

Hoax calls took place in Delaware

WILMINGTON, Del. – David C. Weiss, United States Attorney for the District of Delaware, announced that Stephen S. Landes, 29, of Roswell, N.M., pled guilty Aug. 12 to making interstate bomb threats, before the Honorable Richard G. Andrews, United States District Judge for the District of Delaware.

In May 2018, Landes made bomb threats to the Walmart and the Georgetown Elementary School, both in Georgetown, Del. for the purpose of "swatting" a Delaware resident.

"Swatting" involves making hoax emergency calls in order to elicit an armed police response (e.g., from a SWAT team) to harass someone believed to be at the location of the purported emergency. Landes' sentencing is scheduled for Nov. 27. Landes faces a maximum penalty of 10 years imprisonment.

According to court documents and statements made in open court, on May 9, 2018, at approximately 1:43 pm, Landes called the Walmart in Georgetown from Roswell. He asked to speak with a manager. Landes impersonated a certain resident of Georgetown, and then stated that he had a bomb and a child hostage in the bathroom. He demanded $20,000 and threatened to blow-up the Walmart if he did not receive the money.

Law enforcement from Georgetown Police, Delaware State Police and Delaware Natural Resources Police responded to the Walmart and evacuated the store. K9 units searched the Walmart but did not find any bomb.

A few minutes later, at approximately 1:56 pm, Landes called Georgetown Elementary School. Landes again claimed to be a certain resident of Georgetown, and told the person who answered the phone that he had two children buried in his basement and that there was a bomb in the school. School administrators locked down the school and called 911. Law enforcement units from the Delaware State Police and the Georgetown Police Department responded to the elementary school immediately. K9 units searched the school but found no bomb or other threats.

“Bomb threats and swatting calls, especially to schools and highly trafficked retail stores, are designed to cause intense fear,” U.S. Attorney Weiss said. “They also necessitate an immediate response from law enforcement, diverting the limited resources of local law enforcement and emergency service agencies away from true emergencies where these agencies are critical to the health and safety of our communities. When these violent threats are directed towards an elementary school, they have a particularly lasting psychological impact on members of our community. My office will vigorously prosecute those who engage in bomb threats, swatting calls and other similar terroristic activity.”

Georgetown Police Chief R.L. Hughes said, “Stephen Landes’ actions exposed our children and community to fear and a real potential for injury. I am proud of the professional response of our police officers and the exceptional investigation and prosecution by our state and federal partners.”