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Deadly Explosion Killed God-Fearing Couple in 1982

June 19, 2020 By True Crime Diva — [Leave a Comment](#)



Andrew and Patricia Puskas received a mystery package on a cold winter morning in 1982. The box contained a bomb, and minutes later, they were dead. Despite a massive investigation, the case remains unsolved today.



Andrew and Patricia Puskas. Photo source: *The Courier-News*, February 27, 1982

Andrew Richard Puskas married Patricia Nodes on May 4, 1968, in her church, St. Mary of Mount Virgin R.C. Church in New Brunswick, New Jersey.

Andrew was a 1964 graduate of New Brunswick High School. He attended Trenton State College and received an associate degree from Union County Technical Institute. Additionally, he served in the United States Army Special Forces.

Patricia was also a 1964 graduate of New Brunswick High School and had previously attended St. Mary's School in New Brunswick and Linwood School in North Brunswick.

They were the parents of Andrew Junior, 9, Scott, 7, and Brian, 3.

The Puskas family moved to Piscataway and became Jehovah's Witnesses. In 1974, they moved to 182 First Street in the borough of Middlesex and became involved in the Middlesex Bible Church in 1977 after sending two of their children to vacation Bible school there one summer.

Andrew, 35, was employed as a technical service representation at Dodge Newark Supply Inc. in Fairfield since 1975. Patricia, also 35, was unemployed.

They were deeply religious people and their lives centered around the Middlesex Bible Church. On Tuesdays, they attended a Bible study class; on Fridays, Andrew worked with a teen Bible study group, and on Saturday nights, he showed religious films at the church. Patricia taught a Bible study class

of six- and seven-year-olds. Andrew was also a lay minister at the church and on his way to becoming the church's fourth elder, according to elder, Raymond Good.

The Mystery Package

On the chilly morning of February 25, 1982, Andrew Puskas was preparing to take his two older sons to school when he found a package on his front porch.

He took the package into the home but immediately became suspicious. Andrew sent the boys outside and then called the police.

Transcript details calls to police

The following is a transcript released yesterday of the telephone conversation between Middlesex police and Andrew Puskas and that of a second caller:

8:35 a.m.

POLICE LINE: Middlesex police, Sgt. Benson.

INCOMING LINE FROM VICTIM: Good morning, sergeant. My name is Puskas, P-U-S-K-A-S, 182 First St.

On my way out the door this morning to take my kids to school, there was this box on my front porch. I brought it in and it had some bottles in it. My wife called me back into the house and it is two bottles of gasoline, a timer, a piece of pipe and a bunch of wires, I doubt, but it appears to be gasoline.

I don't know if it is a joke or not. The timer is not ticking or anything else, but if it is a joke, it is a very poor one. I would like someone to come over and look at it please.

POLICE LINE: OK, what is the house number?

INCOMING LINE FROM VICTIM: 182 First St.

POLICE LINE: And your first name?

INCOMING LINE FROM VICTIM: Andrew.

POLICE LINE: OK, I will send an officer right over.

INCOMING LINE FROM VICTIM: OK, I am going to take my kids to school and I will be right back.

POLICE LINE: OK.

INCOMING LINE FROM VICTIM: Thank you, my wife will be here.

8:36 a.m.

POLICE LINE: Middlesex police, Sgt. Benson.

INCOMING CALL: Yes, there was an explosion on First Street.

POLICE LINE: Just now?

INCOMING CALL: Yes, just this minute — black smoke pouring out.

POLICE LINE: OK, it is probably 182 First St. I just got a call from there.

INCOMING CALL: OK, 'bye.

Photo source: *The Courier News*. February 23, 1983

Sgt. Benson radioed Officer Richard Schwarz, who was patrolling a block away and sent him to the Puskas home. Schwarz, 24, initially had trouble finding the house, and that probably saved his life.

As he started walking to the front door of the Puskas home, the home exploded. He was only about 30ft from the door. The force of the blast threw him over the hood of his patrol car.

Schwarz sprang into action and lunged for his police radio. He shouted into his microphone, "Send everybody!" Andrew Jr. and Scott had been blown off the front porch by the blast. Officer Schwarz

smothered the flames on the children. Luckily, they suffered only minor injuries. Brian, unharmed, was sitting in the car, waiting for his father when the house exploded.



