

WHEN THINGS TURNED TO 'ASH': HENRY TARRIO'S FIRST WITNESS APPEARS; PLUS A FIGHT OVER INFORMANTS ENSUES AT PROUD BOYS SEDITION TRIAL

From emptywheel, 4/2: Thanks to the generosity of emptywheel readers we have funded Brandi's coverage for the rest of the trial. If you'd like to show your further appreciation for Brandi's great work, here's her PayPal tip jar.

The first witness for Henry Tarrio at the now 43-day-old trial was George Meza, a former Proud Boy turned self-professed rabbi who also goes by "Ash Barkoziba." Meza was discharged from the U.S. military after going AWOL for over six months. These days, as prosecutors elicited, Meza offers prospective converts to Judaism medical exemptions for the Covid-19 vaccine online.

If the aim of Meza's testimony was, in some fashion, meant to persuade jurors that the Proud Boys as an organization were tolerant, ideologically passive, or nonviolent or further, that Tarrio's oversight of the group meant greater standards were enforced that put checks on members who engaged in bigotry or hate, then Meza was unsuccessful.

Appearing before jurors wearing angular dark-rimmed glasses and a long button-down shirt, Meza's testimony was often contradictory. On direct examination, he told Tarrio's counsel Nayib Hassan that he became a third-degree member of the extremist organization but he couldn't recall when. He told the January 6

committee he joined the group in September or October of 2020.

He told Hassan the Proud Boys were a “reactionary movement” aimed to protect patriotic Americans from communist leftists and flag-burners. Anyone who held supremacist views would be kicked out of the Proud Boys or “should have been,” he said.

When he was a member and participated in the Ministry of Self-Defense (MOSD) group chat he said he policed it for anti-Semitic and racist commentary. It was a responsibility he took upon himself, he admitted, because the group didn’t “do enough” to eject bigots from its ranks.

They did, however, eject Meza.

He was cagey about why he was ousted, his memory foggy on the finer points. During a pointed exchange with prosecutors during cross-examination, Meza also could not remember the exact date he was ousted but insisted it must have been prior to Jan. 3, 2021. Incidentally, Jan. 3 was the same date that members like Proud Boy Gabriel Garcia of Miami texted Tarrío, Biggs, and other members in MOSD that “yes sir, time to stack those bodies in front of Capitol Hill.”

Prosecutors say evidence shows Meza was in the MOSD chats through Jan. 6 and wasn’t kicked out until after the insurrection.

When he was an insider, Meza was a member of MOSD as well as the group’s Boots on Ground channel yet another text forum where, according to prosecutors, Tarrío and his now co-defendants Ethan Nordean, Joseph Biggs, Zachary Rehl, and Dominic Pezzola (as well as a host of other Proud Boys charged in separate indictments) coordinated efforts directly or indirectly aimed at disrupting Congress on Jan. 6, 2021.

The defendants claim the groups were innocuous and largely served as spaces where members could sketch out methods of self-defense against antifa and other perceived enemies of patriots

like Donald Trump or his supporters when pro-Trump events were underway.

The mission of MOSD was about ensuring the “safety of other Proud Boys,” Meza testified. There was talk of Jan. 6 in MOSD, he said, but he couldn’t recall specific discussions. He also brushed aside suggestions that the group used the space to do things like find “real men” willing to confront police when Jan. 6 rolled around.

MOSD, he said, was a place where leadership could work toward things like the “thinning out” of members who were unable to curb binge drinking or other unruly behavior at rallies. But at the same time, Meza said Proud Boys did not shy away from taking matters into their own hands when they felt under duress.

After two pro-Trump events in D.C. in November and December 2020 –the Million MAGA March on Nov. 14 and the ‘Stop the Steal’ rally on Dec. 12–the Proud Boys were keyed up. Members had been stabbed during street brawls with antifa, he said. But, he admitted, he didn’t see the stabbings with his own eyes or who started it.

People got bored. Bored and drunk. And stabbings occurred, he said.

But, he testified, this boys club also sincerely believed it was in the middle of a civil war with antifa. Meza described it as “somewhat of a peaceful civil war... for the most part.”

