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Deputies ran check on Clemmons hours before 4 officers slain, reports show

Less than eight hours before Maurice Clemmons opened fire in a coffee shop, killing four Lakewood police officers, a pair of Pierce County sheriff's deputies crossed paths with him while on routine patrol. Their report was recently made available as part of a large release of documents by the Pierce County Sheriff's Department after a lengthy court action brought by The Seattle Times and others.

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Less than eight hours before Maurice Clemmons opened fire in a coffee shop, killing four Lakewood police officers, a pair of Pierce County sheriff's deputies crossed paths with him while on routine patrol. One of the deputies, familiar with Clemmons, even ran a check for outstanding warrants — and came up empty. That check took place at 12:38 a.m. on Nov. 29, 2009, the same day that Clemmons committed one of the worst crimes in the history of the Pacific Northwest.

The deputies did the warrant check while following a 1976 Lincoln Continental collector car owned by Clemmons. When the Lincoln parked, one of the deputies recognized Clemmons getting out of the passenger side.

It is yet another example of how close authorities came to stopping Clemmons before he acted on a pledge to kill as many police officers as he could.

After being released from the Pierce County Jail on Nov. 23, 2009 — six days before the shootings at a Forza Coffee shop in Parkland — Clemmons took a number of steps that could have resulted in a warrant being issued for his arrest or in bail-bond employees trying to hunt him down. But each time, the opportunity was missed.

One opportunity arose when Clemmons failed to report to his community corrections officer, despite being required to do so within 24 hours of his release from jail. Another came when

Clemmons cut off a GPS bracelet that had been placed around his ankle by a bail-bond agency that had posted his \$190,000 bond.

The police report about the deputies spotting Clemmons the same day of the shootings was recently made available as part of a large release of public records by the Pierce County Sheriff's Department. That release followed a lengthy court action in which The Seattle Times — supported by The News Tribune of Tacoma, The Associated Press, and television stations KING, KIRO and KOMO — requested access to the 2,000-plus pages of documents and prevailed in a unanimous ruling by the state Supreme Court. The records' release had been fought by relatives and associates of Clemmons who had been charged with aiding him either before or after the shootings.

The GPS bracelet

The documents provide new details about how Clemmons managed to get away with cutting off the tracking device, used by Jail Sucks Bail Bonds of Chehalis to track Clemmons' whereabouts and keep him within the court's jurisdiction. On Nov. 25, two days after his release, Clemmons went to the detached garage of one of his three Pierce County homes and removed the GPS device. Clemmons told Darcus Allen, a friend who had served time with Clemmons in Arkansas, that he figured the destruction of the device would bring police to his door.

Clemmons told Allen: "When they come to this door, I got something for 'em," according to an account provided by Allen to the Sheriff's Department.

The owner of Jail Sucks, John Wickert, told authorities that the bail-bond company did, in fact, receive a "strap tamper" signal on Nov. 25. But, according to a report describing Wickert's account, an "office person" at Jail Sucks called and spoke with Clemmons, "and they believed at the time things were OK."

The GPS tracking mechanism also became "static" on Nov. 25, meaning no movements were registered for it, according to the sheriff's records. With just one exception, the GPS device remained motionless for the next four days, until it was found after the four officers were killed. The one exception was a brief movement "across the alleyway" from the garage, according to the sheriff's records.

Wickert, in an interview Monday, said one of his employees called Clemmons on Nov. 25, after the tamper alert. "We get those from time to time on those units, because if they're jostled around or a little too loose on the ankle, we'll get that signal," Wickert said.

Clemmons told the Jails Sucks employee that he had not removed the GPS device, and the company did nothing further with the alert, Wickert said.

Wickert said that if he'd known Clemmons had cut off his GPS bracelet, Jail Sucks would have been on its own in going after Clemmons. "We would have gone and tried to find him," Wickert said.

After the shootings on Nov. 29, police searched Clemmons' houses in Pierce County. At one, they listened to voice-mail messages for Clemmons and found one left by Jail Sucks.