The fire at the home of Andrew and Patricia Puskas following the explosion of a package found at their front door on Feb. 25, 1982. The couple was killed in the explosion. COURTESY OF MIDDLESEX COUNTY PROSECUTOR'S OFFICE

Photo Source: *The Central New Jersey Home News*, August 12, 2018

The explosion lifted the roof of the one-story frame home and blew out the front door.

The blast had partially damaged the home at 176 First Street.



Photo source: *The Central New Jersey Home News*, February 26, 1982

Authorities pulled the bodies from the collapsed kitchen floor four hours after the explosion.



Photo source: *The Central New Jersey Home News*, February 26, 1982.

The two older boys were taken to Green Brook Regional Center for treatment of minor burns.

Chief County Medical Examiner Dr. Marvin Schuster performed the autopsies. Shrapnel found in the victims' abdomen and chest indicated they were facing the explosion and that Andrew may have been closer to the source than Patricia. Both died from "traumatic and hemorrhagic shock due to explosion," according to autopsy reports.

The Investigation

One of the children provided police with a description and diagram of the contents of the package, a 2-foot-square, unmarked cardboard box which the child said held several bottles and a pipe bomb with a 45-second timer (Del Vecchio 1982).

On the [Middlesex County Crime Stoppers page](#), the description states two bottles were blue; one was a dark blue, and the other a lighter blue. The most significant piece of glass found at the crime scene contained molded lettering, which read in part "KING'S."

The bottles contained a flammable liquid. One report stated it was gasoline.

The package was addressed to Andrew Richard Puskas, although authorities refused to say how. It could be significant because Andrew went by "Andy" by his co-workers and "Dick" by close friends and church members.

Through the investigation, authorities determined the package was placed on the front porch by the killer and not sent via the United States Postal Service or a shipping carrier, such as United Parcel Service (UPS).

Investigators spoke with friends, neighbors, and members of the Middlesex Bible Church but found no red flags in the couple's background that provided a possible motive for the killings.

They also interviewed Andrew's co-workers but came up empty-handed. They believed someone committed the act out of "personal hatred" towards Andrew Puskas.

Investigators sent four or five large sacks full of debris to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco (ATF), and Firearms lab in Rockville, Maryland, for analysis. They also sent samples of wood, human tissue, and water left by the firehoses, which might contain a clue to the nature of the bomb. But after several weeks, the samples yielded some evidence, but nothing further was mentioned.

The ATF determined that the bomb was a "fairly sophisticated device," according to then-ATF agent Johnny Bouras. Authorities ruled out the possibility that the bomb was detonated by remote control.

