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## **'Child' porn star backs Army major**

BY LIAM CLARKE

AN AMERICAN porn star is to give evidence on behalf of a British Army major who has been charged in Belfast with possession of child pornography.

The officer, who is serving in Northern Ireland, is accused of having a picture of the rape of an underage girl stored on his laptop computer.

Melissa Bertsch from Los Angeles, whose stage name is Melissa Ashley, has given statements to the officer's solicitor certifying that the image is of her and that she was over 20 years of age when it was taken.

Bertsch, whose film credits include *Babysitter Training* and *Extreme Schoolgirls*, said: "I am willing to travel to Belfast if needs be. I am always willing to help out a fan."

Bertsch is now 26 but still looks like a young girl, a fact her agent puts down to "good genetics". She made a career in the porn industry after her 20th birthday and frequently poses in school uniforms.

The image was discovered in a raid on the major's Northern Ireland home by military police last year. Three computers were seized but the only suspicious image located was of Bertsch.

If found guilty the major faces up to five years in jail under the terms of the Protection of Children Act 1978. He is charged with possessing a "level four" image, the second highest on the scale.

Lewis Cherry, his solicitor, is hopeful the case will be dropped once Bertsch's evidence about her age is put to the court. Cherry says his client was caught up in Operation Ore, a police operation against child pornography. It was launched in April 2002 after the US Postal Inspection Service handed over credit-card details of 6,500 British citizens who had paid for access to a web portal, Landslide, which gave them access to about 300 internet sites, some of which allegedly carried images of child abuse.

So far 3,800 people have been arrested and 102 children — some as young as two — rescued from paedophiles in cities, including Belfast. Pete Townshend, the former guitarist with the Who, was the most high-profile name to emerge on the Operation Ore list. Some 33 men have committed suicide rather than face the courts.

Cherry believes he has uncovered a flaw in police methodology. "Already her (Bertsch's) image has come up in another case where I

am representing an RAF officer," he said. "The site from which these images were downloaded does not purport to offer child pornography; it states that it is entirely legal.

"This raises the question whether, in other cases, people have been sent to jail and had their lives ruined for having pictures of this woman or another adult actress."

The American porn industry is tightly regulated and actors must prove their age to a custodian of record whose details are available on internet sites.

Cherry said: "I was able to track this woman down purely on the basis of following links given in an overprint on the image my client had on his computer. This was information that was available to the police."

Bertsch has already given proof of her age in five American prosecutions. "I once flew to Hawaii and testified in front of a jury and a judge," she said. "They dropped all the charges after I testified. In the other cases they dropped everything once I made a statement and provided proof of my ID."

John Carr, an internet safety adviser for the children's charity NCH, says there is an argument for creating a database of adult performers, but he believes it would be wrong to put the onus on police to prove the age of a person in a pornographic picture before bringing a prosecution.

"The chances of finding out the identity of children being abused in any of these videos is very low," he said. "Fewer than 500 children anywhere in the world have ever been identified from images recovered from the internet."

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