

Body camera footage from police killing of environmental activist shows Atlanta police speculating trooper was shot by fellow cop

Jacob Crosse
9 February 2023

Three weeks after 26-year-old Venezuelan immigrant, Florida State graduate and environmental activist Manuel “Tortuguita” Esteban Paez Terán was “riddled with bullets” by Georgia police officers while protesting the creation of a police training center, the Atlanta Police Department released roughly two hours of body camera footage from the January 18 “clearing operation,” conducted in an Atlanta-area forest.

The released footage shows dozens of police conducting a military-style sweep of the forest, where dozens of environmentalists, anarchists and anti-police protesters had been camped out for over a year protesting the construction of the Atlanta Police Foundation’s (APF) “Public Safety Training Center.” The 85-acre, \$90 million police urban warfare training complex, dubbed Cop City by protesters, will include gun and explosive ranges and a vehicle course.

The project is opposed by a majority of Atlanta residents, especially among the working class and youth. The project has the backing of wealthy corporations and both big business parties, including Democratic Mayor Andre Dickens, who hailed the police complex as a “vital ... community asset” in a press conference defending the project last week.

In the tape released Wednesday night, dozens of police are observed wearing body armor, combat boots and armed to the teeth with military grade weaponry. At various points in the footage, drones are heard buzzing overhead, ATVs roaring in the background, and police repeatedly cursing and threatening tents they think are occupied with protesters.

While none of the footage shows the actual shooting, audio from the videos confirm that 26-year-old Tortuguita was killed in a hail of police gunfire that lasted for over 10 seconds.

Tortuguita is one of at least 133 people killed so far this year by police in the United States, according to a tracker maintained by *MappingPoliceViolence.us*. Police have maintained the deadly record pace they set last year, when at least 1,176 people were killed, an average of just over three

people a day.

In its original January 18 press release, the Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI) claimed that police gave “verbal commands” to a “man inside a tent” and that “the man did not comply and shot a Georgia State Patrol Trooper.”

Five days later the GBI wrote in another statement that the shooting was not “captured” on camera, only its “aftermath.” All of the videos uploaded Wednesday night by the Atlanta Police Department show body cameras recording prior to the shooting.

Two of the videos do not have audio before the gunshots ring out. In the two videos with audio, it is clear that at least four shots are fired at roughly 09:01:21 followed by a barrage of gunfire that lasts for over 10 seconds. Before the four initial shots, there is no audible warning or commands heard from police on any of the footage provided.

In the most revealing video, following the sustained gunfire from the Georgia State Troopers SWAT, one of the Atlanta cops asks, “Is this target practice?” Roughly 30 seconds after the gunfire ceases, another cop is heard ordering fellow police to “put your body cameras on.” After several body cameras beep, cops begin yelling, “Jaguar” and “Blue.” Over the radio, a police dispatcher confirms a Georgia state trooper was shot but that they were “ACB,” that is, “Alive, Conscious and Breathing.”

At 9:04:00, a little less than three minutes after the shooting, a police officer reports that he heard “fireworks” and that a “male individual” was “screaming.” An incredulous Atlanta cop responds, telling another cop, “Nah, that sounded like suppressed gunfire.”

The camera records police communicating over the radio to dispatchers on the shooting. At roughly 9:04:25, an Atlanta cop

speculates that the shooting was a “friendly fire” incident saying, “Man ... you f*cked your own officer up.”

The same camera shows that roughly 15 minutes later, the Atlanta cops converge with other cops, who were still unclear as to what had actually transpired. “Did they shoot their own man?” one cop asks.

“We don’t know who he got shot by, if it was by a deputy,” another one responds.

“The first ones they say were suppressed,” another cop says.

On Thursday morning, lawyers for the family of Tortuguita released a statement which said that the body camera videos “raise more questions than they answer, but confirm the family’s worst fears that Manuel was massacred in a hail of gunfire.”

It continues: “The videos also show the clearing of the forest was a paramilitary operation that set the stage for the excessive use of force.

“The video also calls into question previous reports regarding the events leading to the police shooting of Manuel Paez Terán,” the statement continued. “The GBI’s refusal to provide the family access to the information in its possession continues to sow mistrust in it, particularly in light of the selective—and so far unsubstantiated—narrative it has put forth.”

The GBI also released a statement on Thursday admitting that the tape shows that “at least one statement exists where an officer speculates that the Trooper was shot by another officer in crossfire.”

The GBI said however that “[s]peculation is not evidence. Our investigation does not support that statement.” The agency asked for “patience” and said that once the “investigation is complete, all videos will be provided.” The Atlanta Police Department likewise released a statement saying that they had found “no evidence to suggest these officers had any information on the events surrounding the shooting prior to their comments.”

No doubt there are dozens, if not hundreds of hours of police footage left to be released that will reveal more context behind the killing of Tortuguita. However, no tapes have been released yet showing Tortuguita armed with a pistol or shooting at police.

However, the tapes that have been released have confirmed the sadistic and violent character of the police as the front-line soldiers of capitalism.

Most of the footage released on Wednesday showed the Atlanta police spent a large amount of their time and energy destroying the tents of activists they found in the forest and needlessly endangering themselves and others. In one of the tapes, a police officer is observed stabbing and ripping apart a tent with a pocket knife for nearly seven minutes. That same cop later fires his pistol above a tent that he does not know is empty.

After police killed Tortuguita, roughly a dozen Atlanta police officers cleared out a different green tent they found. In the footage police are heard threatening any potential occupants with their K-9 units.

“The dog will bite you,” one cop is heard yelling. “F*ck around, and you’re gonna find out,” another cop yells.

The thuggish and violent actions of the Atlanta police, many of them African American, refute claims from capitalist politicians and pseudo-left elements that diversifying police forces would eliminate “bad apples” and lead to less police killings. As inequality continues to widen, the police, an instrument of class rule, will continue to kill, especially poor and working class people, regardless of their skin color.

The class character of police violence was further confirmed in the vicious police beating of African American Fed Ex worker Tyre Nichols last month.

On Tuesday major news outlets, including the *New York Times*, obtained documents from the Memphis Police Department confirming that after arresting Nichols and propping his battered body against the police cruiser, Demetrius Haley, one of the five cops charged with second-degree murder in his death, took photos of the dying man and shared it with “at least five people.”

This included two police officers, a civilian employee of the department and a “female acquaintance.” In the documents, police supervisors wrote that the sending of pictures was part of a pattern of abusive and “blatantly unprofessional” behavior by several Memphis police officers.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact