

FBI Agent, Suspect Slain in Shootout; Gunfight Turns Up Weapons Tied to P.G. Officer's Killing

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Prince George's County police officials yesterday stood by their charges that Jeffrey C. Gilbert, of Lanham, fatally shot a county police officer last month, despite evidence recovered in a dramatic shootout with a Landover man that linked that man with the officer's death.

Police and federal agents said they recovered the weapon used to kill Prince George's police Cpl. John J. Novabilski and the slain officer's stolen service pistol after a shootout in Greenbelt with Ralph McLean yesterday. Both weapons were found near McLean's body after he shot and killed FBI agent William H. Christian Jr. and then was fatally shot himself.

But at a news conference yesterday, the acting police chief in Prince George's said there were no immediate plans to free Gilbert, because three witnesses have identified him as the gunman who walked up to Novabilski's cruiser outside a Kentland liquor store and opened fire April 26.

"Mr. Gilbert remains our number one target," acting Chief Alphonso Hawkins said. "We have eyewitnesses who saw Mr. Gilbert participate {in Novabilski's shooting}, and he's our number one suspect."

Hawkins and other law enforcement sources said yesterday that they cannot explain what, if any, connection there is between Gilbert and McLean. Investigators have found no evidence linking them, although Hawkins suggested that the two may have worked together in some fashion.

McLean, 29, lived in an apartment in the 2300 block of Virginia Avenue in Landover, within a mile of the liquor store where Novabilski was killed.

Gilbert's attorneys and his girlfriend said police unnecessarily beat Gilbert when he was arrested, causing him to be hospitalized for four days. Prince George's police have said Gilbert was injured when he resisted arrest.

Hawkins said his investigators have found no motive for Gilbert to shoot a uniformed police officer without provocation. Gilbert's girlfriend said she told police he was with her at the time Novabilski was slain.

Last week, a county district court judge ruled that prosecutors had enough evidence to charge Gilbert, 26, and ordered him held without bond pending trial. But one of Gilbert's attorneys said yesterday that he planned to ask a county judge to lower Gilbert's bond as a result of the new evidence.

Privately, law enforcement officials said it is difficult to reconcile the three witnesses against Gilbert with evidence implicating McLean as the gunman. District police have identified McLean as the gunman who wounded two D.C. officers in unprovoked shootings this year. After McLean was shot and killed yesterday, police found Novabilski's department-issued 9mm Beretta handgun near his body. It was stolen moments after the Prince George's officer was shot.

Police and federal agents also said preliminary tests showed the same MAC-11 pistol used to kill Novabilski was used to shoot the FBI agent in Greenbelt yesterday.

Other than the witnesses, detectives have uncovered no physical evidence that puts either Gilbert or McLean at the scene of Novabilski's slaying, although authorities are waiting for the results of a DNA examination of Gilbert's blood. It was unclear yesterday what evidence was going to be compared with Gilbert's blood.

"At this point," said Gilbert's attorney, Christopher Griffiths, "the county can only compound what is already a disaster by keeping him in jail. They have the wrong guy, simple as that."

From the start, county investigators suspected that Novabilski's killing was connected to the Jan. 10 shooting of D.C.

police Officer Vance Warren and the Jan. 17 shooting of Sgt. Eric L. Hayes. But that suspicion dissipated quickly, law enforcement officials said yesterday. The descriptions of the two suspects were different, and ballistics tests showed that a .32-caliber revolver was used in both District attacks, while Novabilski was killed in a burst of semiautomatic gunfire. The revolver used in the two D.C. attacks was recovered by police after the gunman discarded it while fleeing the scene of the second attack.

The key evidence against Gilbert, police and prosecutors maintain, is three witnesses who independently identified him as the gunman -- including one man who claims to know Gilbert and who says he watched the shooting from a pay telephone less than six feet away, sources said.

James Papiermeister, one of two county prosecutors handling the case against Gilbert, said McLean's identification as the stalker in the D.C. cases and the discovery of the weapons "is certainly dramatic." But he said the county's state's attorney's office could not move to release Gilbert without evidence that exonerates him.

Gilbert was beaten so badly during his arrest that he was unable to speak with detectives investigating the case, Griffiths said. Days after he was arrested, Gilbert's girlfriend told a reporter the two were together at her Greenbelt apartment after 10:30 p.m. on the night of Novabilski's slaying, which occurred at 11:30 p.m.

"He was with me when that officer got shot. I know it," the 30-year-old woman said. "I told the police that, but they didn't even listen. They just assumed I was telling a lie and didn't even listen to me."

Staff writer Avis Thomas-Lester contributed to this report.

[Illustration]

PHOTO-MUG,,Wusa-tv; PHOTO CAPTION: Defense attorneys say their photos of Jeffrey C. Gilbert, 26, in his hospital bed the day after his arrest show he was beaten by police. CAPTION: Prince George's police say Jeffrey C. Gilbert, above, remains the prime suspect in Cpl. John J. Novabilski's slaying, despite new evidence.

Credit: Washington Post Staff Writer

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