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## Mont. police search for anti-government fugitive

Former Montana militia leader David Burgert planned for a gunfight with Missoula County sheriff's deputies

By [Nicholas Geranios](#) and [Matthew Brown](#)  
Associated Press

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MISSOULA, Mont. — Fugitive and former Montana militia leader David Burgert is one of a new breed of anti-government activists who display particular hatred of law enforcement, police and militia experts say.

Burgert apparently carefully planned for a gunfight with Missoula County sheriff's deputies on Sunday, then escaped into the heavily forested mountains of western Montana. The 47-year-old parolee remained on the run Thursday.

Burgert, Sheriff Carl Ibsen said in a statement, "harbors great animosity for law enforcement and government in general."

Police believe Burgert is hiding somewhere in the mountains near the Montana-Idaho border, an area of towering peaks, low brush and thick pine forests. In recent decades, the remote region has proven fertile ground for extremist groups including the Militia of Montana, the neo-Nazi Aryan Nations and many others.

Burgert previously led an anti-government militia in northwestern Montana known as Project 7 that was broken up by authorities last decade. He spent eight years in federal prison on weapons charges before his release in March 2010.

A former Marine who has been diagnosed as mentally ill, Burgert is the latest in a growing number of anti-government activists who have engaged in shootouts with law officers around the country, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center, which studies extremist groups.

"Basically, law enforcement, especially the feds, are seen as agents of an evil conspiracy run by the government," said Mark Potok of the Montgomery, Ala.-based SPLC.

Such extremists are contemptuous of traffic laws and have engaged in shootouts with law officers who have pulled them over, Potok said. In a similar incident, two police officers in West Memphis, Ark., were shot to death by two men with anti-government ties in May 2010, Potok said.

Burgert has a long history of conflict with police, including Sunday's incident in which he led sheriff's deputies on a low-speed chase and then allegedly fired a handgun at them before disappearing into the woods.

Authorities believe Burgert planned the shootout, and is relying on previously stashed caches of food, weapons and even a vehicle to elude capture.

Deputies thought their manhunt was reaching a climax on Wednesday when they received a tip about a man living at a remote forest camp west of Lolo that was tied to Burgert. Undersheriff Mike Dominick said the man there was not Burgert and had no ties to him.

The Missoulian reported deputies have received and pursued numerous tips, including a man walking alone in the woods with a satellite phone and another man who resembled Burgert and was trying to enter Canada without a

passport. The U.S. Border Patrol determined it wasn't the fugitive.

"Somebody called saying they saw some guy in a 7-Eleven in Wisconsin who looked like Burgert," said Dominick. "Tips like that aren't going to do me any good here in Montana."

Dominick told The Associated Press that Burgert had been living for some time in a Jeep in the Lolo area, moving among different campsites.

He spent much of that time at a day-use area known as Fort Fizzle, a few miles west of Lolo on Highway 12. But no one was parked there \_ named for a planned battle that never occurred during the Army's pursuit of the Nez Perce tribe in 1877 \_ during a visit on Wednesday.

Authorities say Burgert may have left the area in a stashed vehicle, a tan Jeep Cherokee. Officers so far have recovered two other jeeps registered to Burgert and both had ammo in them.

Dominick also told KPAX-TV of Missoula that deputies reported hearing a gunshot shortly after Burgert ran from them Sunday. If they don't find him soon, Dominick said they plan to bring in a cadaver dog to search the area in case the fugitive took his own life.

The slow-speed chase began when deputies went to Fort Fizzle to check a report that one of Burgert's vehicles had been parked there for some time. Burgert pulled onto a logging road, stopped and shot at the deputies. They returned fire before Burgert grabbed gear from his Jeep and ran into the woods. No one was hurt.

Dominick said Burgert stole three rifles from a former employer in eastern Montana, two of which were recovered by law officers. Burgert is also believed to be carrying the handgun used Sunday, Dominick said.

Burgert was convicted in 2003 of illegally possessing a machine gun. Before his arrest in that case, Burgert eluded authorities by staging his death. He was caught about a month later after an armed standoff in the forest.

The similarities between that escape attempt and the current manhunt are striking: Nearly 10 years ago, authorities found caches of weapons, food and gear believed to be Burgert's stashed around the search area.

The Project 7 militia was accused of planning to assassinate local officials and a plot overthrow the federal government. The group was named for the number "7" on Flathead County license plates.

Burgert had been complying with probation terms, said Karen Redmond of the U.S. Courts Administrative Office. Those terms included participation in substance abuse and mental health programs.

Burgert was diagnosed with paranoid personality disorder before his sentencing in the militia case. Burgert disputed that diagnosis after his conviction.

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