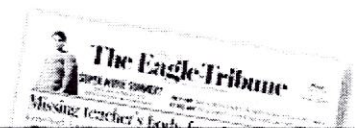


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Local defense lawyers not surprised at Entwistle conviction

By Jim Patten
Staff writer

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The guilty verdict yesterday in the Neil Entwistle murder case came as no great surprise to local defense lawyers, some of whom felt his lawyer had a powerful government case to overcome.

For more than two years, Entwistle, 29, told the same story: he came home from running errands and found his wife and baby daughter snuggled in bed together, dead from apparent gunshot wounds.

Never once publicly — either when his family defended him, or when his friends recounted conversations with him or in a three-hour taped interview with investigators — did Entwistle offer a suggestion of who else might have killed his wife, Rachel, and their 9-month-old daughter, Lillian Rose, in their Hopkinton home.

But in the final days of his trial in Woburn Superior Court, his defense lawyer Elliott Weinstein floated a stunning theory: Rachel Entwistle had killed their baby, then committed suicide.

Yesterday, a jury rejected that defense and convicted Entwistle of two counts of first-degree murder.

Jurors deliberated less than two days before finding Entwistle guilty of putting a .22-caliber handgun to his daughter's chest and firing, then pointing the gun at his wife's head and firing again.

Sentencing was scheduled for today. Under state law, Entwistle must be sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

Haverhill attorney Scott Gleason said he was personally surprised that the defense raised the possibility of a murder-suicide without proving that scenario. It was an argument that damaged the credibility of an already weak case, he said.

"My professional view: I think Mr. Entwistle got every benefit that our system can provide. And it certainly appears the jury took great care and great time to go through all the evidence. But the evidence appears, from the outside looking in, to be very overwhelming," he said.

"My personal view: Right verdict. God bless that jury," Gleason said.

Middlesex District Attorney Gerry Leone, standing with Rachel's family, including her mother and stepfather, Priscilla and Joseph Matterazzo, denounced Entwistle for blaming his wife for the killings.

"I condemn Neil Entwistle for compounding the unspeakable nature of what he has done by disparaging the memory of his wife and vilifying the entire Matterazzo family by his decisions during the course of this trial," Leone said.

Entwistle, a British citizen, acknowledges not calling police after he said he found their bodies, and said he returned the .22-caliber gun used to kill them to his father-in-law's house 50 miles away in an effort to preserve her honor. He later flew back to his parents' home in England.

"The thing that really stuck out to me was they didn't spring the murder-suicide thing until the last minute," said Andover-based defense attorney Alex Cain, who also is a former prosecutor.

Cain said Entwistle's lawyer then never presented any evidence to corroborate the murder-suicide theory.

"Entwistle's statements to the police sunk him," Cain said.

Fred McAlary, a veteran prosecutor and defense attorney based in Andover, said he had only followed the case in the press.

"From my point of view, right from the get-go there was an overpowering case against Mr. Entwistle. It was a well-trying case. Elliott Weinstein did a good job working with what he had to work with," McAlary said.

He said the murder-suicide theory introduced by the defense team was not enough to overcome the prosecution's case.

"It was too little, too late to say that in closing arguments," McAlary said. "The jury reached the correct verdict."

Murat Erkan, a defense lawyer and former prosecutor from Andover, said the verdict was consistent with the evidence.

"You have to play the cards you are dealt in the end. Sometimes you can establish doubt with alternate versions of the case, but the deck was kind of stacked against Entwistle," Erkan said.

Material from the Associated Press is included in this report.

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