The message, according to a sheriff's report, "stated that Maurice had called them and stated he lost his charger for the ankle bracelet he was wearing and needed a new one." The company's message added that if Clemmons lost the charger, he would have to pay \$65 to get a new one.

Wickert told The Times on Monday that he left that message himself after the shootings, in hopes of getting Clemmons to come forward while police were searching for him. Wickert said he took that action on his own, without any request from law-enforcement officials.

The manhunt ended Dec. 1 when Clemmons was shot by a Seattle police officer.

The weapons

When Clemmons walked into the Forza Coffee shop on Nov. 29, he was armed with two handguns, a 9-mm Glock Model 17 and a Smith & Wesson .38-caliber revolver.

Federal authorities ran traces on both handguns, which had been left at the scene, only to find that each had long ago disappeared into the underground, according to recently released documents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

The Glock was purchased by a Seattle man at a Renton pawnshop, Ben's Loan Inc., in June 2005. The purchaser reported the gun stolen in March 2006, after his car was broken into at a downtown Seattle parking garage at Second Avenue and James Street. The gun remained missing until Clemmons turned up with it at the coffee shop.

The Smith & Wesson revolver had been unaccounted for since the 1980s. It was shipped in 1981 to the now-closed Police Arms and Citizen Supply in Lakewood, Colo., but from that point, federal authorities could turn up no records showing when the gun had been sold or to whom.

The associates

The records released by the Sheriff's Department also shed new light on the chaotic manhunt for Clemmons, and on his associates.

Clemmons' status as an active drug dealer — he sold "everything," one of his nieces told investigators — was well-known within his family, according to the reports.

One of Clemmons' friends, Reginald Robinson, told sheriff's investigators that he and Clemmons would buy "boats" of Ecstasy in Arkansas — a boat is slang meaning 1,000 pills — for \$1,000 and resell them in the Puget Sound area for \$7,000.

Robinson, who met Clemmons in an Arkansas prison, ran a charitable solicitation booth in the baggage-claim area at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, requesting money for "needy children." Police officers investigating Robinson in the days after the shooting described the booth as a "shell charity" with nightly cash counts conducted at a gas station near the airport, reports show.

In an interview with a detective on Dec. 1, 2009, Robinson denied transporting Clemmons after the shooting, but disclosed the Federal Way hotel room where Clemmons' alleged getaway driver, Darcus Allen, was staying. Allen was quickly arrested based on the tip, and is now facing murder charges in Pierce County.

After the shootings, Robinson went to a Best Buy store in Federal Way and asked clerks there to check his cellphone for police tracking devices, saying he was associated with the people involved in killing the four police officers, according to sheriff's reports.

The jail phone calls

Beginning in May 2009, Clemmons had spent several months in the Pierce County Jail on eight pending felony charges, including one accusing him of raping his 12-year-old stepdaughter. He made more than 100 hours of phone calls from the jail, all of them recorded by the Sheriff's Department. In some calls, particularly in the late summer and fall, he made explicit threats to kill police once he was released.

The newly released sheriff's reports show that a Pierce County deputy prosecutor, Angelica McGaha, listened to some of Clemmons' calls in the early summer. McGaha, in an interview Monday, said she listened to a sample of the recorded calls to see if she could find any evidence of Clemmons admitting the alleged rape or of his wife tampering with the investigation.

"I listened to a couple, and it wasn't getting me anywhere," McGaha said.

The most alarming calls made by Clemmons — including one in which he said, "The strategy is gonna go, kill as many of them devils as I can, until I can't kill no more" — were made in September 2009, long after McGaha had listened to the recordings.

Pierce County Prosecuting Attorney Mark Lindquist said Monday of McGaha: "Because of her commitment to the case, she went well above and beyond her usual role in listening to the tapes."

School shooting threat

The released documents also included an assortment of other new details. When police searched Clemmons' properties, they found a summons — for Clemmons to report for jury duty.

And days before Clemmons opened fire in the coffee shop, he threatened to go into a school and kill students, according to sheriff's reports. One of his nieces told police that Clemmons "took the gun out of his pocket and was waving it, and he said he was gonna shoot the little, the little white girls."

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