

Commercial Appeal, The (Memphis, TN)
November 18, 2006
Edition: Final
Section: News
Page: A1

Topics:

Index Terms:

fayette co sheriff shooting homicide injury aid benefit police

Disturbed loner snapped, leading police in deadly hunt -- Military skills failed 'worn out' man killed in Fayette shootout

Author: Shirley Downing and Chris Gadd downing@yourappeal.com / gadd@yourappeal.com

Article Text:

The ambush of a Fayette County deputy prompted a massive police manhunt, but when it ended Thursday afternoon, it was a small but deadly skirmish in the canebrakes for two lawmen and a loner who snapped.

Some who knew Ervin Lee Jones say he was a former Army Ranger. He had already shot one deputy earlier Thursday, according to police. Later that day, he put his field skills to use in a second ambush that left another deputy wounded.

"He wasn't your average Joe out in the woods," said Ty Inmon, an officer with the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency. "He'd been trained by the military to survive."

But in the shootout that ended suddenly in the West Tennessee woods, it was the 53-year-old Jones who would lose his life.

One deputy, Lt. Doug Davis, 49, was released Friday from the Regional Medical Center at Memphis, while the second, Sgt. Al Freeman, 44, remained hospitalized in serious condition.

Davis was on what he no doubt anticipated was a routine patrol at about 11 a.m.

That's when he saw Jones' white 1996 van parked on a dirt road in the Ghost River Natural Area between Moscow and LaGrange along Tenn. 57, Fayette County Sheriff Bobby Riles said Friday.

As Davis was getting out of his car, Jones came around the side of the van, firing a .20-gauge shotgun loaded with "number 7 or 8 birdshot," the sheriff said.

The two men were about 35 feet apart, Riles said.

Davis ran for cover behind a tree, and Jones ran in the opposite direction, he said.

A short while later, officers responding to the distress call found the squad car riddled with pellets, its rear window missing, said wildlife officer Inmon.

A dozen or so TWRA officers had been attending a meeting at the wildlife area when the call of officer down went out.

"I knew I needed to assist," said Inmon.

"I hollered at a couple other guys to come," and headed to the site three miles north of the Mississippi state line.

Inmon and wildlife officer Charles Yoest, the first to arrive, discovered the damaged vehicles. Jones and Davis were missing.

Davis had left the area on foot after being shot, and was able to call for help, Yoest said. Jones,

meanwhile, had run off into the dense woods, abandoning his van. More police and TWRA officers converged, as did officers from throughout West Tennessee and North Mississippi, said Fayette County Sheriff's Department Insp. Ray Garcia. TWRA's yellow Lab named Jake picked up Jones' scent, then lost it. He picked it up again. By midafternoon, Inmon and Freeman found Jones' tracks at a sandy ditch, and they knew he would have to cross a bridge over a creek. He said he, Freeman and Jake headed in that direction and "that's when it took place." Jones was "waiting there in ambush in a cane thicket on the edge of the creek," Inmon said. Riles said Jones began firing when the two officers came in sight. "He was lying in a prone position with the shotgun in an ambush-type situation," said Riles. "The first they knew he was there was when he fired shots at Sgt. Freeman, who returned fire." Riles said when Freeman realized he had been wounded he started hollering for Inmon. The time was about 3:30 p.m. Riles said Jones had faint vital signs by the time paramedics arrived, but apparently died at the scene or shortly afterward. LaGrange businessman Wallace Witmer said he and his wife had given Jones food and blankets several days ago, but were not aware he had a gun. At that time, Jones had said "he was tired and wanted to get on with it." "I just think he was worn out," said Witmer. "He didn't have the right food to eat. He was cold and homeless." More than 400 officers from 26 law enforcement agencies tracked Jones through thickets and canebrakes of the Ghost River area. Riles said Jones was known to have mental troubles. Deputies had carried him to Western Mental Health Institute in Bolivar for commitment "two or three times" in recent years. Businessman Larry Watkins said he'd known Jones about 20 years. Jones had grown up in the area, and local folks knew how to handle him. And, they say, he was a good worker. He said Jones had told him that he'd been treated in a mental hospital in California, and that he'd had trouble with police in a neighboring county. "I think any officer that came along was going to be the next victim," Watkins said.

Benefit fund

Donations to aid wounded officers

The Bank of Fayette County has established a fund to benefit the two officers shot Thursday near LaGrange.

Details

The Davis-Freeman Special Account is being made available to anyone wishing to contribute to support the officers and their families as they recover. The account number is 0352365.

Donations can be made at any of the five branches of The Bank of Fayette County or by mail to P.O. Box 277, Moscow TN 38057. For more information, call 877-6891, or visit the bank's Web site, bankoffayettecounty.com.

Shots, then a manhunt / This map shows where the shooting incidents began Thursday in

Fayette County, and where suspect Ervin Lee Jones made his last stand.

Caption:

Doug Davis

Al Freeman

Ervin Lee Jones

Photos; Map - By Frank Bertelt

Copyright (c) 2006 The Commercial Appeal, Memphis, TN