

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Former Navy Recruiter Sentenced To 17 Years On Child Coercion And Enticement Charges

ASHEVILLE, N.C. – U.S. District Court Judge Max O. Cogburn, Jr. sentenced yesterday a Weaverville, N.C. man to 204 months in prison on child coercion and enticement charges, announced Jill Westmoreland Rose, U.S. Attorney for the Western District of North Carolina. Judge Cogburn also ordered Benjamin Ernest Johnson, 39, to serve a lifetime of supervised release and to register as a sex offender after he is released from prison. Johnson pleaded guilty in May 2016 to one count of Coercion and Enticement of a minor. John A. Strong, Special Agent in Charge of the FBI in North Carolina, and Sheriff Van Duncan of the Buncombe County Sheriff's Office join U.S. Attorney Rose in making today's announcement.

“Johnson was a wolf among sheep, a predator who took advantage of his access to high school students and used his position of trust to sexually exploit impressionable young victims. His conduct is not only a disgrace to all military personnel, it is also criminal. And for that, he will deservedly serve time in federal prison,” said U.S. Attorney Rose.

“Benjamin Johnson was trusted to advise young people about the benefits of a military career. Instead, he used that access to manipulate children for his own vile sexual gratification. The FBI has zero tolerance for those who prey on our children,” said Special Agent in Charge Strong.

“No form of sexual misconduct is ever acceptable anywhere in the Department of the Navy. Ensuring the safety of our Navy applicants and members of the communities we work in is our top priority.

Upon notice of the allegations of misconduct with a minor, the former service member was immediately removed from all recruiting duties and subsequently discharged from the Navy. We will continue to train our Navy recruiters on appropriate behavior when working with Navy applicants and we will continue to enforce high standards and professional conduct,” said

Commander Stan Dickerson, Commanding Officer Naval Recruiting District Raleigh.

According to filed court documents and yesterday’s sentencing hearing, in February 2014 Johnson was a United States Navy Petty Officer First Class on active duty stationed in Asheville. Johnson’s duties were to conduct recruiting of high school students in Western North Carolina. According to court records, sometime in the fall of 2013, Johnson was assigned as a recruiter at a high school in Buncombe County. Over the course of his official duties as a recruiter, Johnson met child victim one (CV1), a 15-year-old female high school student who was enrolled in the school’s Naval Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (NJROTC). Court records indicate that Johnson began to communicate with CV1 via instant messaging, and over the course of their exchanges Johnson solicited and received sexually explicit images of CV1. Johnson also sent the minor sexually explicit images of himself.

According to court records, Johnson also solicited sexually explicit photos from another child victim (CV2) Johnson met in 2011 when the victim was a freshman in high school. Johnson maintained a relationship with CV2 until March 2014. Court records indicate that Johnson met the victim when he was a recruiter at CV2’s high school, where the victim was a NJROTC student. According to court records,

CV2 and Johnson became friends on social media after the victim enrolled in a different high school in the area. Court records show that Johnson induced CV2 to send him multiple sexually explicit images of herself via instant messaging. Johnson also sent CV2 multiple sexually explicit images of himself. According to court records, CV2 indicated that she and Johnson had scheduled an upcoming trip to a military testing location and Johnson was going to use it as an opportunity to have physical contact with the victim. In announcing today's sentence Judge Cogburn said, "This is a serious crime with a serious punishment."

Johnson has been in custody since May 11, 2016. He will be transferred to the custody of the Federal Bureau of Prisons upon designation of a federal facility. All federal sentencings are served without the possibility of parole.

The FBI and the Buncombe County Sheriff's Office led the investigation and were assisted by the Asheville Police Department. In making today's announcement, U.S. Attorney Rose also thanked the Department of the Navy for their cooperation and assistance with the investigation.

Assistant United States Attorney David A. Thorneloe of the U.S. Attorney's Office in Asheville prosecuted the case.