

# Our police department learned from its mistakes, says the Chief

The Bethlehem Gadfly George Floyd killing, Police June 15, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts on the George Floyd killing* 

*“We learn from our mistakes.”*

*Chief DiLuzio*

*June 3, 2020*

The Chief was no doubt referring to this drug raid by City police on April 23, 1997, which ended with a man dead and a house burned down. The City was sued, found guilty, and fined \$8m in damages — a giant sum only recently paid off.

As part of the court judgment, the City Police Department was required to review its policies, procedures, and tactics, which review and subsequent changes resulted in the unusual dual accreditation the department now enjoys and to which the **Chief called attention** at City Council June 3.

About the guilty verdict, the *Morning Call* in March 2004 would title an editorial: “Jury sends police a message.”

Message received according to the Chief.

# Gunshots killed man in drug raid

■ He initially was thought to have died in Bethlehem fire possibly started by police device.

---

By M. FLOYD HALL,  
MIKE FRASSINELLI  
And SONIA CSENCISITS  
Of The Morning Call

---

As they crept up a narrow side street, clad head to toe in black and carrying M-16 style assault rifles, Bethlehem police were pretty sure of what they were facing.

Over the previous week, they had engineered three heroin and cocaine buys in the nondescript frame house on the city's South Side. There were also guns, several

of them, and a young alleged drug dealer who had boasted he would use them if he had to.

In the conflagration that followed, one man would be shot dead as the house became engulfed in flames around him, the fire possibly started by a noise device intended by police to stun the occupants of 629 Christian St.

Bethlehem state police identified the dead man as 22-year-old John David Hirko Jr., originally of Palmer Township.

Details of the Wednesday night episode were sketchy. Bethlehem police largely declined to comment, as did state police at Bethlehem, who were brought in to investigate. District Attorney John Mor-

---

Please See **GUNSHOTS** Page A4 ►

# Gunshots, not fire, killed man in raid

► Continued From Page A1

ganelli said he would review the preliminary results of that investigation today.

But in court records and interviews with neighbors and friends of the dead man, a dramatic picture emerges, one probably better suited to a television drama than a middle-class enclave of Bethlehem.

It started just before 11 p.m., when about a dozen Bethlehem police pulled up in battered, civilian cars to execute a search warrant.

According to a district court affidavit, Bethlehem police used a confidential informant to make the drug buys. The informant was first searched to make sure he no drugs on him, then sent into the house with cash, the serial numbers recorded.

The last buy was made less than 48 hours before police decided to move in.

In the affidavit, the lead investigator, Anthony Leardi, noted the neighborhood was heavily populated with many young families.

Leardi also carefully noted that, according to his informant, Hirko and others in the house often took drugs and had several handguns that occupants of the house had said were "kept close by in case they were needed."

Two friends who stopped by to view the damage Thursday confirmed the substance of the court documents. A young couple, they described Hirko as stuck in deep drug dependency. Both declined to give their names, saying they were trying to get out of drug problems of their own.

"When he wanted to be up and do something, he did coke, but heroin was his main thing," said the young man. "He was completely strung out."

The woman, who said she had known Hirko since they attended Eastern High School, said, "He was a real nice guy, but he was a real trouble maker on our side."

But, she said, he had a gentler side.



LARRY PRINTZ / The Morning Call

ally intelligent."

The man said Hirko seldom left the house and kept the door locked at all times. He kept guns, they said, as protection.

What happened as police approached the house is unclear. But neighbors said first there was an explosion and then gunfire.

As the fire raged, neighbors reported seeing a young male and female flee the building, to be captured by police. Bethlehem police later said only the girl, Hirko's girlfriend, was taken in for questioning. She was later released without charges. Her identity is unknown.

Bethlehem police otherwise were mum as they awaited the outcome of the investigation.

"I have all the confidence in the world everybody responded properly," said Commissioner Gene Learn, declining further comment.

One question is what caused the fire. Morganelli said police "used a device to distract — it was not an explosive device. It was a noise device." Morganelli said initial indications were that the device might

have started the fire.

As the sound of gunfire shattered the cool night air, neighbor Jason Long yelled to his mother to hit the floor.

"All I saw on this street were cops, laying on the street, crouching behind their cars," said Long. "They were pointing their guns at this house, ducking behind everything. It was wild, really wild. . . . Flames burst out. And the weirdest sound was the fire alarms in the house. They wouldn't stop."

The fire trucks filled the narrow street as flames shot high into the air and lasted about an hour.

Neighbors poured into the street, and police yelled at them to get back inside.

"They yelled in there. One cop even said come out now or I'll shoot you again," said neighbor Fred Groenewold, who was across Sioux Street when he heard the police yelling to Hirko.

Groenewold's wife, Ellie, said one officer screamed repeatedly: "Come out now with your hands up! Show me your hands!"

"I could feel his vocal chords popping," she said.

Several neighbors said they had notified police on numerous occasions about what they suspected was drug activity at the house. Neighbors said cars pulled up at all hours and the occupants would run into the house, stay for a few minutes, then leave.

"There were a lot of people, but we didn't know who lived there," said Heidi Moyer, of 616 Christian St.

Building owner Tuan Hoang said Hirko lived there for about 10 months.

"When I first looked at him, he was just like any kid, like a college kid. Free spirit, I guess," Hoang said of Hirko. "He came up with the down payment and rent and I guess that's why I was naive never to check up his background."

Morning Call, April 25, 1997