

# Fatal South Whitehall shooting brings police officer's military background to the forefront

Darragh, Tim . The Morning Call (Online) , Allentown: Tribune Interactive, LLC. Aug 11, 2018.

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## FULL TEXT

As prosecutors and defense lawyers prepare for the case against the South Whitehall Township police officer who fatally shot an unarmed man 15 days ago, one aspect of the officer's life —his military career —may take a central role in explaining the split-second calculus he used in deciding to open fire.

No one but the officer, Jonathan Roselle, can say what was going through his mind at the time he shot Joseph Santos, 44, of Hasbrouck Heights, N.J., July 28.

But experts who evaluate police and military personnel say it's possible his police officer training to protect and defend life was overtaken in the heat of the moment by the more intensive combat training he received as a soldier.

"Military training is an incredibly emotive, gut-level experience," said Peter Kraska, an Eastern Kentucky University professor who has written on police and military training. "It's meant to deprogram someone's natural hesitancy to take a life and get them in a mindset —cognitively and emotionally —where they can do that without a second thought. And going through a police academy is not going to rout that out."

The speculation by Kraska and others was not meant to criticize soldiers, police or their training. Indeed, military training, with its leadership skills and discipline, is desirable in police work, Kraska said.

"I know from my own experience that ex-soldiers make excellent police officers," he said.

But it also is true that police have become "more military-like," Kraska said, citing the "extreme levels of fear" police SWAT teams can incite in the public.

Lehigh County District Attorney Jim Martin last week charged Roselle, 33, with voluntary manslaughter in the shooting death of Santos on Hamilton Boulevard, across from Dorney Park. Santos was seen jumping onto moving cars along Hamilton Boulevard, and when Roselle responded and ordered him to get on the ground, Santos refused and continued walking toward the officer. Roselle fired five times, killing Santos.

Roselle's lawyer, Gavin Holihan, said he will explore the role his client's military background may have played in the shooting. Roselle served in Afghanistan in the infantry, he said.

He declined to discuss Roselle's training as a soldier or police officer, but said Roselle's decision to shoot was a "judgment call" based on a fear of imminent death or serious bodily injury. Holihan said Roselle believes the fatal shooting was legally justified.

Philip Stinson, a Bowling Green State University criminologist who has been tracking police shootings since 2005, said he too wonders which training Roselle relied on when he drew his gun on Santos. Stinson said he has thought for years about whether similarly trained officers can "undo those experiences and training that they had with the military."

Videos taken by bystanders of Santos' walking away from Roselle's police cruiser, turning around and walking back while ignoring commands to stop, led Stinson to recall other scenes of police officers' seeming to fire quickly. "I'm looking at patterns over time," Stinson said. "We see it time and again in some of these videos. It's hard to explain their decision-making processes."

However, putting the action in a different setting makes Roselle's decision-making understandable, he said.

"If it were a military situation, the shooting makes sense," Stinson said

A U.S. Department of Defense spokesman said the department does not discuss the rules of engagement for soldiers in Afghanistan, which would define when a soldier's use of force would be warranted.

Allentown police declined to be interviewed about training at the police academy, which Roselle completed in December, according to Martin.

Pennsylvania officials said the most recent police academy curriculum requires 23 weeks of training, of which 26 hours are devoted to behavior management and crisis intervention, which includes recognizing people with special needs and responding to people with mental illness. Lehigh County 911 dispatches just before the shooting recorded Roselle discussing a man, Santos, with possible "mental issues."

South Whitehall police Chief Glen A. Dorney also declined to comment, citing the investigation and the potential for civil litigation.

Researchers have spent little time assessing the impact of military service on police forces, according to a 2016 study by The Marshall Project, a journalism nonprofit focusing on criminal justice. That's even though 1 in every 5 police officers is a veteran, it said.

A study by the Pew Research Center last year of nearly 8,000 police officers found that white, male officers working in large cities —and having military experience —were the characteristics defining those most likely to have fired their service weapon on the job. Only 27 percent of officers ever fire their gun while on the job, it said.

