

Man Acquitted of Attempted Killing of Police Officer

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A Prince George's jury last week acquitted a Southeast Washington man of attempting to drag a former Cottage City police officer to death during an encounter that began as a traffic stop.

In its verdict Oct. 22, the Circuit Court jury acquitted William M. Jones, 31, of attempted murder, first-degree assault and second-degree assault charges in connection with a Sept. 7, 2002, encounter with Officer Timothy Kingston. The jury deliberated for about 90 minutes.

(Six months after the incident, Kingston was fired from his job for unrelated reasons and is now a police officer with the Town of Edmonston).

If convicted of attempted murder, Jones could have been sentenced to life in prison. The assault charges carry maximum penalties of 25 to 10 years in prison, respectively.

The trial featured several unusual twists. For instance, Prince George's prosecutors did not put on any evidence of a police probe of the incident, which was investigated by homicide detective Troy Harding of the county police department. Assistant State's Attorney Carlos Acosta did not call Harding to the witness stand and did not have any county police evidence or forensics experts testify. The lone eyewitness who testified was called by the defense.

Defense attorney Christopher A. Griffiths hammered at the police investigation during his closing argument, noting the lack of witnesses, reports and forensic evidence. "Did you see anything to indicate the police were investigating this incident?" Griffiths said. "We brought in the lone eyewitness. The investigation was skewed toward protecting the police officer."

Griffiths noted that Kingston had testified that he could have been disciplined or even fired if his shooting had been found unjustified. Harding found no wrongdoing, and a county grand jury, relying on Harding's investigation, did not charge Kingston.

In an interview, State's Attorney Glenn F. Ivey said: "I don't know what the detective's testimony would have added. It looked like a case where forensic evidence wouldn't have made a difference. I thought the prosecutor presented a good case, the defense did a good job, and the jury accepted the defense. I'm sure the officer's disappointed, and we understand that. We respect the jury's decision and we need to move on."

Griffiths said after the verdict, "The police investigation wasn't designed to find out the truth, but to cover for the officer's actions." Harding did not return a phone call seeking comment.

Also, two Cottage City police officers, including the chief, testified for Jones against Kingston. Officer James Runaldue testified that he knew Kingston to be dishonest and violent.

When Griffiths asked Runaldue his opinion about Kingston's propensity for violence, the officer replied, "He sometimes uses it when he doesn't need it."

Runaldue testified that Kingston once kicked a man who was handcuffed and lying facedown on the ground, for no reason. Cottage City Chief William R. McCeney testified that on some official police reports, Kingston claimed to be on patrol in Cottage City, but the chief said he actually was in another jurisdiction. It is extremely rare for police officers to testify against a fellow officer unless the testifying officers are themselves facing serious criminal charges. McCeney and Runaldue testified after being subpoenaed by the defense.

The prosecution and defense agreed that Kingston was dragged by Jones, but gave starkly different versions of how that occurred.

During the two-day trial before Circuit Court Judge Maureen M. Lamasney, Kingston said he stopped Jones on suspicion of driving an unregistered 1994 Chevrolet Caprice about 1:30 a.m. on 40th Avenue, a residential street near

Bladensburg Road.

Kingston testified he stopped Jones because he suspected his car had expired temporary tags.

Kingston said that Jones ignored his orders to turn the ignition off, so he leaned in to put the car in park. The 260-pound Kingston said Jones, who weighs 144 pounds, suddenly used his left hand to grab the officer's left wrist. Jones held him as Jones's car accelerated and dragged him down the street, Kingston testified. "I thought I was going to die," Kingston testified

Kingston testified he reached for his gun, swung it inside Jones's car and fired three shots. Kingston said he was finally dislodged when he collided with a parked car.

Kingston suffered a broken right hand, broken right clavicle and a scalp abrasion. He was hospitalized for three days.

Jones testified that as he sat in his car, Kingston approached him with a gun pointed at his head. Jones said the officer ordered him to put his hands up, and he complied.

"He said , 'If you make one false move, I'll shoot your black ass,' " Jones testified. Jones is black; Kingston is white.

Jones testified that Kingston reached into the car to try to put the transmission into "park" mode. Jones said Kingston never asked him to put the car in park.

As Kingston leaned in, Jones testified, the officer put his gun against Jones's left leg, and the weapon went off. A bullet went through his left leg, and he fell over to the right, Jones testified. When he fell over, his foot slipped off the brake, and the car lurched forward, Jones testified.

When the car crashed to a stop, Jones testified, he crawled out of the vehicle and fled because he believed the officer was trying to kill him. Jones was arrested six months later.

The only eyewitness who testified, Bruce Prout, a resident of 40th Avenue, was found by defense investigator Sharon Weidenfeld. Prout testified that he saw Kingston at Jones's car, then heard a gunshot. After the gunshot, he heard the car accelerate, Prout testified.

In his closing argument, defense attorney Griffiths said Prout's testimony supported Jones's version that the car lurched forward after he was shot.

Jones worked as a mechanic's helper at Reagan National Airport before his arrest in March. He remained in jail until his acquittal.

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