



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

Police cops a pathetic plea

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Sgt. Robert Ralston, a 46-year-old Philadelphia police officer, admitted yesterday to having lied about being shot by at on April 6, while patrolling one of the city's high crime neighborhoods. The cop's confession, however, came some five weeks after the city had launched a massive manhunt in the heavily minority-populated area in search of Ralston's phantom assailant.

The officer had described his attacker as a black male with "cornrows" and a "mark or tattoo under his left eye." The level of detail with which Ralston embellished his tale made it sound that much more authentic. Plus, who would question the word of a 21-year veteran in blue?

Apparently, the bullet that grazed the officer's shoulder had come from his own weapon and was shot by his own hand, with no one else around. His motivation is yet unconfirmed; however, the prevailing theory is that Ralston was angry over having been transferred from a white community in South Philadelphia to the black neighborhood in West Philly.

Adding injustice to insult, the disgraced cop was granted immunity by the prosecutor in exchange for his admission of guilt and a promise to pay the city back for the cost of the dragnet. Unfortunately, this special deal does nothing to compensate the residents of community for the dreadful experience of being blanketed by SWAT teams and K-9 units.

"I think it's despicable," said resident Tanya Ennis. "The cops were stopping every man with dreadlocks. Every black man was harassed."

To us in Boston, the incident is reminiscent of the Charles Stuart debacle when the police compromised the civil rights of the entire Mission Hill community in searching for the black assailant whom Stuart, a white suburbanite, claimed had shot him and his pregnant wife as they drove home from birthing class at Brigham and Women's Hospital. The aggressive and highly

questionable manner in which the cops roused countless numbers of residents of the area set race relations in the city back years upon years.

Of course, in Philadelphia, the “victim” or the phantom shooter was not just a white citizen, but a white police officer. For some very good reasons, we tend to treat police officers who are assaulted in the line of duty as a special class of victim, given that they are willing to place themselves in harm’s way for our benefit. For example, in Pennsylvania, as in many states, the killing of a police officer is one of the aggravating factors that qualifies for the death penalty.

So when a law enforcement officer not only violates the public trust, but evokes a special response under false pretenses, the penalty for making an inaccurate police report should be enhanced. Officer Ralston should have been forced to pay for his deception, and not just in the sense of reimbursing the city for the cost of the investigation.