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Deputies' killing 'justifiable,' prosecutor says

Pierce County's prosecutor clears two sheriff's deputies who shot and killed a man who threatened an officer.

Author: KAREN HUCKS; The News Tribune

Article Text:

Two Pierce County sheriff's deputies did nothing wrong in August when they killed a man who attacked one of their colleagues with a knife, prosecutor Gerry Horne said Monday.

"That was clearly justifiable," Horne said of Steven Edwin Strobe's Aug. 9 death.

Sgt. Rustin Wilder, 35, and Deputy Shaun Derby, 32, shot Strobe to death in a wooded area on his property north of Vaughn. At the time, Wilder was a 12-year veteran of the force and Derby a six-year veteran.

They opened fire on Strobe, 51, as he advanced on one of their colleagues who had tripped while trying to apprehend him.

"That was after he was acting so bizarre," Horne said. "He was talking to himself and carving on his own neck."

Separate and independent investigations by the prosecutor's office and the Pierce County Medical Examiner's office each concluded that the deputies were justified in shooting Strobe.

The law says homicide or use of deadly force is justifiable when an officer has probable cause to believe that a suspect poses a threat of serious physical harm to the officer or others.

Bob Boren, Strobe's brother-in law, said he didn't think Strobe deserved to be killed.

"I would have preferred that they would have aimed to wound instead of aimed to kill," Boren said. "Steve was a good man. I'm old enough to remember when shooting to kill wasn't the policy. About 20 or 25 years ago, they began hiring military police or anybody with a military background and shortly after that, I began to notice we started to have stories in the news about suicide by cop. Maybe a little bit of citizen review wouldn't hurt."

Deputies went to Strobe's house - in the 17400 block of Harley Road - after a carpenter working at the house called 911 to report that Strobe had attacked him with a shovel.

They found Strobe in a wooded area, armed with a utility knife and using it to gash himself. He was apparently hallucinating, and he told officers he was going to kill them and "slice them up," the investigations concluded.

The deputies shot him with a nonlethal stun gun, but he continued to threaten them with a knife. When Strobe got within two to four feet of a fallen officer, Wilder and Derby opened fire on him.

The medical examiner's autopsy revealed that Strobe had cut himself dozens of times - some wounds up to three-quarters of an inch deep - in this throat, neck and forearms. He had been using alcohol, methamphetamine, amphetamine and methadone.

Horne said Strobe had been going through a difficult time. His wife and son had both died, and Strobe was awaiting trial on charges he was growing marijuana at his home, Horne said.

Authorities were also starting proceedings to seize Strobe's property, Horne said.

"It is a sad story," the prosecutor said.

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