

DID SHERIFF HANLIN KNOW OF CHRISTOPHER HARPER MERCER BEFORE HIS MASSACRE?

I read this passage – from the Sheriff in charge of the investigation into the mass killing by Christopher Harper Mercer the other day – several times.

Douglas County Sheriff John Hanlin told reporters it wouldn't be strange for someone in the state to have so many weapons.

"In Oregon, this is a hunting state and firearms are possible in most households," he said.

Investigators said it was too soon to identify a motive, although Hanlin earlier told NBC's TODAY he wasn't aware of any "specific red flags" for the shooter.

"He is a local resident and I know personally I haven't heard of any warning signs coming from this person," Hanlin said.

Because Hanlin said, "I personally," I initially believed he meant he personally *knew of* Harper Mercer. But after re-reading it, I believe, though am not certain, that Hanlin meant only that in the time Harper Mercer has been living in town (about four years, according to reports) he has never come up on the sheriff department's radar (or more specifically, Hanlin's personal radar). In a town of 20,000 people, there'd be no reason for Hanlin to know everyone.

Still, I wonder, given Hanlin's refusal to utter Harper Mercer's name. Given that both are big gun enthusiasts (though as Hanlin noted, that's fairly common in the area), it's possible

they've met. There'd be no fault in that, nor would Hanlin be at fault for not noticing the guy, because nothing we know of in his history should have tipped anyone but the people who were egging him on on 4Chan. But I bet a guy like Hanlin has a certain idea of who engages in senseless killing and it's not a guy like Harper Mercer, no matter how much of a loner.

In any case, this passage, from a local editorial, got me wondering about that statement from Hanlin again.

The investigation, led by Hanlin's office, has only just begun. In press conferences, Hanlin has been urging anyone who might have tips relating to the shootings to call 1-800-CALL-FBI. But as a practical matter, how are people who may have valuable information about Harper-Mercer supposed to call if they never know that he was the shooter?

They're right: Hanlin's dictate no one should name Harper Mercer makes it somewhat less likely locals would call in tips of any warning signs.

Add in Hanlin's fierce belief that guns are under threat – extending even to Newtown trutherism – and I wonder whether he wants to suppress how much like Harper Mercer looks like any other gun enthusiast.

In general, I'm sympathetic to the idea that we ought to celebrate the guy who tried to save innocents – Chris Mintz – rather than focus on the guy who did the massacre. I very much believe the entire country needs to look at how much it obsesses on these massacres, which encourages fly-by panic and may inspire copy-cats, but which has never led to policy changes.

But I also believe that this country needs to come to grips with the fact that a gun rampage is as likely – statistically more likely – to be committed by a guy like Harper Mercer or Dylann Roof or James Holmes and, especially, Adam Lanza as it is to be committed by a Muslim guy. Only

then will we understand the problem is not terrorism, it's that some young men channel their resentment and loneliness into guns in this country, regardless of what faith or color they are. And coming to that realization takes some details (details Hanlin may find uncomfortable) and a name.