

The Boston Globe

‘The avatar of cop violence in Boston’: Police captain routinely crosses line, activists say

With six open internal investigations, Captain John "Jack" Danilecki has plenty of detractors — and some supporters

By [Dugan Arnett](#), [Adam Vaccaro](#) and [Steve Annear](#) Globe Staff, Updated June 24, 2020, 11:28 a.m.



John Danilecki arrested a counterprotester at the Straight Pride Parade on August 31, 2019.
Craig F. Walker/Globe Staff/The Boston Globe

Outside of Boston's police commissioner, there may be no officer more widely recognized than Captain John "Jack" Danilecki.

A presence on the front lines of recent city protests, Danilecki and his actions have been captured, frame by frame, in videos and photos posted across the Internet. In one, he knocks a seemingly peaceful protester to the ground. In another, he appears to rip apart a protester's sign following a march against police brutality. And in multiple cases, he can be seen utilizing the pepper spray that serves as the inspiration for his nickname: Pepper Jack.

As worldwide protests in recent weeks have laid bare the fraught state of community-police relations, leading to increased scrutiny on Boston police, Danilecki — the second-highest paid city employee in 2019 after collecting nearly \$350,000 — has quickly become, for some, a symbol of the very brand of aggressive policing demonstrators are seeking to abolish.

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“He’s like the avatar of cop violence in Boston,” said Joey Peters, 37, who said he found himself on the wrong end of Danilecki’s pepper spray canister during a protest last year.

To supporters, Danilecki is a tough-love cop carrying out a high-profile job; the Rev. Miniard Culpepper, who became friendly with Danilecki around 2006, calls him the rare officer capable of working in a Black community without animus or judgment.

“I’m not one to come to the defense of any police officer,” said Culpepper, a longtime pastor at Pleasant Hill Missionary Baptist Church in Dorchester. “But I think in this case, over the years, Jack has withstood the test of time.”

In his career, Danilecki has risen through the BPD’s ranks, and now, as a supervisor, helps maintain order during large-scale city demonstrations.

But his actions during those events have contributed to multiple ongoing internal investigations and last year caught the attention of Suffolk District Attorney Rachael Rollins, who said at the time she was reviewing allegations of inappropriate behavior by police — and Danilecki specifically.

Now, members of a prominent city roadway safety task force are calling for Danilecki’s removal from his liaison post with the organization — a move the mayor’s office has hinted might be imminent.

“It is unacceptable for an officer who engages in brutal tactics against civilians to be the liaison between BPD and those of us who are fighting to make our streets safer,” several members of the Vision Zero task force wrote in a June 9 letter to Mayor Martin J. Walsh.

A BPD spokesman this week declined to make Danilecki available for this story, and multiple messages left with the Boston Police Superior Officers Federation, the union representing BPD captains, went unreturned.

But interviews and records show Danilecki has long racked up allegations of wrong-doing over his career, even as he received several commendations for his work.

BPD spokesman Sergeant Detective John Boyle confirmed that the department has six active internal investigations into Danilecki. He declined to provide details.

Since 1993, the department has investigated Danilecki 20 times, Boyle said. Of the 14 investigations that have been closed, he said, three were sustained, with punishments ranging from a verbal reprimand to a one-day suspension.

The most recent controversy occurred on May 31, as protesters gathered near the State House to condemn the killing of George Floyd, a Black man killed days earlier while in the custody of Minneapolis police.

Already under investigation for videos that appeared to show him in altercations with counterprotesters during last year's Straight Pride Parade, Danilecki was again front and center at this protest. And again, he appears to have been filmed in a contentious encounter, this time in Downtown Crossing.

In the eight-second video — which members of the Vision Zero city task force linked to Danilecki and cited as an impetus for their request to the mayor — a white officer who appears to be Danilecki can be seen rolling his bicycle alongside a Black protester who is carrying a sign. The officer grabs the sign out of the protester's arms and tears it apart.

Protesters and members of a city task force identified Danilecki as the officer in this video. Police say an investigation is ongoing.

Patrick Shaughnessy, a 24-year-old from Natick, attended the march with the person who filmed the video. They met the protester, who was Haitian, earlier during the march, Shaughnessy told the Globe.

At one point, Shaughnessy said, the protester stopped to have a photo taken in front of a business that had been boarded up and was decorated with a Haitian flag. In the moments before the encounter captured on video, Danilecki and other officers yelled at the group, and someone within the group of officers told the protester to “go back to the hood,” according to Shaughnessy.

