour. Then Wilson asked if Coffindaffer’s male colleague could leave the room. That was when Coffindaffer knew she could get her to talk candidly. The two women chatted quietly, almost like friends. “There was an understanding between us, as girls, that we could let each other know our worst secrets—but

“Criminals don’t think of a woman in this role. Sometimes they’re so shocked, they don’t resist.”

don’t humiliate me in front of a man,” Coffindaffer says. Eventually she asked Wilson to take a polygraph. Before the electrodes were even fastened on, Wilson caved: She’d written the bomb note. It seems that her personal troubles had made her desperate for attention.

In just a few minutes, Coffindaffer had helped elicit a confession that could have taken days to get. Being female helped, she believes. “People who feel guilty about terrible crimes want a shoulder to cry on,” says Coffindaffer. “Whose shoulder would *you* want to cry on? A woman’s.”

The FBI wants you, girl

It’s been more than 30 years since the FBI hired its first female agents, and the venerable crime-fighting organization is finally figuring out what Coffindaffer already knows: They need more like her. “Our recruiting efforts in 2005 are focused on women, minorities and people with certain skills, like computer science,” says Special Agent Lori Bailey, who handles media relations in Dallas. Female agents now account for 22 percent of the force (up from 16 percent in 2002), and the FBI wants to add as many more as it can. Why? Women have become essential because they connect more easily with the rising number of female suspects. “On any given investigation,” says Special Agent Patty



Cuff 'em: Coffindaffer arrests suspect Castillo.

GREG SMITH/CORBIS

Thompson, “half the people we’re talking to are women.”

Coffindaffer knows, too, that being female provides some camouflage. “Criminals don’t think of a woman in this role,” she says. She once busted two Colombian drug kingpins after keeping watch on them from her car as they sat by the window of a Houston restaurant. To allay any suspicion of a stakeout, every once in a while she’d clamber out of the driver’s seat and stretch, in full view, so the men could see that she was a woman. When she finally went in for the arrest, the drug dealers “were so shocked, they didn’t even resist,” she says.

In addition to serving as a regular agent, Coffindaffer is also one of only a handful of women nationwide on an FBI SWAT (short for Special Weapons and Tactics) team, a group specially trained to deal with dangerous missions. There again, being female has advantages. Coffindaffer, who is 5’1” and 110 pounds, recalls the time her team stormed a Houston apartment looking for bank robbers; she squeezed into an opening in the ceiling where an armed suspect could have been hiding. “A guy would have fallen through,” she says.

But if the FBI is going to make use of women’s special skills, it will also have to confront some long-term problems. Historically, the agency has had trouble keeping the women it hires. “Typically, they get married and leave or get pregnant and leave,” says Coffindaffer, who has a daughter, Chloe, three, and a son, Kyle, five. “It’s very difficult to manage this sort of career and kids.”

Rosemary Dew, who wrote the 2004 book *No Backup: My Life as a Female FBI Special Agent*, thinks the agency’s problems with women run deeper, however. “The FBI is the worst government agency when it comes to sexism,” says Dew, who left the bureau in 1990 but says the situation hasn’t improved since then. “It’s a boys’ clubhouse. The FBI women I speak to say they hear ‘You don’t belong here.’”

Coffindaffer, though, has come to feel at home in this macho environment. “I think of these guys as my brothers,” she says. *Glamour* sat down with (and ran after) her to see what it takes to make it as a woman in the FBI.

The accidental agent

Coffindaffer hadn’t planned on making a living hunting down drug dealers and terrorists, until she became the target of a criminal attack herself. She was raised in Kansas—her dad was a dairy farmer—and attended Wichita State University, where she studied computer science. One night as she was walking to an off-campus apartment, a man knocked her down and started pulling off her clothing. “I was kicking and fighting,” she recalls.

ON MOM DUTY
With her kids and
her husband, Thad



ON SWAT DUTY
During a
training drill



Her attacker began dragging her to his car, but the sound of approaching police sirens scared him off. “I was close to hysterical,” she says. “A police officer had to slap me to calm me down.” Two hours later her attacker raped another woman. The man, who police believe assaulted at least 10 women over two years, was never caught, but the attack gave Coffindaffer a new focus in life. She switched her major to criminal justice and later applied to the FBI. “I wanted to work at the premier organization,” she says.

Coffindaffer was one of only four women in her grueling, 17-week training class at the FBI academy at Quantico, Virginia.

She passed, but making the Dallas SWAT team years later proved even more demanding. She remembers her try-out for the team with amusement: Waiting for the start of a speed drill, she lay flat on the pavement, her small frame swathed in black commando gear designed for a 200-pound man, including a huge groin protector that came down to her knees. When a voice

barked, “Go!” she grabbed her shotgun and began a 40-yard sprint. “The 20-pound Kevlar vest was banging my legs, and the helmet was wobbling off my head,” she says. Encumbered by the gear, she fell to the ground, picked herself up and finished the dash—but not fast enough.

