

Johnnie Veal and George Knights Four Lives Destroyed, Justice Denied



Johnnie Veal

On July 17, 1970, around 7:00 pm, two Chicago Police officers were shot and killed on a baseball field that was part of the Cabrini-Green Homes housing project of the Chicago Housing Authority. Sergeant James Severin and Officer Anthony Rizzato were shot and killed by what the police claimed was “sniper gunfire.” Both were relatively young officers. Rizzato had a family. They were assigned to the “walk and talk” detail at Cabrini-Green, an initiative of the Police Department to improve relations with the community.

For years major news media always described Cabrini-Green high-rises as violent places to be avoided. Only African American families lived there. Cabrini-Green became synonymous in the news media with poverty and gang crime.

Tense atmosphere in Chicago and the nation



George Knights

The atmosphere in Chicago and the nation the summer of 1970 was tense. Seven months prior to the murder of Severin and Rizzato at Cabrini-Green, Chicago Police under the command of Cook County State’s Attorney Edward V. Hanrahan, had assassinated two leaders of the Black Panther Party - Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, on the West Side. A year earlier parts of the North and West Side and other Black communities across the country had seen uprisings of Black youth outraged over the assassination Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Police dragnet

After the murders of Severin and Rizzato police fired hundreds of rounds into the buildings at 1150-60 N. Sedgwick and 1117-19 N. Cleveland. Reports described a police force numbering over 200 officers searching every apartment in the buildings, breaking down doors if residents did not answer promptly, damaging property. They arrested over 200 “suspects.”

George Knights, 24, and two other men were caught up in this dragnet, arrested, and charged with the murders of Severin and Rizzato. Several days later Johnnie Veal, 17, saw on television that police were looking for him and with his attorney, Eugene Pincham, turned himself in. Veal and Knights were acquaintances but were not friends. Hanrahan, himself under investigation for the Hampton-Clark assassinations, managed the prosecution by Assistant State’s Attorneys Nicholas Motherway and Gino DiVito.

The trial

Veal and Knights were portrayed at trial as quintessential gang members and criminals. Both were alleged to be members of the Black P. Stones, a Chicago gang born on the South Side in the 1950s that was alleged to wield influence in the Cabrini-Green area at the time of these murders. Both were convicted of the murders.

During the trial Veal reported that Chicago Police officers threatened members of his family, warning them not to show up for court proceedings. They told Veal that if he was acquitted, they would kill him, and several policemen brought cameras into court and took photos of Veal. The

office of Sam Adam Sr., Veal's attorney, was broken into during the trial and all his files on the case were stolen. Adam told Veal he was afraid of police retaliation.

A lurid story was painted by the prosecution of Veal and Knights sniping at the officers from Apartment 603 on the sixth floor of the 1150-60 N. Sedgwick building. But no one testified that they saw either Veal or Knights shooting at the police or anyone else. The whole case depended on the shots having been fired from the 6th floor of the 1150 N. Sedgwick building and reports that placed Veal and Knights there hours prior to the shootings.

It was stipulated by Prosecution and Defense that the coroner's pathologist would testify that he performed autopsies on the bodies of the two police officers and would say that the cause of death of both officers was bullet wounds, the path of which was downward. But the autopsy reports he made were never introduced as evidence. This stipulation was false. Police reports not given to the defense cited an eyewitness who gave police a written statement on the day of the shootings in which he said that when he heard the shots he looked in their direction and saw a man standing on the street near a light pole holding a rifle.

The autopsy reports by the pathologist actually showed that the shots were fired from ground level, according to an analysis by Joseph H. Davis, MD, former Medical Examiner of Miami-Dade County, FL, who was asked to review the autopsy reports by Dennis Kendrick, a former priest and mentor to Veal at St. Joseph Church, across the street from Cabrini-Green. This information was never presented to the jury.

