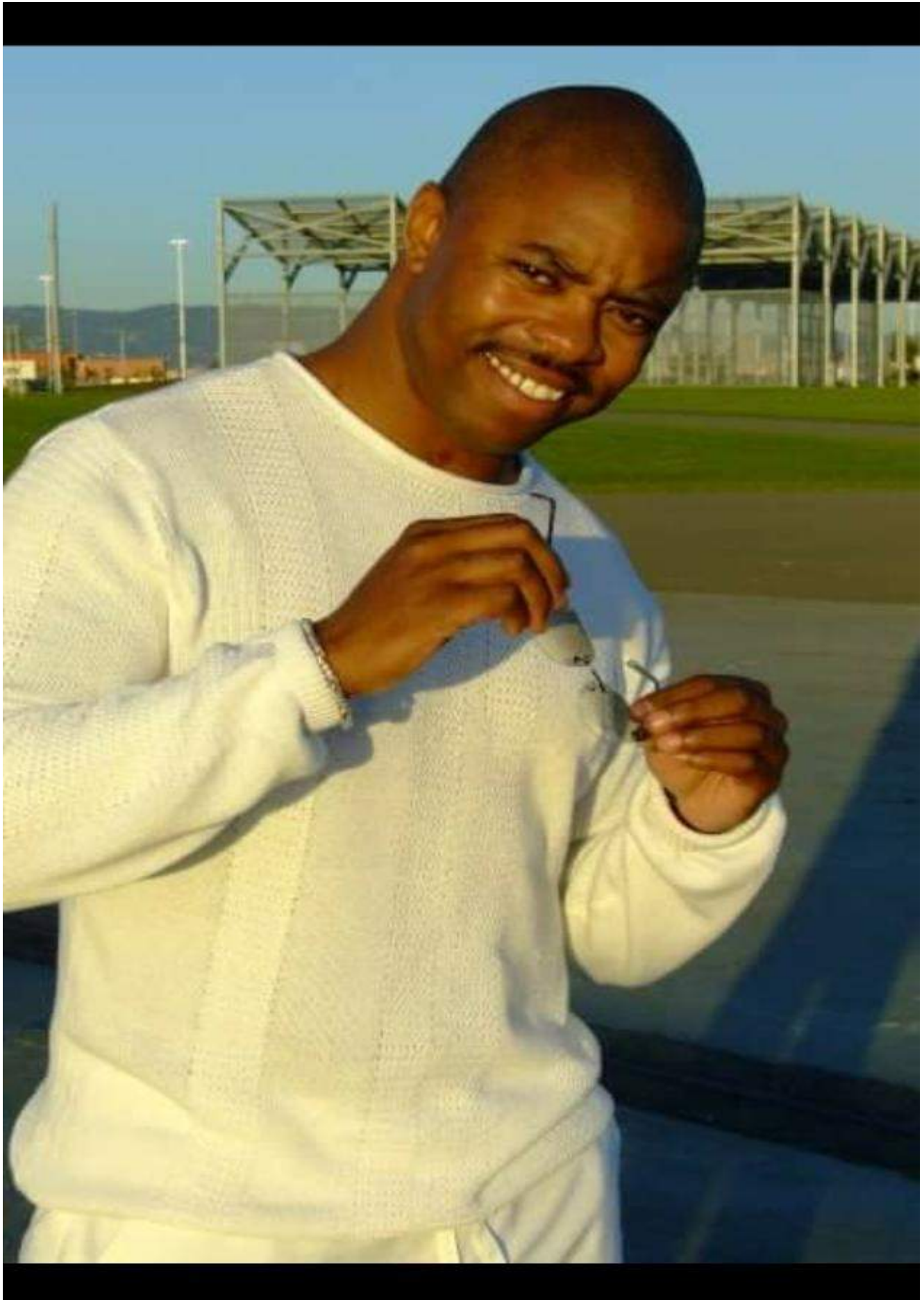


Friends say man shot by Tampa police was former U.S. Marine with PTSD

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FULL TEXT



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TAMPA —J.R. Walton couldn't get to the phone when his friend and former commanding officer called Saturday just before he died.

Walton had done two tours in the U.S. Marines with Sidney T. Richardson IV. Decades later, the two men were still friends, coping with post-traumatic stress disorder together, Walton said.