Yet, he downplayed the Proud Boys as a drinking club akin to a “fraternity” where “locker room talk” flowed. When one member in MOSD discussed breaking people’s legs or hunting antifa down, for example, Meza said it was hyperbole.

“It was always reactionary,” he volunteered to Assistant U.S. Attorney Jason McCullough. “It was a lot of poetic hyperbolic statements.”

“When you’re on the receiving end of violence, does it feel better if it’s just hyperbole?” McCullough asked.

Defense attorneys objected before he could answer.

By the time Jan. 6 arrived, Meza testified that he was specifically focused on providing security for Latinos for Trump founder Bianca Gracia. He had been admitted to MOSD after the December 12 rally, he said. Text exhibits indicate Meza was a participant in the MOSD Main chat when Tarrío first sent out an invitation for a critical video conference hosted on Dec. 29, 2020.

Ahead of that meeting, defendant Joseph Biggs eagerly told members in MOSD they would soon discuss the “need to make sure guys understand the chain of command” for Jan. 6. In clips from the teleconference played for the jury this February, Proud Boy Charles Donohoe—who has already pleaded guilty conspiracy to obstruct proceedings—is heard emphasizing a need for secrecy among MOSD’s operations.

There would be no social media posts about MOSD, Donohoe urged and at the meeting, Tarrío reiterated this point. Even in the MOSD text channel jurors saw this point was one of several Tarrío listed in a reminder post that was pinned at the top of the channel. When FBI Special Agent Peter Dubrowski testified about the Dec. 29 teleconference, he said while Tarrío, Biggs, and other leaders on the call did not discuss a strategic objective for January 6 that he heard, there was interest for those details expressed by other members.

Tarrío just wouldn’t come out with it openly, Dubrowski said. He opted to keep information siloed. There was more than one teleconference for MOSD members in the run-up to Jan. 6, Dubrowski testified, but investigators were unable to successfully locate recordings of those videos if they existed.

As for Meza, he would arrive in Washington on Jan. 5 to stay at the Phoenix Park Hotel.

His mission, he told the jury, was to escort Gracia and others in her entourage as a

representative of the Proud Boys on Jan. 6.

He was to ensure she got to and from the hotel and to the group's rally. Tarrío, he said, was meant to speak at the Latinos for Trump rally from 10 a.m. to noon though he admitted, Tarrío's name was never listed on the Latinos for Trump publicity flyer for the 6th.

The Proud Boys ringleader was arrested on Jan. 4 and promptly received an order to stay out of D.C. from law **enforcement**.

Despite being tapped as security for the high-profile pro-Trump event that the very leader of the Proud Boys was supposed to speak at, Meza testified that he and Tarrío never had any communications about it before Jan. 5.

Further stretching the limits of logical belief, in addition to security for Gracia, Meza told jurors he was there on Jan. 6 as an "independent licensed journalist." Putting aside the fact that there is no license issued to journalists independent or otherwise, McCullough elicited from the former Proud Boy turned rabbi that he was also interviewing people on the 6th who had never met Proud Boys before.



The prosecution has alleged that the Proud Boys activated fellow members of their organization on Jan. 6 to breach police lines but further, that they understood their success in applying force to stop the certification would hinge also on raising the hackles of "normies" or everyday people at the rally in Washington. These "normies" were "tools" of the conspiracy, at times, almost as much as some members of the organization were, the government contends.

McCullough pressed Meza on this point asking him several times if he was positive that he was ousted from MOSD prior to Jan. 3. Presenting a MOSD text chain to the jury, McCullough showed him where a Proud Boy using the handle "BrotherHunter Jake Phillips" told MOSD members: "So are the normies and 'other' attendees going to push through police lines and storm the capitol buildings? A few million v. a few

hundred coptifa should be enough. I saw a few normie groups rush police lines on the 12th.”

“Ever see that?” McCullough asked.

“Never seen it,” Meza said.

