

Marshals task force rebuilds Marshals A year - Patriot-News, The (Harrisburg, PA) - January 22, 2019 - page 001

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When a U.S. marshals task force served a warrant for Shayla Pierce at her Harrisburg home last year, they were at a disadvantage.

The marshals didn't know her boyfriend **Kevin Sturgis** was hiding upstairs, or that he was wanted for shooting a pregnant woman in Philadelphia.

They didn't know he'd apparently shot and wounded two men in Harrisburg. Or that the couple had more than 1.5 pounds of marijuana and two ounces of PCP stashed in the house in the 1800 block of Mulberry Street.

Members of the task force only knew that Pierce had an outstanding warrant for pointing a gun at her neighbor and that a fugitive named "King" from Philly might be staying with her.

With that limited information, the task force members knocked on Pierce's door in the early hours of Jan. 18, 2018, according to officials who provided new details to PennLive on the one-year anniversary of that fateful raid.

"They proceeded to the residence to apprehend her and to decipher whether or not someone by the nickname of King frequented her place," said U.S. Marshal Martin Pane.

After police handcuffed Pierce in her living room, they tried to call her children downstairs and asked her if she knew someone named "King." That's when a man at the top of the stairs shouted, "Are you

looking for me?" and started a gunfight that left him and deputy U.S. marshal Christopher Hill dead and two officers wounded.

The new details answer some lingering questions about who was the target of the raid. The questions arose because of Sturgis' lengthy criminal record and fugitive status compared to Pierce's criminal record and the fact that she had appeared in court twice in the weeks prior to the raid.

In the end, both Sturgis (whose nickname is King) and Pierce were targets of the raid, but Pierce was the initial target since officers did not even know Sturgis' real name at the time.

Pierce pleaded guilty to the gun charge from her warrant last August and was released for time served, but with eight new drug charges hanging over her head. Her next court date is in March. She likely will face no charges related to the death of deputy Hill.

A time of healing

Hill's death represented the first line-of-duty death for the Middle District of Pennsylvania's marshals service in its 118-year history. It took time for task force members to recover from not only losing their friend, but witnessing it.

"Deputy Hill was an outstanding employee who participated in many agency initiatives throughout the country and abroad," Pane said. "To that end, he was known and highly respected by many within this agency. So the impact and the loss of Chris has been felt by many."

The agency provided counseling and other resources to employees after the incident and again Friday, on the one-year anniversary.

Two of the full-time deputies on the task force retired last year after the raid. Between grieving, healing and training new members, the productivity of the task force fell below its normal level.

The middle district task force typically serves about 450 warrants per year. But that figure dropped to 350 last year, Pane said.

"Anytime you have a line of duty death," Pane said, "it takes time to heal and process the event."

Harrisburg Police Commissioner Thomas Carter, however, said he didn't notice any lull in activity. He said the task force responded every time he called last year.

"The incident left a permanent scar on that unit," Carter said. "But they're trained to overcome extreme difficulties, so the unit will continue to provide the citizens of Dauphin County and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania the great service they always have."

Pane said the unit is back up to full speed for this fiscal year and expected to serve about 450 warrants.

Those warrants reflect just a portion of the warrants out there that need to be served, Pane noted.

"Unfortunately throughout every district in the nation, there is a consistent violent felony backlog, and I can assure you there is far in excess of 450," he said. "But if you get me more resources, I'll get you more arrests."

'They train all the time'

After every death involving a marshals task force member, the agency does a detailed review.

"An examination of the event takes place and a briefing and review occurs with senior leadership in Washington, D.C.," Pane said.

The head of the agency's training academy takes part in these reviews, Pane said, and incorporates information into additional training, and enhanced training for entering buildings. The

training leader also reviews equipment standards such as ballistic shields, helmets, vests and ammunition, Pane said.

So what came out of the review of the deadly raid in Harrisburg?

If there were changes in any procedures, policies, training or equipment in the wake of Hill's death, Pane said he could not divulge it because it could provide a tactical advantage to fugitives.

"And we don't want to do that," Pane said.

But after all the detailed reviews, Pane described the death of Hill as a "tragic accident," indicating that little could have been done to predict or prevent the tragedy.

Carter said he was briefed on the incident and feels comfortable continuing to assign a member of his department full-time to the task force.

"They train all the time," he said. "They're experts at serving warrants and going after violent fugitives. What happened was just an unforeseen tragedy. Sometimes things just happen."

'Tend to be desperate'

In last year's raid, Sturgis fired the first round from upstairs that hit a York officer. Task force members in the living room fired back. Some of the officers' bullets penetrated the wall behind Sturgis and struck Hill, who was on the other side of that wall. One of the rounds hit Hill near his armpit area, one of the small areas not covered by his bullet resistant vest.

The fact that Sturgis came out firing is not uncommon for violent felony fugitives, Pane said.

"The difference is they know they're wanted," Pane said. "They know they're going away for a long time, and perhaps facing the death penalty. They tend to be desperate and take overt action."

That could be why the United States Marshals Service loses more federal law enforcement officers in one year than other federal law enforcement agencies combined.

Sturgis was wanted for skipping bail and failing to appear at his Jan. 5, 2017, sentencing in Philadelphia for a 2014 gun crime, where he was likely facing 5 to 10 years in prison. A prosecutor was pushing for serious jail time, noting that Sturgis had been arrested 11 times and had six convictions, not including a rape case as a juvenile.

He had been convicted in October 2016 of illegally carrying a gun in his car.

Less than one month after that conviction, while he was out on \$1 bond, Philadelphia police allege Sturgis nearly killed his pregnant girlfriend.

Responding officers found a 25-year-old woman with two gunshot wounds to her right arm and one to her chest. She was critically wounded, but survived. Police did not release any information about the status of the baby.

The fugitive task force in Harrisburg, however, didn't know about his criminal history when they knocked on Pierce's door. They only had the nickname of King, which is hardly unique in Philadelphia.

After the deadly raid, Harrisburg police got information that "King," was responsible for a brazen double shooting in broad daylight October 2017 that injured two men who were in a pickup truck behind a barber shop near 17th and Market streets. The gun used in the double-shooting was a .45-caliber, just like the gun Sturgis used in the deadly marshals raid.

Harrisburg officer retires

Harrisburg Officer Jeff Cook was shot in the chest during the raid last year as a member of the task force. He had planned to retire in December 2017, but stayed on longer because there weren't enough officers to fill his position on the task force.

Cook agreed to stay on until the end of January.

The shooting that could have ended his life happened that month. He was shot when Sturgis barged out the front door after a York officer and Hill were shot inside. A bullet struck Cook in the chest, but a bullet-resistant vest with a protective plate saved his life.

Cook said he didn't want to retire immediately after the shooting. He wanted to see if he could still perform the job.

Cook was cleared for duty two months later, and returned to the task force. He helped with their assignments until June 1.

The police department meanwhile bought more bullet-resistant plates and carriers for additional officers to wear, to better protect them. Previously, only officers assigned to the county tactical team or marshal's task force had access to the expensive vests.

The department won a \$145,000 county gaming grant to purchase 10 vests, which will be donned for high-risk assignments. A group of emergency department nurses at UPMC Pinnacle Harrisburg also staged a 5K run that raised \$20,000 to help buy even more.

Meanwhile, the York officer, Kyle Pitts, who was shot in the right arm suffered nerve damage that required him to learn how to consistently shoot with his left hand. Pitts recently returned to duty, according to a report in the York Daily Record.