The case against Veal and Knights

Three witnesses testified that after the shootings Veal had bragged that the Black P-Stones had done them. They were members of a rival gang, the Gangster Disciples. One of those testifying had, himself, been a prime suspect in the case. Those testifying against Veal and Knights had charges pending against them that were dropped in exchange for their testimony, a fact that was not presented to the jury. Others testified that they had seen Veal or Knights prior to the shootings with guns and ammunition. Still others testified that they overheard Veal and Knights speaking of killing policemen. Jake Davis testified that he went to Apt. 603 in the 1150 N. Sedgwick building with Veal, and that Veal told him "this is where we are going to start icing the police."

Witnesses said they heard gunfire and saw what appeared to be rifle barrels sticking out of upper windows of the 1150 N. Sedgwick building. Others saw rifles sticking out of windows in the 1117-19 N. Cleveland Ave. building, across the street from the 1150-60 building. Several police officers said that as they rushed to aid their fallen comrades, they continued to hear bullets hitting the turf around them and heard continuing gunfire between the two buildings.

Guns and bullets

The building superintendent said that he had found two rifles and a bag containing ammunition in the 1150 N. Sedgewick incinerator room the day after the killings. There were no fingerprints on any of them. Knights testified that he had purchased the ammunition.

Police said they combed the area in which the two officers had been slain. They found several lead bullet fragments and a bullet jacket. There were fibers adhering to the bullet jacket that were of the same type as the material of the cotton shirts worn by the victims. A firearms examiner testified that the bullet jacket with the fibers adhering could have been fired from a Winchester Savage rifle such as that found in the incinerator room.

The defense

Veal's attorneys were not permitted to call witnesses who would have placed Veal at a different location, because the court ruled that to do so the defense was required to disclose the names and addresses of alibi witnesses in advance. The defense said that the witnesses were fearful of reprisals by the police if their names and addresses were made available to the prosecution in advance of their testimony. In the climate surrounding this trial and the unsolved burglary and theft of files from the defense counsel's offices, that was certainly reasonable and Veal's position on this was later upheld in 1982 by the U. S. Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals.

In fact, Veal had been playing baseball with other youth in the area in front of the Seward Park Fieldhouse. When they heard shots, the two Park District coaches herded the youth into the field house for their own safety. None of these coaches nor the youth who were with Veal were allowed to testify.

Earline Maten lived in Apartment 204 at 1150 N. Sedgewick. She testified that she was sitting on the steps outside the building when she heard the first shot and saw one of the police officers go down. She saw Knights in the building's east parking lot behind his car. When she heard the second shot she saw Knights run to her and grab her baby, Terrell; together they ran with Terrell and other neighbors to Maten's apartment.

Marsha Jones lived in Apt. 1102 of the 1150 N. Sedgewick building. She said that she heard a shot that sounded like it came from the breezeway, and ran downstairs, where she heard another shot that sounded like it came from behind the building at street level. She saw both policemen down, and saw Knights, Martin, and others running into the building. Knights was carrying a very small child.

Jackie Futrell said that at the time she was in Apt. 309 of the 1119 N. Cleveland building. She saw the two policemen run out onto the field and go down. She heard shots and saw sparks from what she thought were the 17th and 13th floors of the 1150 building.

George Knights testified at the trial. He confirmed that he had purchased the boxes of 30-30 ammunition. Knights said that he had been at his car in front of the 1150 building when he heard shots fired and saw the two policemen go down. He started gathering the children present and

herding them into the building. He denied being a member of any gang. He denied shooting anyone. He denied ever bragging to anyone that he killed the victims.

Witnesses recant

Attorneys for Veal and Knights filed motions for new trials shortly after the verdicts. In hearings on those motions witnesses Jake Davis, Jerry Davis and Paul Williams all recanted their trial testimony that they had seen Knights and/or Veal with guns on the upper floors of the 1150-60 building. They said that police had forced them to give false statements and the state's attorney threatened them and coerced their testimony at trial. They also said that the police and state's attorney knew that their testimony was false, which of course, the police and state's attorneys all denied.

