

Marine Found Not Guilty In Shooting Death Of His Fiance

BY ERIC CARLSON

Members of a Brunswick County jury said they could not find enough evidence to convict a U.S. Marine corporal who admitted under oath that he fatally shot his girlfriend in the throat and punched her business associate in the face.

Cpl. Alfonza Lee Staley, 25, of Camp Lejeune, was found not guilty Monday of first-degree murder in the shooting death of Stephanie Bradley at her Leland mobile home last May 31. He was also acquitted on a charge of assault inflicting serious injury against Richard Ballard.

After a week of testimony, the jury of eight women and four men deliberated about two and a half hours Monday before returning with the not guilty verdicts.

Staley, neatly dressed in his Marine uniform, sat quietly at the defense table and stared intently as Court Clerk Lisa Aycok read the verdict. When the words "not guilty" were spoken a second time, Staley turned away from the near empty courtroom gallery, covered his face and cried.

Juror Ralph Heil asked Judge Craig Ellis why Staley's cellmate was not called to testify in support of a written statement in which he allegedly claimed Staley admitted shooting Bradley after she grabbed the gun he had thrust under her chin.

Heil also said the jury wondered why a paraffin test was not conducted after the shooting to determine in which hand Staley was holding the gun when it discharged into his fiancee's brain.

"Wouldn't it have been routine to get a paraffin test?" Heil asked the judge. He said the question of how Staley held the gun "had a strong bearing" on the jury's decision.

"You have to decide based on the evidence given in court—unfortunately or fortunately," Judge Ellis said.

Staley testified that he is naturally right handed. But he said he was holding the .25-caliber pistol in his left hand when it accidentally went off as he pushed Bradley away to discourage her from hugging him.

He said he wanted to keep his right hand free to protect himself against a possible attack by Ballard, whom he had just punched in the face and pushed out the door of Bradley's trailer.

A paraffin test is used to help determine if a person has fired a gun. It is administered by wiping a suspect's hand with a swab and conducting a laboratory analysis for the presence of gunpowder.

Assistant District Attorney Lee Bollinger, who prosecuted the case, said arresting officers did not conduct the test because Staley readily admitted shooting Bradley.

"Nobody foresaw that as an issue," Bollinger said. "You don't normally take fingerprints at the scene of a break-in when you have a suspect who admits committing the burglary. Mr. Staley did not start making claims about left hand, right hand until he got on the stand to testify."

Bollinger said he did not call Staley's cellmate, William Eugene Webb, because he "absolutely refused to come to court." He said Webb, who is awaiting trial on several felony charges, would have had to be "shackled to the witness box" to get him to testify.

"I don't think he would have made a very good witness under those circumstances," Bollinger said.

The prosecution claimed that Staley shot his girlfriend in a fit of jealousy after finding her alone in her trailer with Ballard, who said he was there to collect some money she owed him. The two worked together in a small-scale art sales and picture framing business.

According to Bollinger, Staley testified that he was visiting Bradley for the weekend and had attended a birthday party for her son. He said he left the party and sat in his car for several hours while Bradley took all the party guests home except Ballard.

Staley said he walked back to the trailer, looked through the window and saw Ballard expose himself to Bradley. Staley said he went inside a short time later and found the two arguing. Ballard refused to leave until Staley said he punched him and threatened him with the gun.

Ballard testified that he did not make sexual advances toward Bradley. He said he left the trailer after Staley unexpectedly hit him with a blunt object and pushed him out the door. As he drove

off, he said he saw Staley inside the trailer holding a gun.

Staley claimed he didn't realize he still had the pistol in his left hand when Bradley tried to hug him and assure him that she hadn't been raped, Bollinger said. Staley said he pushed her away and the gun went off by accident.

Jacksonville Medical Examiner Dr. Walter Gable testified that the fatal bullet was fired at a distance of about 18 inches from the right side of Bradley's neck.

An SBI firearms expert who examined the weapon said the gun operated properly and would not fire unless a normal amount of pressure was applied to the trigger, Bollinger said.

Law enforcement officers testified that Staley called 911 to report the shooting and then went outside to flag down a deputy. They said Staley admitted shooting Bradley and showed them the weapon. He said he had given her first aid treatment. She was pronounced dead on arrival at New Hanover Regional Medical Center.

Outside the courtroom, Heil said that on the jury's first vote a majority immediately felt Staley should be acquitted. He said the state's case "was not substantiated with evidence" and left reasonable doubt as to Staley's guilt.

"The evidence just wasn't there," Heil said.

Admitting surprise at the verdict, Bollinger said he thought the jury put more weight on Staley's actions after the shooting than on the act itself.

"They apparently believed the testimony of a clean-cut, eight-year Marine and a veteran of Desert Storm with no prior record who did everything he could to keep a woman alive after shooting her," Bollinger said.

The prosecutor also said it was difficult to overcome the fact that Bradley's mother and sister believed Staley's claim "from day one" that the shooting was accidental. Both testified in his defense at the trial.

"You have to believe in the jury system even if you don't agree with a jury's decision," Bollinger said. "But what you basically have here is a guy who's gotten away with a crime of passion."



STAFF PHOTO BY WILLIAM MANNING

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