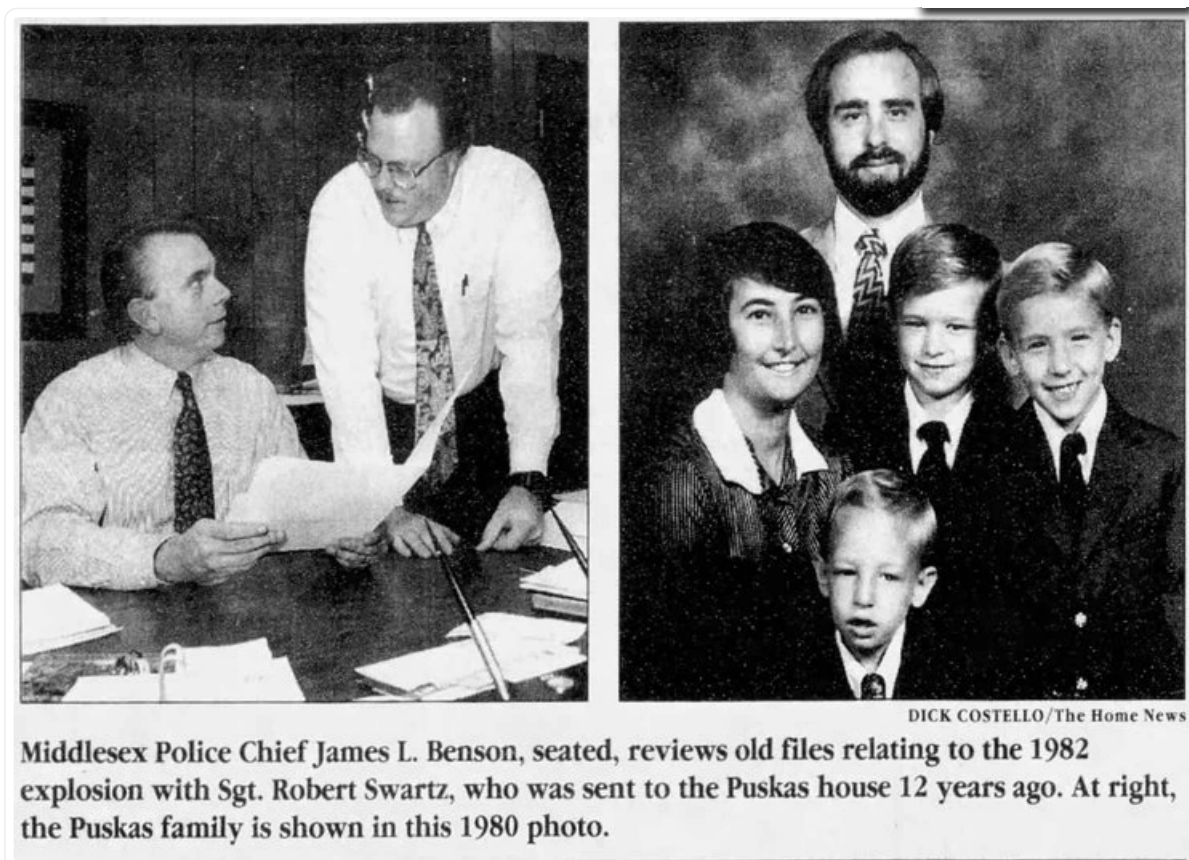


Photo source: *The Central New Jersey Home News*, December 14, 1994

WITNESSES

A 17-year-old girl reported seeing a white Mercury Cougar skid to a halt at the end of First Street and then making a quick turn west onto Union Avenue (Route 28). The girl told police that she saw two white males inside the vehicle, but did not notice its license plate number.

One of the Puskas' neighbors said she ran to the scene after the blast and saw the Puskas children running around shouting. She heard one of the children say, "My parents are in there. I knew they were out to get us." The neighbor later recanted her story, and the children said they had not made that remark.

In June 1982, a neighbor came forward with information. On the day of the explosion, she was running late for work. She remembered seeing a strange car near the Puskas house shortly before the package was discovered.

Under hypnosis, the woman recalled seeing a late-model, mid-sized white station wagon pull either into the Puskas' driveway or next door. She saw the car as it pulled past her driveway while she waited to move into the street. She saw it again in her rearview mirror as she backed out and then drove away.

The woman described the driver as a white male; in his late 40s or 50s, he was 170 pounds, 5 feet 8 to 5 feet 10, average build, olive complexion, dark eyes, bushy eyebrows, dark hair with specks of gray.

On the vehicle's passenger door, she saw a rectangular sign. It had a white background with a red border containing the capital letter S or C and smaller letters afterward, all red and written in cursive.

The woman did not remember any letters or numbers on the license plate, but she believed it was straw-colored, like the New Jersey license plates in circulation between 1959 and 1977.

The woman also recalled seeing a box in the back of the car before it stopped at the Puskas home.

Working with a sketch artist from the Middlesex County Sheriff's Office, a composite sketch was created based on her account.