Ministry of Self Defense - MAIN		
Time	Name	Message
1:30:10 PM	Gabriel PB 692355272	This is the guy that posted it. 
1:30:30 PM	The Vidivic 1204642019	That's crazy man
1:32:38 PM	BrotherHunter Jake Phillips 774644050	👇This!!!
1:35:06 PM	E-Geezy 745053353	
1:36:30 PM	VIGO THE CARPATHIAN 848702325	This story... Even the man's name bares witness. Tell it @Freedomreigns !
1:37:39 PM	BrotherHunter Jake Phillips 774644050	Also this 👇. So are the normies and "other" attendees going to push thru police lines and storm the capitol buildings? A few million vs A few hundred coptifa should be enough. I saw a few normie groups rush police lines on the 12th.
1:59:45 PM	Deplorable51 965418765	cue in the music....."let the bodies hit the floor let the bodies hit the floor 🇺🇸"

Meza also testified that he didn't see another comment where "BrotherHunter Jake Phillips" asked, "what would they do if 1 million patriots stormed and took the capitol building. Shoot into the crowd? I think not."

Meza did not meet with Proud Boys, including

some of the defendants, who gathered at the Washington Monument on the morning of Jan. 6. He told the jury he did not march with any of them when they descended on the Capitol. He said too that he had no cellphone communication with any of them and carried no radio. McCullough, however, showed Meza a picture of himself where a radio is clearly visible on his chest. He stands next to a Proud Boy from Miami he identified as "The Greek." Also appearing alongside them in the picture is Josh Macias, the co-founder of Vets for Trump.

This jogged his memory, Meza said. They had radio for the Latinos for Trump event, he said. But they never used them. Someone had given the radios to him but he couldn't recall who and he said, in any event, they "never figured out how to use them."

Former Proud Boy Matthew Greene—who has pleaded guilty to conspiracy and obstruction of an official proceeding already—testified this January that he was tasked to program radios for Proud Boys on Jan. 6 but it wasn't Tarrío, he told Nayib Hassan, who set him about this project.

When Nick Smith, defense attorney for Proud Boy leader and defendant Ethan Nordean, asked Greene whether those radios were ever used to plan an invasion on the Capitol, Greene also said no.

Though he said he heard no specific plan for Jan. 6 if it existed, Greene said Proud Boys had steadily grown angrier and angrier as the day approached and members, by December, fully and openly expected a civil war was imminent.

When Greene traveled to D.C with defendant Dominic Pezzola in a two-car caravan (Pezzola rode in a separate car, Greene rode with New York Proud Boy William Pepe), that hadn't changed. When things finally clicked into place in his mind, he said, was when he saw Proud Boys lead rioters over barricades for the first time on Jan. 6.

"Oh shit, this is it," he recalled thinking.

"I personally had an abstract feeling that Proud Boys were about to be part of something, the tip of the spear, but I never heard specifically what that could be. But as people moved closer to the Capitol, I was in the moment, putting two-and-two together and saying, well, here it is," Greene testified on Jan. 24.

Like Meza, Greene was not a high-ranking member of the Proud Boys.

Greene stuck close to defendant Dominic Pezzola on Jan. 6 as they breached barriers and ascended scaffolding around the Capitol.

At one point on the 6th, when Greene saw Pezzola clutching a police riot shield, Greene said it was then that he started to question what he was really doing there. Greene stayed close enough to Pezzola long enough to watch him have his picture taken with the riot shield, Pezzola's hand making the "OK" hand gesture that extremist experts say is associated with the white power movement. Meza told the jury Proud Boys were instructed by the group's leadership to use the hand signal to antagonize the media.



Other testimony from Meza was likely just as unhelpful for the defendants.

As video footage played in court from a violent breach of the Columbus Door near the East Rotunda, police clearly struggling to keep the mob at bay, Meza testified that he was escorting two women out of the Capitol after the door was breached. He never saw it breached, he said. He

was walking away and three seconds later, the door was open. He asked jurors to believe he never saw protesters stream through that same door 10 to 15 seconds later because things were "so densely populated."

He understood the purpose of going to D.C. on Jan. 6 was to "stop the steal," he testified. And when McCullough asked him plainly whether he believed that the people who went inside the Capitol were "heroes", Meza was unabashed.

"Yes I do," he said.

