

Ex-law officers plead guilty to charges of torturing two Black men in U.S.

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Jackson, August 17 (RHC)-- Six former Mississippi law enforcement officers, all of whom are white, have pleaded guilty to state charges for torturing two Black men in a racist assault in the United States. All six had also recently admitted their guilt in a connected federal civil rights case. They appeared in a Rankin

County courtroom in Brandon, Mississippi, on Monday.

The men include five former Rankin County sheriff's deputies — Brett McAlpin, Hunter Elward, Christian Dedmon, Jeffrey Middleton and Daniel Opdyke — and a former police officer from the city of Richland, Joshua Hartfield. Some of them nicknamed themselves the “Goon Squad.”

In their crimes, federal prosecutors saw echoes of the racist violence committed against civil rights activists in 1964. Locally, Sheriff Bryan Bailey called it the worst case of police brutality he had ever seen.

In January, the officers entered a house without a warrant and handcuffed and assaulted the two men with stun guns, a sex toy and other objects. The officers mocked the two men with racial slurs in a 90-minute torture session, then devised a cover-up that included planting drugs and a gun, leading to false charges that stood against the victims for months.

Their conspiracy unravelled after one of the officers told the sheriff he had lied, leading to confessions from the others. The charges against the victims were not dropped until June, after federal and state investigators got involved, according to their lawyer.

All six law enforcement officers agreed to sentences recommended by state prosecutors ranging from five to 30 years, although the judge is not bound by those suggestions. Time served for the state convictions will run concurrently with the potentially-longer federal sentences they may receive in November.

The victims — Michael Corey Jenkins and Eddie Terrell Parker — arrived together to Monday's hearing and sat in the front row, just feet from their attackers' families. They were embraced by Monica Lee, the mother of Damien Cameron, a Black man who died in Elward's custody in 2021.

“I enjoyed the view of seeing the walk of shame. Head down, the disgust everybody felt for them and that they feel for themselves,” Parker said after the officers were led away in shackles. “I hope this is a lesson to everybody out there: Justice will be served.”

The charges followed an Associated Press investigation in March that linked some of the officers to at least four violent encounters since 2019, which left two Black men dead. All six of the former officers pleaded guilty to state charges of obstruction of justice and conspiracy to hinder prosecution.

Dedmon and Elward, who kicked in a door, also admitted to home invasion. Elward pleaded guilty to aggravated assault for shoving a gun into Jenkins's mouth and pulling the trigger, releasing a bullet that lacerated his tongue, shattered his jaw and exited through his neck. Authorities described the incident as a “mock execution” gone awry.

After details of the case became public, some residents pointed to a police culture they said gives officers carte blanche to abuse their power. Jenkins and Parker were targeted because a white neighbour complained that two Black men were staying at the home with a white woman, court documents show.

Parker was a childhood friend of the homeowner, Kristi Walley, who was at the hospital at the time. She has been paralysed since she was 15 and Parker was helping care for her. “He's a blessing. Every time I've needed him he's been here,” Walley said in a February interview. “There were times I've been living here by myself and I didn't know what I was going to do.”

Jenkins still has difficulty speaking because of his injuries. He can only eat soft foods easily and has recurrent nightmares. “As far as justice, I knew we were going to get it,” Jenkins said. “But I thought it was maybe going to take longer.”

Other consequences remain to be determined. Elward and other deputies continue to face other probes and allegations of abuse.

Bailey, the Rankin County sheriff, applauded the investigations that led to the guilty pleas. “I believe today’s guilty pleas show the community that our system of checks and balances is effective,” Bailey said in a statement after the hearing.

Court documents unsealed by federal prosecutors suggest only some members of the “Goon Squad” participated in the illegal raid. There are other Rankin County deputies “known to the United States Attorney”, the documents say.

“We would certainly hope that they continue to investigate the Goon Squad and other outstanding claims that may exist against these officers, as well as other officers,” said Trent Walker, a lawyer for Jenkins and Parker.

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