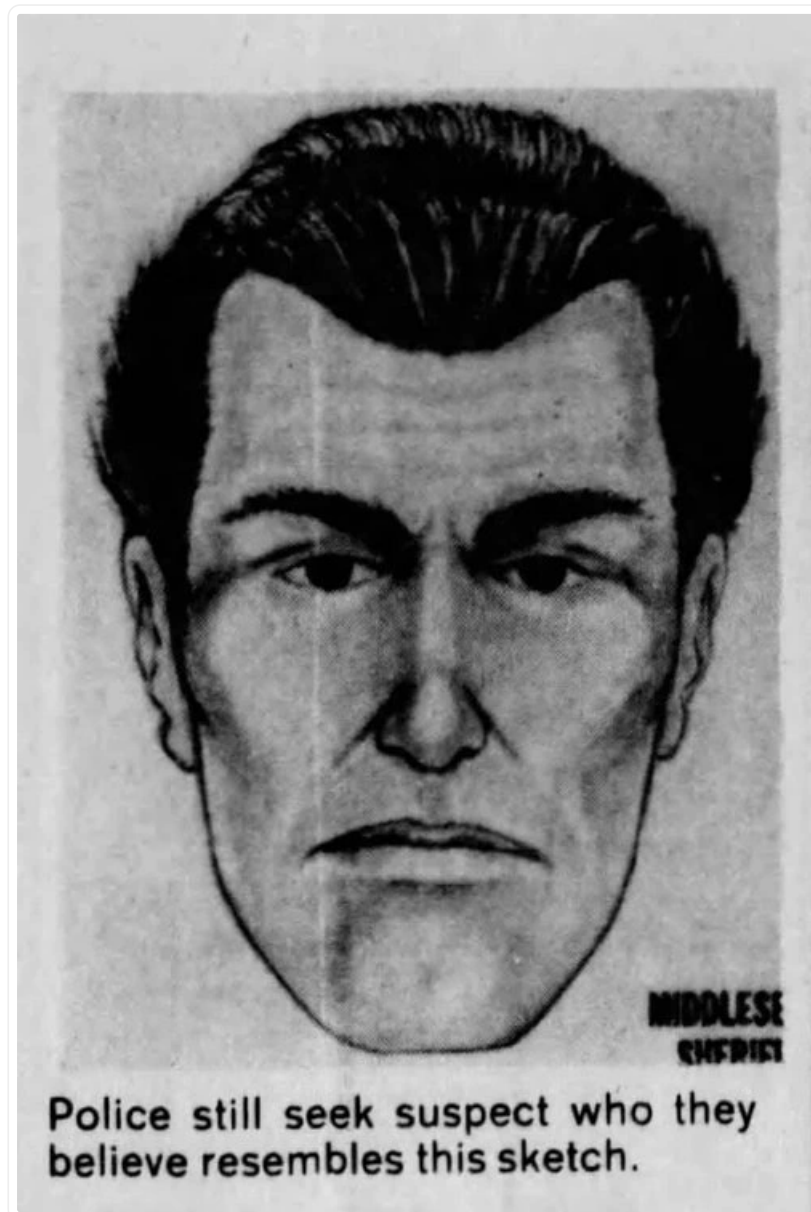


Photo source: *The Courier-News*, Saturday, February 25, 1984

Investigation Dwindled

By April 1982, the investigation had dwindled. Investigators had interviewed between 500 and 550 persons to track down leads. They tried to match the composite sketch with 15 suspects in the case, but there were no matches, and they eliminated the men as suspects. Of those 15 men, only three or four may have been angry at Andrew or Patricia for any reason, so investigators did not consider them suspects in the accepted sense of the word.

According to then-Detective Sgt. Joseph Zimmerman, most of those persons were “people who were in the wrong place at the right time.”

Middlesex County Prosecutor Richard S. Rebeck estimated men from his office, the borough police and the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms had put in 4,000 man-hours at the cost of \$100,000. (Kavanaugh 1982).

By May 1982, investigators scaled back the bombing probe. Detectives were assigned on a part-time basis to continue checking on leads into the killings. Early in the investigation, 14 county, federal, and local law enforcement officers were assigned to the case full-time.

By the first anniversary of the killings, the bomb probe led to a dead end. Hundreds of leads proved futile. Among them:

- Investigators searched the home of a person living in the Puskas’ neighborhood. They had enough evidence for a judge to grant a search warrant, but they found nothing.
- Someone called in an anonymous tip saying Andrew Puskas and an atheist had engaged in a hostile exchange of letters to the editor in some publication. Investigators examined copies of daily and weekly central New Jersey newspapers but found nothing.
- Investigators looked into Andrew Puskas’ military background to see if he received bomb training. However, he was an Army reservist who mainly served as a supply clerk at Camp Kilmer in central New Jersey.
- Investigators briefly studied the theory that Andrew had planted the bomb to kill Patricia, and that he had planned to be safely away with their children when it exploded. However, they found no problems in the couple’s marriage to suggest he would kill his wife.
- An ATF employee contacted Rev. Kay Horman, a Virginia psychic. After touching photographs of Andrew and Patricia, she said she felt “vibrations” that flashed images and words through her mind’s eye. She believed there were two men involved in the bombing, one around 17 years old who drove the car, another in his 50s with whom Puskas had had three arguments, and who made the bomb. She said the two men lived near the Puskas home, but her information proved fruitless.

