

Friendly Fire Fells Oakland Officer / Two rookies accidentally kill undercover cop arresting suspected car thief

Matthew Yi, Henry K. Lee, Chronicle Staff Writers

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IMAGE 1 OF 5

COP SHOT-12JAN00-MN-FRL: William Wilkins, a seven-year Oakland Police veteran, was shot and killed last night in Oakland by another Oakland officer. Chronicle photo by Frederic Larson

2001-01-13 04:00:00 PDT Oakland -- Two rookie Oakland patrolmen shot and killed an undercover narcotics officer ... who they didn't realize was one of their own - as he arrested a suspected car thief, authorities said yesterday.

The unidentified officers, ages 23 and 29, fired their weapons near the corner of 90th Avenue and B Street in Oakland about 11:15 p.m. Thursday when they saw Officer **William "Willie" Wilkins**, 29, dressed in plainclothes, with a gun in his hand, Oakland Police Chief **Richard Word** said yesterday at a somber news conference attended by top police and city officials.

The two patrol officers, each with no more than a year of police experience, did not recognize Wilkins, a seven-year veteran who witnesses said was clad in a stocking cap, blue jeans and a coat with a T-shirt underneath.

Wilkins, who was shot at least once in the torso, was pronounced dead at 2: 20 a.m. yesterday at **Highland Hospital** in Oakland, where grief-stricken colleagues had held an overnight vigil. A member of an Alameda County drug task force, Wilkins leaves behind a wife and young son.

Kim Davis, 41, said she looked outside the front door of her home on B Street and saw Wilkins falling to his side in her driveway as a uniformed Oakland officer stood behind him with his gun drawn.

"I don't think (the uniformed officers) knew that the man was an officer," she said. "But they soon figured it out because they were saying, 'Willie! Willie! . . . Just keep on breathing! We're going to get you some help.' "

Many questions remain unanswered in the shooting, including whether Wilkins had notified patrol officers that he was in the area and whether the uniformed officers said anything before they fired their weapons.

Authorities found 11 shell casings at the scene. It was unclear whether Wilkins had also fired.

The shooting comes at a difficult time for Oakland police. Four officers who called themselves "the Riders" are facing criminal charges in a misconduct case, and the city is grappling with a jump in homicides last year.

Wilkins' friendly-fire slaying is a grim reminder of the dangers of working undercover, when both suspects and officers can be dressed similarly, according to police.

"You're always running into that risk when you're not in uniform. You're not clearly marked, it's dark and you can't see if a guy has a badge on," said Hayward Police Lt. **Paul Wallace**, commander of the **Alameda County Narcotics** Task Force, of which Wilkins was a member.

The identities of the officers who fired their guns were withheld, pending an investigation by the department and the Alameda County district attorney's office.

OFFICERS TRAUMATIZED

Oakland Police Lt. **Paul Berlin** of the homicide detail, which investigates all officer-involved shootings, said the two men were "traumatized" and would be interviewed after they were given a chance to "collect themselves."

Wilkins was in the neighborhood conducting narcotics surveillance Thursday night when he responded to reports of a car theft suspect in the area, Berlin said.

After chasing the suspect through backyards in the 9100 block of D Street in East Oakland, he had finally caught him at gunpoint in the driveway of Davis' single-story bungalow.

The car-theft suspect was arrested and, under state law, could potentially face charges in Wilkins' slaying, authorities said. His name was not released.

Undercover officers often radio in to let patrol officers know if they will be in the area. But police said there is no policy that requires them to do that.

Capt. **Dan Lawson** of the San Francisco police training division said that depending on the nature of the operation, undercover officers sometimes keep their work secret from beat officers.

Lawson also said that although police departments train their officers on when to use their weapons, the only remaining tool in the line of duty is an officer's own perception of the situation.

"It's tough . . . in those high-stress situations," Lawson said. "The only criteria that we use is, 'Is there an immediate threat to someone else's life or your own life?' It's really up to the officer's perception."

'LOVED GETTING BAD GUYS'

Officer Felicia Aisthorpe, her eyes red from crying, was among a number of officers who stayed overnight at Highland Hospital and prayed for Wilkins. "He loved getting the bad guys," said Aisthorpe, who along with Wilkins was a former Oakland police cadet.

In 1999, Wilkins was among 17 officers who received a department citation for helping remove guns from the street.

His death comes almost exactly two years after Oakland Police Officer **James Williams Jr.**, 41, was shot and killed by a sniper's bullet.

In Southern California, two officers were shot and killed by colleagues in friendly-fire cases in recent years.

In 1988, Oakland Police Officer **Derrick Norfleet** was posing as a drug buyer and running away from a drug house after a purchase when fellow undercover officers in a car hit him from behind and beat him, thinking he was a drug suspect. Norfleet, now a sergeant, filed a lawsuit and a federal jury awarded him \$60,000.

Wilkins is survived by his wife, Kelly; his 10-month-old son, William Jr., his parents, Fernando and Josefina; a brother, Fernando Wilkins Jr.; and a sister, Stephanie Wilkins.

Fernando Wilkins, the slain officer's father, said his son often talked about being proud to be an Oakland police officer.

"He loved his job," he said. "He wouldn't do anything else. He wouldn't change for another career."

Although his enthusiasm for his police work was clearly known by others, Wilkins' first priority was always his family, said Oakland Police Sgt. **Fred Mestas**.

FAMILY CAME FIRST

"Willie loved his family. OPD would always take second place to his family and he loved OPD," Mestas said. "I don't want his family to think that we came first. They did. He's a good son, a good brother, husband and father."

Wilkins graduated from **James Logan High School** in Union City in 1990 after spending his senior year as student body president. Around that time, he produced a rap album with several friends titled, "Undercover."

A funeral for Wilkins has been scheduled for 10:30 a.m. Thursday at Chapel of the Chimes, 32992 Mission Blvd. in Hayward. A trust fund for the officer's son has been established. Contributions may be sent to **William Wilkins Jr.** Trust Fund, c/o Oakland Police Officers Association, 717 Washington St., Oakland, CA 94607, account number 124009606.

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