Meza's testimony will resume on Monday since his cross-examination did not conclude Friday. And much to the defense's chagrin, presiding U.S. District Judge Timothy Kelly has agreed to admit evidence into question that will tie the Proud Boys ever closer to the sedition charge they each face.

The government wants to cross Meza on a series of key details around Jan. 5 at the Phoenix Park Hotel in downtown D.C.

This was the same hotel where Tarrío would meet that night with Oath Keepers founder Elmer Stewart Rhodes, who was convicted of seditious conspiracy in November, Bianca Gracia, Joshua Macias, former Oath Keeper attorney Kellye SoRelle and others, in an underground parking garage.

Prosecutors argue that Meza's proximity to Gracia as well as his testimony on his stated purpose—security guard for Jan. 6 related events—should grant the government the right to question him about what he heard or what he saw happen in Gracia's hotel room.

Judge Kelly was not initially inclined to let this line of examination run, suggesting it was beyond the scope and that conversations in the hotel room prior to a rally were First Amendment-protected activity. But McCullough kept at it.

"It squarely refutes the idea this is all done

for First Amendment [reasons], your honor,” McCullough said. “He is in a room with the head of the Oath Keepers, with the Latino for Trump folks who have just met with Tarrío in a garage earlier that evening and now he is continuing to engage with Bianca who we have heard on direct is thick as thieves—[strike that]. They are very close is what we have heard. That is relevant. There is a connection with this individual when this is all supposed to be about Latinos for Trump and ‘we’re going to a rally from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m.’.”

In a text message extracted from Proud Boy Gabriel Garcia’s phone after Jan. 6, McCullough said Meza said he told other Proud Boys things were “planned in our hotel room the night before by Oath Keepers and Three Percenters.

In the sentence just before this in the text message, Meza writes, “I’m thrilled with what happened and don’t know why people keep saying it was antifa [or] BLM.”

Ethan Nordean’s attorney Nick Smith argued this was exculpatory since it appeared to rest responsibility on other extremist groups. But these were Meza’s statements, Kelly found, and therefore, he now agreed with the government: they were relevant and Meza could be questioned about them because “at least,” Kelly said, it was an “implication” that Proud Boys planned to stop the certification with the other groups.

Tarrío’s next witness is teed up for Monday after much commotion: FBI informant Jennylyn Salinas, also known as “Jenny Loh.”

Loh’s anticipated appearance threw proceedings into disarray last week as defense attorneys claimed they had no idea Loh was an informant. Loh maintains she told her handlers nothing about her interactions with the Proud Boys and that once the government became aware that she could be called to testify in the case, her informant relationship ended completely. Prosecutors say Loh, who was associated with Latinos for Trump, was an informant from April

2020 through this January and only received a single payment from the bureau after sharing footage with agents of people harassing her at home. Loh has said that her communications with the FBI were not about Proud Boys but the threat that antifa posed.

Sabino Jauregui, another defense attorney representing Tarrío, told Judge Kelly on Friday that Loh would be able to testify that in at least 100 different Telegram channels or group chats with multiple Proud Boys, she never saw any chatter of plans to storm the Capitol on Jan. 6. How relevant that will be remains to be seen. There's no indication that Loh, even if she was a member of dozens of Proud Boy channels, would be hip to information closely guarded by leadership.

The government has maintained that Loh never informed on Proud Boys specifically. Jauregui insisted she would often talk to her FBI handler about Biggs and Tarrío in particular. Defense attorneys claim Loh tried to convince one of the defendants to get rid of his attorney.

McCullough offered to share a 36-minute recorded interview with Judge Kelly involving Loh and her FBI handler where, the prosecutor said, it would become clear that Loh was not reporting on Proud Boys.

Kelly has been treading carefully around informant issues that continue to arise in the trial. The defense has issued subpoenas to several witnesses who they say are confidential human sources that would vindicate the Proud Boys. For example, Judge Kelly recently quashed a subpoena from the defense for Massachusetts Proud Boy Kenny Lizardo. Lizardo attended the meeting with Tarrío and Rhodes in the parking garage at the Phoenix.

Lizardo, Kelly found, had a "reporting relationship" with the FBI and intended to invoke his Fifth Amendment right if called.