

Officers hurt in Troy shooting on mend; dead man's friends have questions

One officer shot in shoulder, another shot in legs

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1 of 26 Troy Police investigate shooting at 112th Street on Sunday, August 23, 2015 in Troy, N.Y.



3of26Scenes from the shooting investigation on Sunday, August 23, 2015 in Troy, N.Y

Troy

Two city police officers wounded in a Saturday night gunbattle in Lansingburgh that left a carjacking suspect dead are expected to recover, authorities said Sunday as competing depictions emerged of the man who allegedly opened fire on police.

The officers — Joshua Comitale, shot in both lower legs, and Chad Klein, who was hit in the back of the shoulder — were both recuperating under guard at Albany Medical Center Hospital on Sunday, police Chief John Tedesco said.

They became the first Troy officers shot in the line of duty in at least four decades, Tedesco said — a shocking end to what had already been a bloody week elsewhere in Troy.

Comitale, an evidence technician and member of the SWAT team who joined the force seven years ago, underwent two surgeries Sunday and was in stable condition, police spokesman Capt. Daniel DeWolf said. Klein, a father and nine-year veteran of the force who served in the Gulf War, was also in stable condition and under observation as doctors assess whether he needs surgery, DeWolf said.

Both men were wearing armored vests, but Tedesco declined to say whether their vests prevented more serious injuries.

The man who police say opened fire on them, 39-year-old Thaddeus Faison of Albany, was shot repeatedly near the intersection of 112th Street and Fifth Avenue by at least one of the officers and was later pronounced dead at St. Mary's Hospital, police said.

Tedesco said Faison continued to struggle after being struck by multiple rounds from .45-caliber service weapons and officers then shocked him with a Taser.

Faison — who authorities said had a lengthy criminal record — was a suspect in a reported carjacking attempt at 114th Street and Second Avenue shortly before the shootout, police said.

"This suspect is not a kid," Tedesco said. "He has a very violent criminal past."

Faison served two stretches in state prison between 1999 and 2010 for weapons possession and drug sales and was returned twice for parole violations, according to the state Department of Corrections and Community Supervision. He was not on parole Saturday because he served the maximum five-year sentence before he was released in 2010, DOCS said. Deputy Police Chief Richard McAvoy said he had eight felony arrests — four of them for alleged violent crimes.

Police said Faison had also been involved in a domestic dispute in recent weeks but said he was not arrested because the incident did not rise to the level of a crime.

Friends, however, grappled Sunday to reconcile that image with the man, known to them as "T.O.", who they described as a dedicated father who less than two hours earlier had been at the supermarket buying formula for his 8-month-old twins.

"His kids did not want or need for nothing," said Billie Young, a friend of Faison's girlfriend. Faison's girlfriend lives in Troy and is the mother of at least three of Faison's children. "Nobody's perfect. But they're making it out to be like he's this villain — and he's not."

The chaotic series of events unfolded a block from 112th Street Park around 10:45 p.m. and began with an unusual police call. Comitale and Klein were responding to a report of an attempted gunpoint carjacking, police said. A random carjacking would be an unusual crime in Troy, Tedesco acknowledged. In this case, the call came from a friend of the alleged victim — not the victim himself.

Tedesco gave the following account of what happened next:

Comitale, the nearest officer to the scene, spotted Faison in the area and concluded he fit the description of the attempted carjacker. Comitale radioed for backup and eventually left his patrol car and began following Faison on foot. Faison began to run and Comitale gave chase.

At about that time, Klein turned onto 112th Street from Fifth Avenue and was almost immediately shot "at point-blank range" through the window of his patrol car.

"He pulled up to the scene to cut the suspect off where he had information he was located and this guy opened up on him," Tedesco said.

Klein was able to turn his car around, jump out and take cover. At that point, Faison opened fire on Comitale, who returned fire.

Tedesco would not comment whether Klein returned fire but estimated that as many as 20 shots were exchanged between the suspect and police, many of them peppering buildings on 112th Street.

The aftermath of the shootout left the neighborhood draped with yellow police tape for blocks in each direction Sunday as evidence technicians tried to make sense of the sprawling crime scene.

"It was a reckless environment where anyone could have been killed," Tedesco said.

Audio of police scanner chatter at the time of the shooting, which was being shared on Facebook on Sunday, depicts a frenetic, fast-unfolding scene.

Both officers reported that they had been shot. Comitale said the suspect was down but still moving. And Comitale had to give emergency responders directions about where he was taking cover between cars in the parking lot at Jimmy's Pizzeria.

McAvoy said the gunfight was captured on video by city surveillance cameras at the intersections.

Police could not immediately answer questions about the handgun they said they found in Faison's possession or how many shots he's believed to have fired.

Tedesco said authorities suspect Faison may have been under the influence of a drug, given the fight he put up even after being shot. But the chief said that could only be confirmed by toxicology tests that can take weeks.

"I do want to say without hesitation that at this juncture in the investigation we are supporting our officers 100 percent," Tedesco said, describing the shooting as "self-defense."

"There is nothing that leads us to believe that they acted outside of policy or beyond the scope of the law."

Rensselaer County District Attorney Joel Ablove seconded that sentiment, saying his office would review the police department's findings but that the evidence so far suggests the officers "acted bravely and heroically and incredibly professionally."

Ablove said the shooting does not fall under a July executive order from Gov. Andrew Cuomo tasking Attorney General Eric Schneiderman with reviewing fatal encounters between citizens and police because that order only applies to the deaths of unarmed civilians.

"Every indication obviously here is that this individual was armed," Ablove said.

But those who knew Faison could only shake their heads at the police account. After walking to a nearby Hannaford to buy formula for his children around 9:15 p.m., Faison returned home to his girlfriend's place and began to eat dinner before he was interrupted by a phone call, Young said.

"It was one of his friends that said he needed him" in the area of 114th Street and Third Avenue, said Young, who knew Faison for about five years. "Like 15 minutes later, he's dead."

Young said Faison's girlfriend was struggling with what to tell their 2-year-old child.

"She was at my house at 7:30 this morning," Young said. "She's devastated."

She added: "I think this was a case of mistaken identity. I really do."

Young said he also had children in Albany.

"He takes care of his kids," said Sharonda Howard, who is also close to Faison's girlfriend. "He was definitely a family man."

The shootout capped an already violent week elsewhere in the city that saw the slaying of a 19-year-old and wounding of a 14-year-old at Hutton Street and Old Sixth Avenue, just feet from where another teen was killed in May. Among the three charged in connection with this week's shooting was a 16-year-old.

Paul Gray, who lives diagonally across the 112th Street Park from the Saturday night shootout, suggested a link between Saturday's violence and increasing drug activity in recent years, which he said is encroaching on the generally quiet neighborhood.

"The traffic over the past three years has become super, super heavy," said Gray, 54, who said he confronts suspected drug dealers rather than calling the cops but won't let his 8-year-old play in the park. "Cars pull up, you see the hand go in the window."

Citing this month's arrest of 20 alleged members and associates of the Young Gunnerz drug gang, alleged to have held sway in the area of Old Sixth Avenue, Gray said law enforcement at times seems so focused on the big busts that the day-to-day crimes that force people like him to fight for their own blocks go unchecked. "I'm not interested in the kingpin. What I'm interested in is it's not going to happen in this neighborhood," Gray said. "This is my house. My family lives here. We own this neighborhood."

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