

Trial Ends in Algiers Motel Case

Chris Singer

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Suspended Detroit Patrolman Ronald August took the witness stand and told the jury at his trial that he killed 19-year old Aubrey Pollard in self-defense.

August, who is white, admitted killing the black youth with a single blast from a shotgun on July 26, 1967 in the Algiers Motel.

Under examination by his Detroit Police Officers Association (DPOA) supplied defense attorney, Norman Lippitt, August carefully told his version of the killing that occurred during the height of the rebellion that began on July 23.

Pollard was one of three black youths shot to death in the Manor House annex of the motel on Virginia Park near Woodward, a short distance from 12th and Clairmount, where the rebellion began.

Fred Temple, 18, and Carl Cooper, 17, were also found dead in the motel hours after Detroit Police, National Guardsmen and Michigan State Police ransacked the motel and beat occupants, allegedly "searching for snipers."

August is on trial in Marion, Michigan, charged with first-degree murder.

August told how he had taken Pollard into room A-3 of the motel annex. "I told him don't touch the gun," August said referring to the shotgun he kept trained on Pollard.

"He grabbed and pulled the muzzle of the gun and I fell back on the bed. Then I pulled the trigger. But the safety was on. Then he came for me again. And the gun fired," August claimed.

"Did you pull the trigger?" asked Lippitt.

"I must have," August said, "the gun fired."

"I thought he was going to take the gun away from me," the 30-year old, quietly serious August said, "He scared me."

August said he encountered Pollard when the youth was lined up, with other motel guests, against a lobby wall. Other witnesses had told of being methodically beaten while forced to stand in the lineup.

Another suspended Detroit Patrolman, David Senak, was talking to Pollard, August said. Senak, August and a third officer, Robert Paille, face federal charges of conspiring to violate the civil-rights of the dead men under an 1866 Civil Rights Act.

"David Senak said: 'This man wants to see an officer. Do you want to shoot one?' I never answered him," August said.

Earlier, prosecution witnesses told how it was August who broke the butt of a rifle over Pollard's head while beating him, and had challenged Pollard to pick up a knife August was said to have thrown on the floor.

He said he took Pollard by the arm into the room and closed the door. "You're not going to shoot me are you man?" August quoted Pollard as asking.

"I told him 'Mr. Pollard, I have no intention of shooting you.'" August claimed he said, "I never shot anyone in my life."

It was then that the struggle for the gun took place, according to August.

A National Guard Warrant Officer had testified for the prosecution that he heard no sounds of a struggle before he heard the sound of the fatal gunshot.

August testified that he intended to file a report on the killing on the night it happened.

“Somebody, I think it was Paille or Senak said: ‘Wait ‘til tomorrow when you feel better,’ and I said all right and went home,” August told the jury.

He claimed he reported to work later that day, intending to make a report on the shooting. But, he discovered that reporters were already inquiring about the three deaths, that first came to the attention of police when a black citizen called the Wayne County Morgue to pick up the bodies.

“I was afraid if I were down there that afternoon I would be blamed for all three (killings). Why weren’t there reports from the other officers who shot people? I was scared,” August said.

The next day, August said he watched while Senak gunned down another man involved in a family argument. The death was ruled as not “riot-connected.” This had been the third killing for Senak the week of the rebellion. On Monday July 24, Senak fired four shotgun blasts into Joseph Chandler. He made no report on the killing.

By that time, (three days after the Algiers slayings) the black community was pressing for arrests in the incident. The Detroit Free Press had carried the story of their private probe of the deaths on their front page.

August, Paille and Senak, were summoned, August told the jury, to police headquarters. August then decided to report Pollard’s death, he claimed.

He told the jury the three officers discussed what they would put in the report after they admitted having been in the motel.

“We decided we should put in the report about our being at the motel but not involved ourselves in any shooting,” he admitted. August said Senak typed the report and that he did not read it before signing it.

Two days later, August testified, they were told to report to the Homicide Bureau. August said they made individual written reports, and he “didn’t tell the truth at that time.” He reported shooting no one.

He asked for that first statement to be returned to him, and then changed his story and told of the “self-defense” action.

Oakland County Circuit Court Judge William Beer had earlier allowed August’s contradictory statements to be admitted in evidence.

Under cross-examination by Assistant Wayne County Prosecutor Avery Weiswasser, August confessed that: “I waited a week before I told the truth.”

Weiswasser demanded to know why he didn’t tell the truth.

“Well, it’s not every day that I go down and tell them I shot someone,” August replied.

August said the shooting happened too quickly for him to request aid from other officers, and that he can’t remember why he closed the door to the room.

August admitted watching the motel’s occupants being beaten by police.

“Why didn’t you stop them?” Weiswasser shouted, “You were a police officer. Why didn’t you stop them?”

“It wasn’t my place to stop it,” August said.

August admitted to the jury that he had been trained in hand-to-hand combat, and that he knew how to use the butt of a shotgun to ward off attacks.

He further admitted that the police “search for snipers” yielded no weapons, and that no one had physically resisted arrest.

Weiswasser explained his courtroom tactics later by saying he had to “shake him from that role he was taking.” Defense attorneys, Weiswasser said, have had a long time to “coach him through his role.”

After testifying, August had dinner with Carl Parsell, head of the DPOA, and a group of Detroit police who journeyed to Mason to hear August tell his story.

The trial was moved to Mason, county seat of Ingham County, when Beer, who entered the case as a visiting judge to Detroit’s Recorder’s Court, granted a change of venue motion. Publicity precluded a fair trial in Wayne County, defense had argued.

The case was expected to go to the all-white jury of 13 women and one man; the week of June 9th.

Lippitt had asked Beer for either a directed verdict or acquittal or a reduction in the charge to manslaughter. Beer said he would rule on the motion before giving the case to the jury. Twelve jurors were chosen by lottery to judge the case.

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