Jake and Jerry Davis said that before the trial they had been sent to a police camp, and before that sent to stay with their grandmother in Mississippi. Just before the trial they were taken to an apartment and a motel with a police guard. They had been on probation - Jake Davis was on probation for violating parole and Jerry Davis had a petition by the Juvenile Court to keep away from Cabrini-Green. Paul Williams said that he had been sent to the Sheridan School for boys by police and had given false testimony at the trial in exchange for a promise of early release from Sheridan by the State's Attorney.

An investigator named Skelly testified at the hearing on the defense motions that he had learned after the trial that the policemen were not shot from Apt. 603 in the 1150 building. In fact, Apt. 603 in that building faces east, and it would have been impossible for the shots that killed Severin and Rizzoto to have come from anyone in that apartment. Yet the whole case against Veal and Knights revolved around that apartment being the staging area of the crime.

Conclusion

Veal, along with George Knights, were sentenced to serve a term in the Illinois State Penitentiary for a term of no less than 100 years and no more than 199 years for murder.

Veal requested a new trial due to the fact that the prosecution suppressed and failed to disclose the fact that there were juvenile charges pending at the time of the trial against two of the State's key witnesses. The request was denied.

A rush to judgment

Hanrahan and the Chicago Police Department wanted to make sure that someone was nailed for this crime. They didn't care who it was, as long as they could get a conviction. What really happened, according to the facts presented, was shooting between two gangs in two high rise buildings in the Cabrini-Green project across the street from each other - 1150-60 N. Sedgwick and 1117-19 N. Cleveland, into which came James Severin and Anthony Rizzato, who were killed.

The police dragnet arrested over a hundred and demanded a story from each under threat of violence or prison. At least one, Sidney Bennett, confessed to the crime and implicated three

others in a rival gang. Two of them, Veal and Knights, were charged and convicted. However, Bennett was never charged and never called to testify because the confession was full of contradictions and had been made under physical duress (torture) by the police. Bennett was characterized as an unstable witness.

All that one can say when reviewing the facts is that Officers Severin and Rizatto were tragically killed. There is plenty of doubt about who actually did the killing. Johnny Veal and George Knights may not have been model citizens. But if all the facts had been presented to the jury they would never have been convicted.

Veal and Knights have been proclaiming their innocence from the moment of their arrest. The Chicago Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression supports their claim of innocence, and the legal effort to exonerate them.

A Facebook page for Veal is at <https://www.facebook.com/FreeJohnnieVeal/> and donations for their legal expenses may be made on line at <http://www.payit2.com/f/httppayit2comfreejohnnieveal>, or can be sent to the Chicago Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression, 1325 S. Wabash Ave. Suite 105, Chicago IL 60605. Please note "Johnnie Veal" on the memo line.

Veal and Knights deserve to be paroled or pardoned, at least. The Illinois Prisoner Review Board (PRB) has heard George Knights' and Johnnie Veal's parole petition numerous times. The Fraternal Order of Police mobilizes dozens of uniformed Chicago Police officers on buses to demonstrate in the PRB meetings demanding that they not be paroled. Neither has ever received a single vote. The rationale of the PRB in unanimously denying them parole has been that they continue to insist on their innocence, thereby refusing to show remorse for the crime, and therefore not to be considered for parole, even though both have records as model prisoners for the past decades and have been deemed totally rehabilitated.

Recent decisions by the U. S. and Illinois Supreme Court have declared that any sentence of a juvenile greater than 40 years is a "virtual life sentence" and a violation of the prohibition by the Court of automatic life sentences of juveniles. Veal has an appeal pending based on these decisions.

The PRB is scheduled to take up Veal and Knights parole again in 2020. People who would like to go to the hearing and stand up for freedom for Johnnie Veal or George Knights should contact Chicago Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression, 1325 S. Wabash Suite 105, Chicago IL 80505, 312-939-2750, or contact@caarpr.org.

Letters of support for parole for Johnnie Veal and/or George Knights can also be sent there for inclusion in their petition to the PRB by their attorneys.