Some friends of the Puskas’ believed there was a connection between their passion for religion and the murders. Rebeck said their religious beliefs might have “bugged someone” and later said, “it has to be a personal hatred; predicated on what I don’t know – the family, the church, employment, social contacts.”

Bombings in Suburbia

At the time of the Puskas bombing, residential areas were the number one target of bombers – including terrorists – and the average suburban police officer did not have the proper training to dispose of an explosive device safely.

The FBI’s 1980 report on domestic bombings showed that towns with 10,000 people or less – an average size for Central New Jersey, there was a 25 percent rise in bombing attacks compared with the previous year.

The FBI also wrote in its report that while criminal bombings “have historically been the trademark of terrorists, these acts of violence are more often perpetrated by disgruntled individuals seeking vengeance against their personal enemies.”

According to the ATF, vandalism and vengeance were the two most common motives for planting a bomb. Investigators believed the Puskas bombing was motivated by revenge.

Aftermath

Investigators never arrested anyone in the 1982 explosion that claimed the lives of Andrew and Patricia Puskas. The case went cold by the mid-1990s and remains unsolved today.

Investigators briefly looked into Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, as a possible suspect for the killings, but found no connection to the crime.

There were two trust funds for the Puskas children, and donations had exceeded \$38,000. One was through the Puskas’ church, and the other, Puskas Children’s Fund, was set up by Police Benevolent Association Local 181.



Photo source: *The Courier-News*, March 4, 1982

The Puskas children went to live with an aunt after the loss of their parents. She had trouble handling all three, so the two older boys went into foster care, and the youngest, Brian, stayed with her.

By 1992, the brothers were reunited and living together somewhere in New Jersey.

Jeannette Puskas, Andrew's mother, suffered a massive heart attack while visiting Andrew and Patricia's graves. She died on June 4, 1982.

A year after the killings, the lot at 182 first street sat empty, except for a few trees, a for-sale sign, and a swing set that Andrew Puskas built for his children. The lot's asking price was \$19,000. Eventually, the lot sold, and a new home was built on the location.

The Middlesex Borough Council awarded officer Robert Schwarz an award for valor because he smothered the flames on Andrew Jr. and Scott Puskas.

On the first anniversary of the explosion, neighbors turned on their porch lights in memory of Andrew and Patricia.

In 2018, Middlesex County Prosecutor Andrew C. Carey said he was hopeful there are witnesses or some type of evidence, such as an item with DNA, for which testing has become more sophisticated, which will help solve the case (Carey 2018).

Today, the Puskas boys are grown men and have families of their own.

Andrew Junior, who now goes by Drew, married Sandy Nazarian in 1993, and they have three boys. Drew and one of his sons are firefighters, and the family lives in North Carolina.

Scott Puskas works for St. Joseph's Health in Paterson, New Jersey. He has a wife, Jennifer, and three children.

Brian Puskas graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in May 2000 and became an airline pilot. Today, he is the owner and founder of Stone Creations Northwest in Washington State, according to his personal Facebook page. He is married with three small children, a boy and a set of female twins born this year.

True Crime Diva's Thoughts

Whoever planted the bomb knew Andrew and Patricia Puskas. It was not a random act of violence because the bomb was addressed to Andrew.

So, it had to be either a coworker, church member, or friend. And that person did not care if he or she killed the entire family, obviously. It was just by sheer luck the two older boys were not killed. Had Andrew not sent them outside, they would have died, too.

But I have to wonder: why didn't Andrew and Patricia leave the package inside and go outside to wait for the police? More importantly, why did Patricia open the package?

I think it's because the couple did not take the package seriously, despite the contents within. Andrew clearly says on the call with Sgt. Benson that he thought it was a "poor joke."

I am confused a bit, though. The boys were outside when Patricia opened the package. How was one of them able to describe the contents of the package? Did he go back into the house after

Patricia hollered at Andrew?

The person who planted the bomb hated Andrew enough to kill him, which means the killer knew Andrew pretty well. I would love to see this case solved.

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