

How routine arrest turned deadly for US Marshal - York Daily Record (PA) - January 21, 2018 - page A6

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It was a routine thing.

Nine members of the U.S. Marshal Service's Fugitive Task Force descended on a house in Harrisburg's South Allison Hill neighborhood. It was not unusual to have such a turnout for an arrest. "It's what they do," said Deputy Marshal Bill Pugh. "It's pretty much all they do."

The address on Mulberry Street, near the intersection with 18th Street, belonged to a woman wanted by Harrisburg police on charges related to a road rage incident. The woman, 30-year-old Shayla Lynette Towles Pierce, had been accused of pulling a gun on another woman and threatening to shoot her.

The members of the task force, while planning the raid to apprehend the woman, took that into consideration, that her charges included a threat of violence. That, again, is routine, marshals say. Task force members often consider a lot of variables - the charges against the person they are seeking, whether they have a history of violence or record of violent offenses, the location of the building and its size. They don't just drive up and kick in the door.

So, on the one hand, it was a routine arrest - the kind of thing the task force does every day - and on the other hand, there is nothing routine about it. Every time they go out to make an arrest is different. You never know what to expect, marshals say.

And Thursday morning would turn out to be anything but routine.

That task force arrived at Pierce's house at about 6:30 a.m. -- again, routine. The task force often makes arrests early in the morning, hoping to catch suspects still sleeping or at least off-guard.

Of the nine members of the task force involved in the arrest, two were U.S. Marshals Service deputies, including Christopher David Hill, a 45-year-old Army veteran who served in Afghanistan and member of the service's Special Operations Group, an elite unit, a kind of national SWAT team. The remainder of the team were local and state police officers, including Kyle Pitts, a 10-year veteran of the York City Police Department.

Hill and Pitts entered the house to arrest Pierce.

On Nov. 25, according to court records cited in reports, Pierce was double-parked in front of her house, blocking the street, when a woman trying to pass by asked her to move her car. Pierce pulled a gun and threatened to shoot her, according to court records. The woman snapped a photo of Pierce's license plate.

The charges – for carrying a weapon without having a concealed-carry permit, a felony, and making terroristic threats, a misdemeanor -- were filed a week later.

Court records indicate that Pierce had no previous criminal history. Her father, Kenneth T owles, described his daughter as "all and all, a real good girl." He said she was a single mother, raising two boys, 13 and 9, on her own. The boys were home when the members of the task force approached.

It's not exactly clear how the case came to fall into the hands of the fugitive task force. U.S. Attorney David Freed hinted there could be more to it. The fugitive task force typically goes after, well, fugitives, suspects who have fled rather than face arrest. In this case, Pierce was arrested at her home. And typically, the task force brings in fugitives wanted for more serious crimes than those Pierce faced.

Hill and Pitts entered the building while the others waited outside. They took Pierce into custody, apparently routinely.

Then, it happened.

As they were arresting Pierce, gunfire erupted.

The shots came from the top of the steps inside Pierce's home. One bullet struck Pitts' arm. Another struck Hill in the chest.

The suspect continued firing as members of the task force dragged their fallen colleagues to safety and provided first aid.

Hill, a married father of two who lived in Conewago Township, didn't make it.

The suspect bolted from the home, exchanging gunfire with a Harrisburg police officer. A bullet struck the officer in the chest, stopped by his body armor. He was able to return fire, killing the suspect.

The suspect was identified as **Kevin Sturgis**, a 31-year-old man wanted by police in Philadelphia for failing to appear in court for sentencing on a firearms violation and for probation violations related to receiving stolen property and drug charges. Sturgis also had a juvenile record for rape.

It was not reported whether members of the task force knew Sturgis was there. Authorities also said they didn't know what his relationship was with Pierce. Pierce's father didn't say what their relationship was.

Pitts underwent surgery Thursday night and is expected to make a full recovery, authorities said.

Hill's body was escorted to a local funeral home by a caravan of police cruisers, fire trucks and other emergency vehicles. On Friday, a state police trooper held vigil at the Hill's Conewago Township home, parked out front to protect the family's privacy.

State Sen. Mike Regan, a York County Republican and former U.S. Marshal, described Hill as "a special guy."

"Just a really neat guy, very highly-trained," Regan said Thursday. "He also had a very humorous side, fun-loving. It really seemed the other deputies gravitated toward him."

At a press conference Thursday, Freed said, "Christopher Hill died a hero today."

Freed said more information would come out as the investigation continues. It was not routine, he said, for the task force to make an arrest like Pierce's, that "it's not just every warrant out there that the locals call up the marshals and say let's go grab this person."

He continued, "Although we don't know at this point, we will know what the larger purpose was for them being there."

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