He was working his barber job when Richardson called at 6:43 p.m.

"By 8 o'clock, he was dead," Walton said Monday.

Walton and local activists are questioning whether the Tampa police officer who fatally shot Richardson at a north Tampa home used unnecessary force. They want a federal investigation into the shooting. They suspect Richardson, 48, was having some sort of mental health breakdown in the moments leading up to the shooting.

"Sid is not a defiant person," said Michelle Williams, Walton's mother-in-law and a Tampa social justice activist who knew Richardson for about six years. "He must have been going through some kind of episode. Why couldn't he be afforded someone who could talk him off the ledge?"

The Tampa Police Department on Monday released the name of the officers involved. Corporal Salvatore Mazza used his stun gun to try to subdue Richardson and Officer Juan Hernandez fired as "a last resort," a department spokesman said.

Mazza and Hernandez arrived at 1805 N Marvy Avenue shortly before 7 p.m. after someone called to report that a man was threatening a relative, according to Tampa police. They found Richardson in a room with a 17-year-old female cousin. He was wielding a machete and refused orders to drop it, police said.

One of the officers used his Taser to try to subdue Richardson but the stun gun was not effective, police said. At that point, Hernandez opened fire, hitting Richardson at least once.

No one else was injured.

"The officers were confronted with a situation where a man wielded a machete, putting a relative and the responding officers in danger," department spokesman Steve Hegarty said in an email to the Tampa Bay Times.

"The officers issued verbal commands to drop the machete. Mr. Richardson did not comply. The officer used non-lethal force — a Taser. Mr. Richardson did not comply. The officer then resorted to lethal force as a last resort."

Hernandez started with the department in December 2011, has no disciplinary history and has never fired his weapon in the line of duty, Hegarty said.

Both Hernandez and Mazza have been placed on paid administrative leave while the case is investigated. This is standard practice.

Friends described Richardson as a smart, kind, soft-spoken Christian man who sought mental health treatment for PTSD but seemed increasingly troubled in recent months.

Walton said Richardson was his platoon leader when they served with the Marines' 4th Assault Amphibian Battalion in Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2002. They later served together during a tour in Djibouti, Africa, and Richardson was honorably discharged about five years ago, according to Walton.

The Times on Monday could not immediately confirm details about Richardson's service.

When Williams met Richardson, he was struggling to secure health benefits through the Department of Veterans Affairs. Williams said she helped him navigate the bureaucracy. He began mental health treatment in 2015, she said, and was officially diagnosed with PTSD about a year ago.

The unmarried father of an adult son, Richardson started to open up about the violence he witnessed during his service, Williams said.

"He was getting care and going to his appointments," she said. "He was on top of everything but he was still suffering from deep depression."

Richardson also thought the government "was out to get him," Walton said. He was sure he was being monitored and urged the management at his Brandon apartment complex to remove the cameras and microphones he believed had been installed there. He rarely left his apartment, Walton said.

"I literally watched him start losing it," Walton said. "It's been getting worse in probably the last six months. He could be in a good mood now and in five minutes it's a total switch."

On Friday, Richardson sent Walton a text saying he needed help. Walton said Richardson seemed okay when the two men spoke by phone Saturday morning.

"He was kind of frustrated, but he was calm," Walton said.

Richardson's family members could not be reached or declined comment Monday.

"Today, my life changed forever," Richardson's brother Reggie Richardson Sr., posted Saturday on Facebook. "I lost my brother Sidney Richardson to PTSD. Please understand it is serious with our vets. Keep me and family in your prayers."

For local activists, the shooting is another troubling case of questionable police behavior leading to the death of a man of color.

Two local advocacy groups, the Restorative Justice Council and Showing Up for Racial Justice Tampa, are calling for a federal investigation separate from the standard review conducted by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, said RJC co-founder Angel D'Angelo. A news conference is set for 6 p.m. Tuesday, when the groups will repeat their call for the department to implement a range of reforms, including revamping its use-of-force policy and outfitting all patrol officers with body cameras, D'Angelo said.

"We want to emphasize to the Tampa Police Department and those in power that they need to listen because we can't keep having member of the community dying," he said.

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Credit: Tony Marrero

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