

Saturday, June 9, 2007

Guns Figure in Suspects Past

Alleged shooter took firearm to courthouse in '97

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CHAMPAIGN — A man accused of shooting three Champaign police officers and who was wounded in return fire by them has had earlier problems with guns in Champaign County. a Donnell Clemons, 36, was in critical condition Friday afternoon at Carle Foundation Hospital with multiple gunshot wounds from police, according to Champaign Police Chief RJ Finney.



CLEMONS

Court records show Clemons was sentenced in August 1997 to two years in prison on a charge of unlawful weapons for carrying a gun in a holster into the courthouse.

That incident occurred April 10, 1997 - as court security was being tightened following a firebomb incident 10 days earlier.

Clemons claimed at the time that he was a private detective and carried the gun for his own protection. He told a court - house security officer he had the gun - a .32-caliber Beretta — unloaded it and placed it on a table.

At the time, Clemons was on conditional discharge for an earlier charge of not having a valid firearm owner's identification. That conditional discharge, a form of probation that requires no reporting, was revoked, according to court records.

John Piland, state's attorney at the time of Clemons' courthouse weapon charge, said at the time that officials were concerned by Clemons' lack of judgment.

Finney said in a press conference at police headquarters Friday afternoon that Champaign police were aware Clemons had been living out of his car, which he often kept near West Side Park.

When police got the call Thursday night, they were going to ask the man in the car if he knew anything, Finney said.

Finney said Deputy Chief John Murphy, a 21-year veteran and supervisor of the patrol division, had been recently riding with patrol officers to get feedback from officers and community members.

On Thursday night, Murphy, 44, was riding with Officer Shannon Bridges, 36, when the dispatch to West Side Park came at 7:42 p.m., Finney said.

"He happened to be that night with Officer Bridges," Finney said.

Officer Jack Armstrong, 29, arrived about the same time, the chief said. As the officers approached the vehicle, with none of their weapons drawn, Clemons shot at them, striking both Bridges and Murphy, Finney said.

"Officers returned fire at the suspect, striking him several times," Finney said. "What this person's motives were are not clear," Finney said of Clemons. "His intentions were to kill my officers, but what his motives were, I'm not sure."

Bridges, a three-year veteran with Champaign police, was in stable condition Friday with wounds to her neck and lung. Murphy and Jack Armstrong, also a three-year veteran, were treated and released Thursday night.

"All the officers who were involved in this serious incident are heroes, in my mind," Finney said. "They put their lives in harm's way for the protection of our community, and they nearly paid the ultimate price."

The three officers are on administrative leave with pay until they are ready to return to duty, the chief said. They will be offered stress counseling and other services.

He also asked the media and public to give the officers and their families "proper respect and consideration." "It is important that they be allowed time to deal with and heal from this tragic incident."

Finney was flanked at the press conference by Deputy Chief Troy Daniels, Deputy Chief Holly Nearing, Lt. Jon Swenson, Lt. Joe Gallo, Sgt. Don Shelton and Champaign County State's Attorney Julia Rietz.

The chief said the local Serious Use of Force Team will conduct the investigation into the shooting incident. The team, made up of officers from Champaign, Urbana, University of Illinois and Rantoul police, the Champaign County sheriff's office and the Illinois State Police, will investigate and file reports with the state's attorney's office, he said. The team, in this case, will be led by Urbana police.

The last time a Champaign police officer was shot was on July 31, 1977. Tom McGuire, then an officer and later a sergeant, was wounded. The last time a Champaign police officer died in the line of duty was Nov. 25, 1967, when Officer Robert Tatman was shot and killed.