

Cover-up exposed in post-Katrina police killings

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A New Orleans police supervisor pled guilty February 24 in a federal court to charges of conspiracy to cover up the police shooting of six unarmed people a few days after Hurricane Katrina struck the city. Two of the victims, Ronald Madison, a 40-year-old mentally disabled man, and James Brissette, 19, were killed, while the other four were seriously wounded, one losing part of her arm.

Police lieutenant Michael Lohman, who just retired from the force at age 42, admitted taking the lead in efforts to manufacture evidence that the police shooting was legitimate. He described the events of that day in detail in sworn testimony before US District Judge Ivan Lemelle.

Lohman is now cooperating with federal authorities, who began an investigation into the shootings on the Danziger Bridge shortly after a local judge dismissed murder and attempted murder charges against seven policemen in 2008. He is expected to testify against the cops who actually fired the shots on September 4, 2005.

The retired police supervisor remains free on \$50,000 bond. Judge Lemelle set a May 26 sentencing date for Lohman, who faces up to five years in prison and three years of supervised release, as well as a \$250,000 fine.

Danziger Bridge crosses the Industrial Canal in eastern New Orleans, connecting the Gentilly neighborhood on the west and the New Orleans East neighborhood. It was one of the few ways of moving across the city in the flood conditions that followed Hurricane Katrina, which struck New Orleans on August 29, 2005.

Ronald Madison was shot to death near a motel on the west side of the span. He was crossing the bridge with his brother Lance, a FedEx worker, as they tried to reach the dentist's office of his brother, Romell.

The other five victims were shot while walking together on the eastern side of the bridge. Leonard Bartholomew III was shot in the head, his wife Susan Bartholomew lost part of her arm, their daughter Leisha and a nephew, Jose Holmes, were hit by multiple gunshots. Brissette, a cousin of the Bartholomews, was killed.

A total of seven policemen were involved in the shootings. Officer Robert Faulcon, who quit the NOPD soon afterwards, shot Ronald Madison. The other six, who fired on the Bartholomews, are Sgt. Kenneth Bowen, Sgt. Robert Gisevius Jr., Officer Anthony Villavaso II, Officer Mike Hunter Jr., Officer Robert Barrios and Officer Ignatius Hills. All six have been assigned to desk duties since the killings.

Lohman arrived at the bridge in response to the report of police opening fire, and immediately understood that it was a "bad shooting," he told the court last week. None of the victims had been armed, and no shots had been fired at the cops, so the evidence would not support a claim of self-defense. He therefore proceeded to manufacture evidence, while coaching the police on the scene so their statements would sustain the planned cover-up.

Lohman worked with two NOPD investigators, Sgt. Arthur Kaufman and Sgt. Gerard Dugue, to concoct a report justifying the shootings. He described how he frequently discussed with Kaufman how to make the report "more plausible."

At one point, he threw out the draft report the others had produced and wrote a 17-page substitute, in which he made changes such as increasing the number of policemen who had allegedly seen Ronald Madison throw a gun into the Industrial Canal—there was no such weapon—from one to four. The additional three policemen then had to be told what they had "seen" so

their statements would be in synch. Lohman's report also falsified the testimony of the Bartholomews, portraying them as admitting that some members of the family had fired on the police.

Lance Madison had been arrested at the scene and charged with attempted murder against the police and Kaufman logged into evidence a gun that was described as belonging to Madison, although it had been planted on him. In their discussions, Lohman testified, he asked Kaufman whether "the gun was 'clean,' meaning that it could not be traced back to another crime." This was necessary to conceal the fact that the gun had been in the possession of the police before it was planted at the shooting scene.

Lance Madison was held in prison for weeks on the bogus murder charges. He was taken before a grand jury, which refused to indict him. He obtained legal representation from longtime civil rights attorney Mary Howell, and the charges were eventually dropped. Both families, the Madisons and Bartholomews, filed federal civil rights lawsuits against the NOPD.

Under pressure from public outrage over the killings, Orleans Parish District Attorney Eddie Jordan brought charges against the seven cops in December 2006. A New Orleans grand jury indicted Bowen, Gisevius, Villavaso and Faulcon on charges of first-degree murder and attempted first-degree murder. Hunter and Barrios were charged with attempted first-degree murder, and Hills with attempted second-degree murder.

The seven cops were treated as heroes by the NOPD and the police union when first arraigned, and their case (the "Danziger 7") became a rallying point for right-wing political forces. District Judge Raymond Bigelow dismissed the charges on August 13, 2008, seizing on alleged misconduct by the prosecutor's office in what may have been a coordinated effort to "throw" the case.

Soon afterwards the families and local civil rights groups petitioned for federal intervention in the case, and the Civil Rights Division of the US Department of Justice agreed to begin the investigation that has now blown open the cover-up.

Lohman was an early target, and as late as May 27, 2009, in an interview with federal investigators, he continued to stonewall. But some time after that date, he began cooperating in the hope of a lighter sentence.

According to the current Orleans Parish district

attorney, Leon Cannizzaro, Lohman's admission of a police cover-up and his role in it will affect many other cases in which Lohman was a key witness, since defendants convicted on the basis of his testimony will now be able to file claims that his credibility is now impeached.

The exposure of the police cover-up in the Danziger Bridge shootings also adds to suspicions over a series of police killings and unexplained murders in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. These include:

- Matthew McDonald, shot to death by police on September 3, 2005. Police claimed he was reaching into a plastic bag carrying a handgun, despite orders to drop it. The autopsy of the victim has since "disappeared" from the coroner's office.
- Henry Glover, shot by unknown persons September 2, 2005, and brought by friends to a police checkpoint, at which the friends were arrested and a car with Glover in the back seat was driven away by police. The car was found days later, badly burned, with Glover's incinerated remains inside.
- Danny Brumfield Sr., shot to death by police after Hurricane Katrina, in front of the Morial Convention Center, after allegedly attacking police with a pair of scissors.

There is, in addition, the notorious police beating of Robert Davis, a 64-year-old retired teacher, in the French Quarter shortly after the hurricane. A videotape of the brutality was widely viewed at the time, but the policeman involved, Officer Robert Evangelist, has been reinstated and returned to work.



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