The video does not capture the comment. However, the person filming can be heard shouting, “Are you going to tell him to go back to the hood again?” before the officer identified as Danilecki grabs the sign.

“It really seemed like they had no care ... in the world that we were filming,” Shaughnessy said.

The police department declined to identify the officer in the video, but said the matter is under investigation.

The video was posted on social media and shared with the Globe by members of the Vision Zero task force. Those members, as well as Shaughnessy and the person who filmed the video, identified Danilecki as the officer.

The incident came a few months after Danilecki's controversial role during last August's Straight Pride Parade, an event that drew thousands of protesters to downtown Boston.

In various videos taken that day, Danilecki can be seen releasing pepper spray and aggressively grabbing and pushing protesters, many of whom appeared to be acting peacefully. One video shows Danilecki chasing down a protester and pushing him to the ground. Another shows him forcibly attempting to rip the mask from a protester's face.

Peters, who was volunteering that day as part of Democratic Socialists of America, said he was pepper-sprayed by a bike officer shortly after the rally ended, while he was trying to form a barrier between police and medics tending to injured protesters.

He said he learned later, while combing through videos of the protest online, that it was Danilecki who had sprayed him.

The events of that day quickly drew condemnation. Rollins told reporters her office was reviewing footage of the event after allegations of inappropriate officer conduct. Asked specifically whether the review included Danilecki, Rollins [said it did](#). The police department, meanwhile, opened an internal investigation into Danilecki's conduct during the parade — which remains open.

Within the department, however, Danilecki was commended for his actions that day.

According to records reviewed by the Globe, the commendation, issued 10 days after the parade, praised him and the officers he supervised for “putting themselves in harm's way, incurring many physical assaults on their persons resulting in injuries to the officers.”

“All the while Captain Danilecki [led] from the front, wading into hostile crowds to stop unlawful behavior before the situation could become uncontrollable,” the commendation read.

Thirty-six people were arrested and four officers suffered minor injuries, police said at the time.

Long before these most recent incidents, however, Danilecki often found himself the subject of department scrutiny.

In 2004, the department launched an internal investigation into Danilecki after a Globe report identified 17 instances of so-called “double-dipping” — collecting pay while working private details in different locations simultaneously. The charge was ultimately sustained, according to Boyle, and Danilecki received a verbal reprimand.

In another incident two years earlier, Danilecki received a one-day suspension after a local attorney said he was prevented from filing a complaint against a patrolman who had allegedly shoved him outside the home of a client, in an incident the Globe reported on at the time. According to the attorney, Jonathan Shapiro, an officer at the station refused to take the report and invited him to go outside, “man to man,” which Shapiro took as a threat. A union representative later identified that officer as Danilecki.

The union rep denied at the time that Danilecki used the phrase “man to man,” saying that Danilecki was merely trying to defuse a scene in the lobby of the station by asking Shapiro to talk outside “like gentlemen.”

As a supervisor who has worked for years in the community, Danilecki has supporters.

“He’s not afraid to mix it up,” said Arnold Pressman, a retired business owner in Mission Hill who got to know Danilecki when he worked in the area. “If you’re having a problem, he’d probably be the guy you’d want alongside you.”

The Rev. Jeffrey Brown of the Twelfth Baptist Church in Roxbury was surprised to learn this week of the recent allegations against Danilecki, whom the reverend credits with playing a “critical” role in helping to broker a ceasefire during a surge in gang violence in the mid-2000s.

“During that period of time, there were very few police officers who were willing to work with clergy,” said Brown. “Even though Boston is a very progressive police department, you saw people on the force who saw that as soft work. But ... Jack was always one of the first to jump in.”

But Brown hadn’t seen the recent videos and couldn’t speak, he added, for what Danilecki had been up to lately.

In an interview last week, Walsh declined to address questions about Danilecki directly but praised the city’s officers as a whole for their work in handling a stream of near-daily protests against police brutality. The officers he’s seen, he said, have avoided negative interactions, and he pointed to the strides the department had made during his tenure as mayor.

According to data provided by the city, internal affairs complaints by citizens dropped from 259 in 2013 to 156 last year. Excessive force complaints dropped from 43 to 21 during that same stretch.

“On the other side of that, there’s still complaints coming in,” Walsh said. “So certainly, I have concerns about that. I’d like to get to zero.

“When somebody sees a police officer,” he added, “their first thought should not be fear.”