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The River Mild : No one disputes that Arizona's Quartzite Falls were deadly. But when Taz Stoner and his pals tamed the Salt River with explosives, they didn't just fool with Mother Nature--they broke federal law and ignited public passion

December 12, 1994 | PAUL DEAN

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PHOENIX — *The elemental simplicities of wilderness travel were thrills. They represented complete freedom to make mistakes. The wilderness gave those rewards and penalties, for wise and foolish acts against which civilization has built a thousand buffers.*

--Aldo Leopold, author and forester

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Taz Stoner fired the blast heard around the world of wilderness travel and whitewater rafting.

He blew the lower lip off remote Quartzite Falls on the majestic Salt River 100 miles northeast of here. It took Stoner, seven schemers and 145 pounds of explosives to reshape this rapid from an experts' deadly menace to a cascade for lesser river runners.

But when accused of the bombing, he wouldn't say why.

Stoner, a 34-year-old river guide, was tarred as the amoral commander of the Quartzite Eight, destroyers of a natural and signature resource. News stories from Pasadena to Paris described his wrecking crew as eco-terrorists, heretics and environmental rapists. A letter to Paddler magazine suggests Stoner's next river ride be face-down without a rubber boat.

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Stoner still spoke no explanation.

In October, a federal grand jury indicted William Stoner--"Taz" since high school for approaching football, sky-diving, rodeo, life and food with the fierce appetite of a Tasmanian devil--on charges of conspiracy and destruction of federal property. Along with Richard Scott, Stephen Cortright, William Kelley, James Lewis, and the brothers Christopher, Mark and Michael Meehl.

And the Quartzite Eight stayed silent.

Then came two months of hot pretrial rumors. The most popular accuses Stoner of blowing Quartzite Falls to reduce a rafting bottleneck and make his part-time job easier. Some are whispering that one or maybe all three companies licensed to run this 58-mile stretch of river, from U.S. 60 to Highway 288, paid him to tame the falls.

Or did the U.S. Forest Service, guardian of the river, turn a blind eye to Stoner's blasting because the deadly rapids represented a perennial federal liability?

Last week, preparing to plead guilty, Stoner finally spoke out.

"I did it to save lives . . . to make it safer for the public to pass through there," he said. He said he toyed with doing something for years. Then, two Californians drowned at Quartzite. "It made me want to take

the killer out of it."

The death trap—familiar to river runners and federal publications covering the Salt River Wilderness of Tonto National Forest—was created by a rose quartz ridge, 21 feet across, that partially barricaded the falls.

Off-season, at low water, with the river running at 400 cubic feet of water per second, the rock was visible and harmless. On season, when the snow-fed Salt River may thunder at 50,000 CFS until its canyon walls quiver, the ridge was submerged and built silent, invisible, hydraulic downforces.

This underwater disturbance elevated Quartzite Falls to a Class 6 ride—somewhere between vicious and inescapable. The type of hazard river-runners call a "keeper," it sucked logs, cows, even 16-foot boats to the bottom, holding anything down for maybe 30 seconds before spitting it out.

Only the stupid or exceptionally skilled ran Quartzite at full boil in a rubber boat. The majority carried their craft around the falls. Or "lined" them, tethering rafts to long ropes and leading them through the 100-foot long rapids like a hippo on a leash.

In May, 1993, Richard Panich, 44, of Manhattan Beach, and Jerry Buckhold, 43, of Chico, dared to run the falls. The keeper grabbed their boat. The veteran rafters drowned.

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Did you know this? Unbelievable. Nobody is reporting this yet. Why?

"I read about the drownings and wasn't surprised," Stoner recalls. He is a bachelor who speaks softly from a gentle face with the look of a loner. "Quartzite Falls is a hazard, has been for a number of years, I knew of its dangers. . . . Still, if I'd ever thought about (demolition) before, I wasn't serious. After the drownings, I was serious."

Stoner, a construction engineer on weekdays, a skier, diver, hiker, hunter and climber on weekends, says he faxed a copy of a news story about the drownings to a man he had taken down the river: Rich Scott, 39, an explosives and hazardous materials expert with a masters degree in engineering from Arizona State.

Scott recruited a crew from good buddies who also had run the river with Stoner. They are companions in campfire parties, hiking, fishing, families and picnics. They have small businesses and no criminal records. Most are married, some baby-sit each other's kids, almost all say they share Stoner's concern for public safety.

Except Cortright, 39, owner of a furniture-foam company and the wheel man who drove explosives and bombers to the site: "My motivation was that it was a weekend rouser with the boys."

Last summer, Scott used an \$800 cashier's check to buy commercial binary explosives—inert ammonium nitrate in four-pound pouches that comes alive when mixed with nitro methane. Exploded by detonator and primer cord, the mix is 30% more powerful than gelatin dynamite.

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