

Three Tacoma, Washington officers charged in 2020 killing of Manuel Ellis

Trévon Austin
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Three Tacoma, Washington police officers were charged Thursday in the killing of Manuel Ellis, 33, a black man who died while repeatedly telling officers “I can’t breathe” as he was being restrained last year. During Ellis’ arrest, officers punched him, squeezed his neck, pressed on his back and placed a spit hood over his head, prosecutors said.

The bloody assault came just three weeks before the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota sparked mass protests across the US and internationally demanding an end to police violence.

Officers Christopher Burbank, 35, and Matthew Collins, 38, have been charged with second-degree murder and Timothy Rankine, 32, was charged with first-degree manslaughter, Washington State’s attorney general Bob Ferguson announced Thursday.

According to court documents, Ellis was walking home March 3, 2020 after purchasing a snack at a 7-Eleven late at night when he saw Burbank and Collins sitting in their police car. Witnesses said Ellis stopped and spoke to the officers in a manner described as peaceful and respectful. Ellis then began walking away.

According to witnesses, Burbank swung open the passenger door, hitting Ellis from behind and knocking him onto his knees. Prosecutors said that several officers on the scene recalled hearing Burbank and Collins claim they had seen Ellis trying to get into a car and then hit their police car. This has been contradicted by three witnesses, none of whom saw Ellis hit the car or officers at any point.

Prosecutors said a combination of bystander videos, surveillance footage and dispatch radio traffic showed what happened next.

Burbank wrapped his arms around Ellis, lifted him into the air and drove him down onto the pavement,

hitting him with one of his fists. Collins, a 215-pound SWAT team member and Army veteran trained in martial arts, then moved toward Ellis and brought his weight down on him. He also began hitting Ellis, punching him four times as he screamed.

“Hey! Stop!” one bystander is heard screaming. “Oh my God, stop hitting him! Stop hitting him! Just arrest him.”

Collins then wrapped his arm around Ellis’ neck and applied what prosecutors called a “lateral vascular neck restraint.” Three witnesses stated Ellis was not fighting back and they never saw him hit the officers. While Collins was choking Ellis, Burbank fired a taser at Ellis and jolted him for five seconds.

Ellis’ head fell towards the ground after Collins released his grip on his neck. Collins then pushed his arm onto the back of Ellis’s head or neck, pressing his face into the pavement, prosecutors said.

The officers then held his arms behind his back and pressed down on his body. Burbank jolted Ellis again with the Taser causing him to thrash and yell out in pain. The officers responded by holding Ellis’ arms behind his back and pressing him in the ground before jolting him again with the Taser.

In a video captured by a doorbell camera on a house across the street, Ellis can be heard saying “can’t breathe, sir. Can’t breathe!” Less than 15 seconds later, he can again be heard pleading with the officers, again mentioning that he could not breathe.

Rankine arrived with another group of officers who responded as backup. Court documents stated Rankine also started pressing onto Ellis’ back in a way that looked as if he were in a “seated position.”

Ellis again told officers he could not breathe. According to prosecutors, Rankine later recalled Ellis say “in a very calm, normal voice” that he could not

breathe and responding that “if you’re talking to me, you can breathe just fine.”

Ellis was hogtied on his stomach, with Rankine on top of him, and another officer put a spit hood on his head. Prosecutors explained the brand of spit hood officers used included a warning that it should not be used on anyone “having difficulty breathing.”

Police kept Ellis under Rankine, hogtied and face down, for six to nine minutes until the Fire Department arrived. He was pronounced dead at the scene. Pierce County medical examiner Dr. Thomas Clark determined Ellis’ cause of death was “hypoxia due to physical restraint.”

The Tacoma Police Union defended the officers, saying, “We are disappointed that facts were ignored in favor of what appears to be a politically motivated witch hunt.”

“We look forward to trial,” the union said. “An unbiased jury will find that the officers broke no laws and, in fact, acted in accordance with the law, their training, and Tacoma Police Department policies. An unbiased jury will not allow these fine public servants to be sacrificed at the altar of public sentiment.”

Ellis, the father of an 11-year-old son and an 18-month-old daughter, was known as a talented musician at his church and had played drums with the worship band earlier on the night he was killed.



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