A 2013 study in the International Journal of Emergency Mental Health found that police officers without a military background experienced significantly more physically and psychologically threatening job-related events than veterans. The findings, it said, "suggest that those officers with prior military experience may be better prepared for the stress of police work."

However, it also found that police without military service used effective stress-reducing practices more often than police officers with a military background.

Psychologists who work with police and military personnel said the situation Roselle faced could provoke different responses.

Eugene O'Donnell, a former officer with the New York Police Department who teaches at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, said police know a situation can deteriorate immediately, even with an unarmed man. He noted two cases in the last month —in Weymouth, Mass., and Fort Myers, Fla. —when an unarmed man gained control of a police gun and fatally shot an officer.

Besides military experience, O'Donnell said, Roselle's lack of police experience and the short time he spent working by himself are issues to consider. In announcing the charges, Martin also mentioned that Roselle was "relatively inexperienced."

"At the end of the day, you are talking about a human ...who has at least two sets of significant life experiences," O'Donnell said, referring to Roselle's military and police work. "Two very different enterprises."

Matt Guller of the Institute for Forensic Psychology in Oakland, N.J., said a military background is "a double-edged sword" for police officers. Their training is superior, but it may not be appropriate at times for police decision-making, he said.

Some military veterans also return home with post-traumatic stress disorder, which can be triggered by police work, Guller said. There has been no suggestion that Roselle experienced PTSD.

Hiring practices often favor veterans, whose service has long been valued by public and private employers. Civil service rules in many jurisdictions give preference to veterans, and the Trump administration last year boosted federal efforts to help veterans make the transition to law enforcement with the signing of the American Law Enforcement Heroes Act.

For Roselle's court case, it's a long way from the filing of charges to a conviction, Stinson said. Stinson keeps a database of police shootings that shows officers have been convicted of unjustified shootings 32 times since 2005 —or less than three times a year on average —although police fatally shoot roughly 1,000 people a year.

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## Two Sunday events

Supporters of South Whitehall police officer Jonathan Roselle will meet for a rally at 2 p.m. by the Comfort Inn Suites on Hamilton Boulevard, near the shooting site.

At the same hour, community groups will hold an interfaith memorial service for Joseph Santos at Resurrected Life Church, 144 N. Ninth St., Allentown.

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Credit: Tim Darragh

## DETAILS

<b>Subject:</b>	Military training; Decision making; Shootings; Manslaughter; Military personnel
<b>Location:</b>	Eastern Kentucky United States--US New York Afghanistan Pennsylvania
<b>People:</b>	Martin, Jim
<b>Company / organization:</b>	Name: Twitter Inc; NAICS: 519130; Name: Bowling Green State University; NAICS: 611310; Name: Pew Research Center for the People & the Press; NAICS: 541720; Name: Department of Defense; NAICS: 928110; Name: Marshall Project; NAICS: 519130; Name: John Jay College of Criminal Justice; NAICS: 611310; Name: Eastern Kentucky University; NAICS: 611310
<b>Publication title:</b>	The Morning Call (Online); Allentown
<b>Publication year:</b>	2018
<b>Publication date:</b>	Aug 11, 2018
<b>Section:</b>	News - Local
<b>Publisher:</b>	Tribune Interactive, LLC
<b>Place of publication:</b>	Allentown
<b>Country of publication:</b>	United States, Allentown
<b>Publication subject:</b>	General Interest Periodicals--United States
<b>Source type:</b>	Blogs, Podcasts, & Websites
<b>Language of publication:</b>	English
<b>Document type:</b>	News
<b>ProQuest document ID:</b>	2087102729
<b>Document URL:</b>	<a href="https://search.proquest.com/docview/2087102729?accountid=14026">https://search.proquest.com/docview/2087102729?accountid=14026</a>

**Copyright:** Copyright Tribune Interactive, LLC Aug 11, 2018

**Last updated:** 2018-08-12

**Database:** Global Newsstream

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