“You’ve got one more chance,” said the tester. “You taking it?” “Yes, sir,” she replied, and went on to make the required time of under eight seconds. Coffindaffer was relieved on several counts: “I was still nursing my 10-month-old daughter. I was hoping I wouldn’t leak any milk.”

“You’re under arrest”

When she’s not on SWAT assignment, Coffindaffer spends her working hours as a special agent gathering evidence against criminals. *Glamour* was with her on one warm spring day as she prepared to make an arrest. She’s wearing a taupe dress-jacket combo and white heels. No one can see a .40 caliber pistol under her jacket at her hip.

For the last 23 months she’s been investigating a company that hires people for jobs at the Dallas airport—such as washing hangars—that are done within the “secure” area. The FBI says the company has been using undocumented immigrants. The danger: Low-paid illegals are considered easy targets for terrorists who could bribe them to sneak dangerous items onto planes.

At 1 P.M. a grand jury hands down a 41-count indictment against the company, Midwest Airport Services Inc., and shortly thereafter Coffindaffer picks up an arrest warrant for Midwest’s office manager, Silvia Castillo. Warrant in

hand, Coffindaffer walks to her car. Opening the trunk, she pushes aside an M4 assault rifle, an MP5 submachine gun, a Remington shotgun and rappelling gear.

"I think I'll wear my raid jacket," she says as she pulls out a windbreaker with "FBI" printed on back. She's going to make the arrest in her cream-colored outfit? "We're supposed to dress professionally," she says. "If it were a drug bust, I wouldn't do it in a suit." Trailed by an agent from the Social Security Administration, Coffindaffer strides into Midwest's headquarters and asks for Castillo. "She's busy," says the receptionist, but Coffindaffer brushes past him, finds Castillo in a back office and leads her away.

On other days Coffindaffer has had to confront more immediate security threats. In March 2003 a Pakistani national changing planes in Dallas was discovered with 32 single-edge razor blades hidden in his duffel bag. When Coffindaffer questioned the man, he told her he used the blades for shaving. She pointed out he had a full beard. Then he said he was bringing them to a friend in Houston. She asked why he'd bring razor blades from Pakistan to Texas when they're cheaper in the U.S. Then he said he knew nothing about the blades.

Does she think he was a terrorist? "There's no other logical explanation," she says. "He'd already passed through airport screeners in Karachi, the United Arab Emirates and Paris. He wanted to know if he could get through security in the States. I think it was a test."

Agent Mom

If you saw Coffindaffer outside her suburban home, you'd think she was any neighborhood mom: shuttling the kids to soccer, grilling ribs—but with a little extra intensity. "I do have a bit of a drill-sergeant mentality," she says. "My kids learned at a young age to get out their toothbrushes for inspection and to line up their sippy cups in the morning."

She and her husband, Thad, a sales director for a medical-equipment company, met briefly in college but didn't start dating until seven years later, when Coffindaffer was working as an agent in Houston. "I thought it was a turn-on," Thad says of his wife's profession. But he admits he has some con-

cerns. "I keep telling her 'Stay in the back' when you're on SWAT assignment. But that's not her personality. She has to go Mach 5 or she's bored."

Although not every woman in the FBI is cut from the same cloth as Coffindaffer, it helps to be an adrenaline junkie. One day in April 2004, she was at her desk when a SWAT alert buzzed on her pager: "Bank robbery in progress," read the message. The bank was in Denton, Texas, 30 miles north of Dallas, and the robber claimed to have a briefcase full of explosives. Coffindaffer ran to her car and pulled on her SWAT gear—minus her boots, which she'd left at home to polish. "Once I suit up, I can feel my heart beating," she says. "A checklist comes into my mind and I lock on to my objective." When the robber left the bank to retrieve his cigarettes from his car, Coffindaffer provided covering fire with her submachine gun while an officer tackled the guy.

“She has to go Mach 5 or she’s bored.”

Several days later, Coffindaffer showed up for a SWAT training session that included a Power Point

presentation that mimicked the format of the famous MasterCard ads. The first picture showed a team member in front of his shiny car, and the caption read: "Washing your car before SWAT operation: \$30." The next read: "Observing bank robber in your subgun sights: \$300." The last picture was a frame from a TV news report; it showed Coffindaffer bracing herself on her car during the bank bust, her gun pointed at the suspect, her midheel pumps clearly in view below the car-door frame. The caption read: "Out on the SWAT operation but still looking fashionable—priceless."

Coffindaffer laughed off the gag with the rest of the team, just one more sign of how comfortable she feels despite being wildly outnumbered by men. She'd still like to see the ratio shift, but when she wants to measure how far the FBI has come, she pulls from her desk a copy of a letter that J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI's legendary director, wrote in 1971 to a young woman who wanted to be an agent. "We do not employ women in this position," Hoover wrote. "We must have agents who are qualified to cope with any situation they may face."

"Whenever I see that letter," she says, "I get a little smile on my face." ©

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