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Former Georgia Officer Who Killed a Black Man Is Convicted, but Not of Murder

The former officer, Robert Olsen, was acquitted of murder charges, but was found guilty on lesser counts after the fatal shooting of Anthony Hill, an unarmed Air Force veteran.



Robert Olsen is escorted out of the courtroom after being found not guilty of felony murder on Monday. Pool photo by Alyssa Pointer

By Rick Rojas and Richard Fausset

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DECATUR, Ga. — A former Georgia police officer was convicted on Monday in connection with the shooting death of an unarmed black man whom the officer had found wandering naked outside an apartment complex in 2015.

The former officer, Robert Olsen, was acquitted of murder, but found guilty of charges including aggravated assault, violating the oath of his office and making a false statement after the fatal encounter with Anthony Hill, whom Mr. Olsen shot twice in a parking lot after residents said he was running around, knocking on doors.

The jury returned its verdict after deliberating for more than a week, resolving a case that had dragged on for years as judges recused themselves and other delays held up the trial. Mr. Hill, whose family said he wrestled with mental illness, was killed amid a national discourse over race, policing and the use of lethal force on civilians. His death occurred months after Michael Brown, a black teenager, was killed by a white police officer in Ferguson, Mo., a shooting that electrified the issue, spurred protests and invigorated the Black Lives Matter movement.

Monday's mixed verdict came two days after Atatiana K. Jefferson, a 28-year-old black woman, was shot and killed by a white police officer while playing a video game inside her home with her nephew. Later on Monday, the officer in that case was charged with murder.

It also underscored the range of results such cases have yielded, from no charges to convictions, as was the case this month in Dallas when a former police officer was convicted of murder.

Standing outside the courthouse with members of Mr. Hill's family behind her, Sherry Boston, the DeKalb County district attorney, said they were "grateful" the jury had accounted for Mr. Hill's death, even if the acquittal of the murder charge was disappointing.

"We look forward to sentencing so that we can have justice," she said.



Mr. Hill's father, Anthony Hill Sr., listening to the verdict. Pool photo by Alyssa Pointer

Mr. Olsen, 57, is scheduled to be sentenced by a judge next month and was released on bond, with an ankle monitor, until then. Though he no longer faces the mandatory life sentence that would have accompanied a murder conviction, he faces up to 35 years. But his lawyers said that the judge, Judge LaTisha Dear Jackson of DeKalb County Superior Court, has considerable latitude and could impose a much shorter punishment.

In some ways, the shooting death of Mr. Hill was defined by contrasting images of two men in uniform: Mr. Hill, a 27-year-old Air Force veteran who had bipolar disorder and who had struggled with trauma sustained while serving in conflict; and Mr. Olsen, who had been with the DeKalb County Police Department for seven years and whose lawyers described him as “a good cop who had to make a tough decision in those few seconds.”

On March 9, 2015, Mr. Olsen was responding to 911 calls from Mr. Hill's neighbors, who had reported him walking around undressed and acting bizarrely in public areas of his suburban apartment complex east of Atlanta. Lawyers in court said that Mr. Hill ran toward Mr. Olsen, who is white, and did not stop after Mr. Olsen shouted for him to do so.

As the verdict was read on Monday, Mr. Olsen, who resigned from the police force after he was indicted in 2016, stared ahead and appeared visibly relieved when he heard that he had been found not guilty of murder and the associated counts. But his face stiffened and his eyes twitched when the rest of the verdict was read. His wife shook and sobbed, and had to be led out of the courtroom.

Mr. Hill's relatives, including his mother, Carolyn Giummo, also wiped away tears. Later, his family declined to talk to reporters, but earlier in the day, after prosecutors objected to Mr. Olsen's release on bond, Ms. Giummo testified to her family's pain.

"It's been four years that we've been waiting for this," she said, describing her eagerness for Mr. Olsen to be behind bars. "I just feel like it's time now."



Carolyn Giummo, Mr. Hill's mother, reacting as the jury read the verdict.
Pool photo by Alyssa Pointer

Mr. Olsen was part of a wave of police officers who were charged with murder or manslaughter after fatal encounters with an unarmed black person. After the verdict, Amanda R. Clark, a lawyer for Mr. Olsen, said in a statement that the team was “disappointed with the guilty verdicts” but “relieved and thankful that this jury acquitted Mr. Olsen on the most serious charges of felony murder.”

Earlier this month, Amber R. Guyger, a white police officer in Dallas, was found guilty of murder for the off-duty shooting death of her neighbor, Botham Shem Jean, after she mistook his apartment for her own. She was sentenced to 10 years in prison.

And also in Georgia this month, Zechariah Presley, a white police officer, was found guilty of violating his oath of office in the fatal shooting last year of Tony Green, who was running and unarmed when he was shot. Mr. Presley was acquitted of charges of voluntary and involuntary manslaughter.

But in other recent cases, police officers who used lethal force never reached trial, or the officers were not indicted, mobilizing activists and adding to the tensions between minority communities and law enforcement. In Michael Brown’s case, a grand jury declined to bring criminal charges against the officer, Darren Wilson.

Mr. Olsen was indicted by a grand jury in 2016 on six counts, including two counts of felony murder and one count of making a false statement after he told another officer that Mr. Hill had “physically assaulted him prior to the shooting” by pounding on Mr. Olsen’s chest, according to the charging documents.

Under Georgia law, causing the death of a person, intentionally or not, during the commission of another felony is defined as felony murder. In this case, the murder charges were linked to the charges of aggravated assault, for shooting Mr. Hill, and to violation of an officer’s oath, for breaching his department’s use-of-force policy. Like the trial itself, the deliberations over Mr. Olsen’s guilt were also protracted, continuing for six days after they began on Oct. 4. The jury — composed mostly of minorities, with five African-Americans, one Asian and one Hispanic — had, at one point,

indicated to Judge Dear Jackson that it was deadlocked, and at the end of last week, the prosecution asked the judge to issue an “Allen charge,” or a note to jurors that encouraged them to come to an unanimous agreement. The judge decided against issuing the Allen charge on Friday morning.

Joetta Burnette, 67, was among a handful of activists who stood outside the courthouse in downtown Decatur, just outside Atlanta. She carried an American flag and a flier with the photos of several American law enforcement officers who were involved in fatal encounters with civilians.

“What crushes me is that he went to war, and survived and came home,” she said, referring to Mr. Hill’s military service in Afghanistan. “And then came back here, and was killed by law enforcement.”