New Orleans police found guilty in post-Katrina killings

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On Friday, a jury found five current and former New Orleans police officers guilty of shooting six innocent residents and then covering it up in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The officers were convicted in federal court of 25 separate civil rights violations.

The victims were gunned down on September 4, 2005 as they crossed the Danziger Bridge from the still inundated New Orleans East Ward in search of missing family members, food, and dry ground less than a week after the storm struck. The high-rise Interstate 10 bridge was one of the few ways survivors from the low-lying neighborhoods could cross the Industrial Canal and reach supplies and medical care.

Testimony during the trial over the past month painted a picture of unprovoked and unrestrained carnage. As two families crossed the bridge, police pulled up in a commandeered rental truck and immediately opened fire.

Among the victims was James Brissette, a 17-year-old high school senior from the Ninth Ward who was traveling with the Bartholomew family in search of his missing mother. Four members of the Bartholomew family were gravely wounded. According to testimony presented at the trial, Brissette was riddled with bullets from head to toe before being killed by a shotgun blast to the back of the head. Susan Bartholomew had her arm blown off; her daughter's legs were torn apart. Jose Holmes was shot multiple times in the stomach and face.

Several officers then chased two brothers of another family across the bridge. Former officer Robert Faulcon shot Ronald Madison, a 40-year-old mentally disabled man, in the back as he ran away. Sergeant Kenneth Bowen stomped on him as he lay dying. Bowen was also convicted of leaning over a barricade to shoot at the Bartholomews where they had taken shelter.

Lance Madison and Susan Bartholomew's 14-year-old son were arrested and falsely accused of firing a gun at police. None of the victims were armed.

Immediately after the rampage, the police department began devising a cover-up, trumping up charges against Lance Madison, fabricating witness testimony, lying to federal investigators, and planting a weapon at the scene.

Victims testified that in the months after the incident, they remained hospitalized for their injuries. During this time, police made repeated visits to the hospitals and attempted to intimidate them into silence. Susan Bartholomew testified that after the shooting stopped, the police ordered the family not to look at their assailants. She told the court that she stole a glimpse anyway and recognized "NOPD" insignia on their shirts.

The jury convicted all five defendants—Bowen, Faulcon, Sergeant Robert Gisevius, Officer Anthony Villavaso, and retired Sergeant Arthur Kaufman—on all counts, but determined that the officers did not have the requisite intent to support a murder conviction. This decision bears on prison term length during the sentencing hearing, set for December 14.

Four of the officers face potential life sentences. According to federal Attorney Jim Letten, Faulcon faces a mandatory minimum sentence of 60 years;

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Bowen, Gisevius, and Villavaso face mandatory minimum terms of 35 tears. Kaufman faces a sentence of up to 120 years for his role in the cover-up. Two other officers have also pleaded guilty to participating in the cover-up, including Sergeant Gerard Dugue, whose trial begins September 26.

In statements following the verdict, James Brissette's mother Sherrel Johnson signaled her displeasure with the jury's failure to find the officers guilty of murder. "I want the word murder behind their name, attached to their name," she told the press. "I'm not satisfied with this, and I'm not going to be satisfied with this. I'm not." In her statement, she described her son as "the twinkle of my eye, the song in my heart," and recalled that he never got to finish school or even have a proper burial.

Lance Madison, who survived the attack, expressed some relief at the verdict. "I am thankful to have some closure after six long years of struggling for justice," he said.

"They thought they could do what they wanted to do and there wouldn't be any consequences," assistant US Attorney Theodore Carter said in his closing statement. "This led to their crime, it led to their brazenness. It never occurred to them they were shooting up two good families."

The brazenness with which the NOPD carried out this and other brutal crimes was closely related to the climate promoted by government officials from then-President Bush on down and encouraged by a hysterical media. In the days after Katrina, thousands of poor, mostly black residents were left to suffer without necessary food, water, or humanitarian aid. Desperate to reach higher ground and locate loved ones, survivors were vilified by the political establishment and media as "looters" and "thugs."

More than 65,000 military personnel, armed with combat weapons, were deployed in the city to suppress civil unrest and protect the property of the wealthy. Police, military forces, and other mercenary elements were given orders to shoot to kill by the Bush administration.

Termed the "Danziger Seven" prior to the federal prosecution, the officers had escaped conviction in the Orleans Parish court in 2008, when the judge dismissed all charges. Later that year, federal investigations into the Danziger Bridge shootings and eight other incidents prompted a reopening of the case, and the launching of a civil investigation into the New Orleans Police Department as a whole in May 2010.

The case epitomizes the lawlessness with which the New Orleans police operated both before and after Katrina. Two other cases have gone to trial in the past year, involving the deaths of Henry Glover and Raymond Robair. While both trials resulted in convictions, two officers accused of killing Glover and burning of his corpse were acquitted, and a third officer who was convicted had the verdict vacated.

In April, two officers were found guilty for the beating death of Robair in July 2005. At least five other civil rights investigations into police misconduct are currently pending, involving nearly two dozen current or former officers.

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