

Former Navy crewman executed in Georgia

Kate Randall
19 February 2016

Travis Hittson was executed Wednesday in Georgia for the 1992 killing of fellow sailor Conway Utterbeck, whose remains were found buried in two states. He was the second prisoner put to death in the state so far in 2016.

Hittson, 45, was declared dead at 8:14 p.m. by Warden Bruce Chatman after being injected with a single, lethal dose of the barbiturate pentobarbital at the state prison in Jackson, according to the Associated Press.

Pat Hittson, Hittson's mother, was among the witnesses to her son's execution. He made no final statement. The condemned inmate blinked repeatedly for several minutes after the warden left the execution chamber at 8:04 p.m., according to AP, and then appeared to take several deep breaths before becoming still about 4 minutes later.

Hittson's execution proceeded after a series of last-minute pleas for mercy were denied. His attorneys argued in court filings that he was physically mistreated and neglected as a child and constantly sought the approval of others.

They said that his mental state, along with alcoholism and relatively low intelligence, allowed his direct Navy supervisor, Edward Vollmer, to manipulate him into killing Utterbeck. Vollmer received a life sentence with the possibility of parole in exchange for testifying against Hittson.

The State Board of Pardons and Paroles denied Hittson's request for clemency on Tuesday. Also on Tuesday, a Butts County judge rejected Hittson's lawyers' arguments that his constitutional rights were violated during sentencing, when a judge allowed a state psychologist who had examined Hittson to recount damaging statements made by Hittson about Utterbeck.

On Wednesday, the state Supreme Court rejected an appeal of the lower court's ruling and denied a state of execution. The US Supreme Court also did not stay the

execution.

Hittson, a 21-year-old Navy crewman, was stationed in Pensacola, Florida, in April 1992 when he went with Utterbeck and Vollmer to Vollmer's parents' home in Georgia for the weekend.

Hittson told investigators that after a night of drinking, when he and Vollmer returned to the home Vollmer told him that Utterbeck planned to kill them and that they should "get" him first. Vollmer gave Hittson an aluminum baseball bat and directed him to hit Utterbeck several times in the head, which he did.

Prosecutors at Hittson's trial said Hittson then shot Utterbeck in the head. The two then dismembered his body and buried his body parts in both Houston County, Georgia, and in Pensacola.

Hittson's attorneys have argued in their client's defense that Vollmer took the lead in cutting up the victim's body and that due to Hittson's mental state he passively followed Vollmer's directions.

Hittson was convicted of malice murder, aggravated assault and possession of a firearm during the commission of a crime, receiving the death penalty for the malice murder conviction. Vollmer, who is serving a life sentence, has been denied parole twice. His next chance at parole is in 2024.

Wednesday's execution of Hittson follows the lethal injection two weeks ago of Brandon Astor Jones, who at 72 years old was Georgia's oldest death row inmate. According to a report from the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, it took more than an hour for prison authorities to prepare Jones for his lethal injection.

According to an investigation by BuzzFeed, based on public records and eyewitness accounts, Georgia prison authorities have struggled recently inserting the IV to administer the lethal drugs.

In preparation for Jones' execution, members of the IV team spent 24 minutes trying to insert an IV into Jones' left arm, and then 8 minutes on his right arm,

before returning again to the left arm.

When this didn't work, BuzzFeed reports, they called for the help of a doctor who was present to monitor the prisoner's vital signs during the execution. The doctor spent 13 minutes attempting to set an IV near Jones' groin in the femoral line. This location is the last resort, as it is significantly more painful. For some reason not indicated in prison records, in the end the femoral line was not used in Jones' execution.

It took Jackson prison authorities 54 minutes to set the IV lines into Brian Keith Terrell, who was executed December 7, 2015.

According to the Death Penalty Information Center (DPIC), Georgia had 80 inmates on death row as of October 1, 2015. Standard appeals for at least three of them have been exhausted although execution dates have yet to be scheduled.

Georgia has been responsible for 62 of the 1,429 executions carried out nationwide since the US Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact