

# 'They shot the wrong man!': Police said they killed a mall shooter — then said they made a mistake

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## FULL TEXT

After dozens of people fled a Thanksgiving evening shooting inside an Alabama mall —stampeding through the food court and hiding inside stores —one woman told reporters that she said a prayer as she ran: "Give the police wisdom and accuracy of shots."

At first, it seemed the prayer was answered. Police in Hoover soon announced they had secured the Riverchase Galleria and killed the gunman, whom they named as 21-year-old Emantic Fitzgerald Bradford Jr.

Speaking to reporters who were outside the mall, police said Bradford shot a teenager during a fight near the food court, wounded a 12-year-old girl with a stray bullet and brandished his pistol at the uniformed officer who killed him. "Thank God we had our officers very close," Police Chief Nick Derzis told AL.com. "They heard the gunfire, they engaged the subject, and they took out the threat."

The next day it become clear that police missed something.

As Black Friday crowds streamed through the mall in the morning, a reporter with Fox affiliate WBRC posted a photo of a pistol lying on the floor of the Santa's Village display.

In the evening, police released a statement: "We regret that our initial media release was not totally accurate, but new evidence indicates that it was not."

The statement said, "New evidence now suggests that while Mr. Bradford may have been involved in some aspect of the altercation, he likely did not fire the rounds that injured the 18-year-old victim. This information indicates that there is at least one gunman still at-large."

Police, who claimed earlier that Bradford had threatened responding officers with a pistol, said other people appeared to be involved in the shooting. They say at least one of those people apparently escaped while Bradford died on the concourse outside a shoe store, surrounded by officers.

"They were so quick to rush to judgment," Emantic Fitzgerald Bradford Sr., the deceased's father, told the Associated Press from his home near Birmingham on Saturday, after protesters marched through the mall, demanding to know why police killed a black man who may not have had anything to do with the shooting.

"That was not his character at all," Bradford's mother, April Pipkins, told the New York Times.

The police department did not respond over the weekend to questions about whether Bradford had a role in the shooting and about the search for the person who shot the teen and the girl. The Alabama Law Enforcement Agency, which has taken over the investigation, planned to release a statement on Sunday.

Bradford had posted on Facebook photos of himself in an Army uniform. He described himself as a combat engineer. A spokesman for the Army, however, told The Washington Post that he "never completed advanced individual training" and so did not serve. An attorney for Bradford's family said he had been honorably discharged from the Army.

He lived just outside Birmingham, a few miles from the mall where he was shot.

"He was a super sweet, funny, kind and good-hearted young man who never had a bad word to say to anyone," his

former Catholic high school teacher Carl Dean told the Hoover Sun.

About an hour before the shooting, Bradford had posted on Facebook a photo of him posing in a doorway wearing the shredded jeans and T-shirt in which he would die. Digital scribbles on the photo obscure his left hand, in which he appears to be holding something.

Bradford's parents and a family attorney say he had a concealed-handgun license, which is not unusual in Alabama. The Galleria, which advertises itself as the state's largest indoor mall, prohibits firearms on site, according to its website. But state law is broadly permissive of gun rights, according to AL.com, and it's unclear whether the mall has the public signs and security measures that are required for businesses to enforce a firearm ban.

The first volley of gunfire broke out on the second floor of the mall shortly before 10 p.m., according to police and witness accounts. Cellphone videos show people fleeing through the food court, knocking over a cash register and cowering in employee backrooms.

An unidentified 18-year-old was shot and reported to be in serious condition at a hospital. A 12-year-old girl standing nearby was struck in the back by a stray bullet, her mother wrote on Facebook. A military medic used a shirt from a rack at a nearby store to stop her bleeding. She is expected to recover.

In this chaos, AL.com reported, "several shoppers were seen with their guns drawn."

It is unclear where Bradford was during the shooting. Two uniformed police officers working as security guards intercepted him in front of a shoe store on the second level, where a photo posted online shows him lying on the tile with blood pooled around his head.

"While moving toward the shooting scene, one of the officers encountered a suspect brandishing a pistol and shot him," police said in a statement written immediately after the shooting. In a revised statement, they said Bradford was fatally shot while "fleeing the shooting scene while brandishing a handgun."

In videos taken outside the shoe store, shoppers watch in astonishment.

"That boy didn't shoot at nobody. He's dead!" a man down the corridor says, as officers stand over Bradford and pin someone else to the ground. "They just killed that black boy for no reason. . . . He probably got a gun license and everything."

Civil rights attorney Ben Crump, who has previously represented the families of black shooting victims such as Stephon Clark and Trayvon Martin, is representing the Bradfords.

Bradford is one of more than 850 people who have been shot and killed by police in the United States this year, according to a Washington Post database, and the latest of many black men whose deaths have led to accusations of systemic racism in the U.S. law enforcement system.

"The systems in America are dangerous for and to Black people," Bernice King, the daughter of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., wrote as accounts of Bradford's killing spread on Twitter.

On Saturday, a group of protesters marched around and through the mall, followed by Hoover police officers and joined by several of Bradford's family members.

As seen in ABC 33/40s live feed, relatives described Bradford as the youngest member of a military family —the son of a Marine who, as his great aunt put it, "chose country first, not a bullet."

"They shot the wrong man!" another woman said, consoling the aunt.

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Credit: By Avi Selk

## DETAILS

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