

The Troubling Interrogation of Travis Lee Wright

Robert Perske

On the morning of June 25, 1999, an officer led Travis Wright into a small, bare, soundproof room in the Stamford, Connecticut, police headquarters. He was handcuffed to a chair. For better than 12 hours, three police officers took turns interrogating him. Most of the interrogation was one-on-one.

Just before midnight an officer walked out of that room with a confession for the murder of Wieslaw Tarnowski, a homeless immigrant from Poland. The confession had been typed by Officer Gregory Holt and signed by Wright. Wright was a 17-year-old special education student at Westhill High School. A school psychologist's tests showed Wright to have an IQ of 49 (performance scale) and 59 (full scale).

No physical evidence ever connected Wright to the crime. No weapon was ever found. No witnesses ever came forward. No stenographic or videotaped records were made.

The confession contained ramblings about things Wright said and later recanted (e.g., "I was lying when I said that earlier.") Other admissions proved to be false after they were checked out.

Also, Officer Holt, Sergeant Anthony Lupinacci, and Officer John Lynch swore that Wright made other statements that did not appear in the typed confession. On the stand, all three—each with better than 20 years of service in the Stamford police—were articulate and convincing. Wright did not testify. He was utterly unable to defend himself in the "he-said-they-said" swearing contest one usually hears in courtroom trials.

The Earlier Arrest

In the early morning hours of June 25, 1999, Wright was heading home to The West End from a party at the Elks Club in downtown Stamford with his two brothers and another friend. One of them—not Wright—egged the others to jump a man who was walking on the street. They took him down and went through his empty pockets before the man got away and called the police.

When a policeman arrived, the boys took off running. The officer shouted for them to stop, but only Wright did as he was told. He stopped.

He then waited as the officer approached him and handcuffed his hands behind his back. The officer said Wright was "compliant" and "cooperative" as he was driven to headquarters, booked for attempted robbery, and placed in a cell.

The Fright

Early in the interrogation, it was clear to the officers that Wright's time in the cellblock was frightening. He never wanted to go back there again. He wanted to get out of the attempted robbery charge and go home.

Lupinacci offered a friendly sounding deal: If Wright "cooperated" Lupinacci would assist him with the prosecutor. Then he asked Wright whether he knew anything about "the stabbing in The South End" a couple of months earlier.

Early Stories

Wright named a woman who told him she saw the man being murdered. When the officer said they would check, Wright said he was lying.

Next, Wright told a long, involved story about being with a group of boys and girls who watched somebody they knew do the killing. The police checked immediately and found that the person he named was in prison at the time of the crime.

They confronted him harshly. They said he was lying again. They told him to "tell the truth." For quite some time the officers employed a powerful combination of confrontation and sympathy—a tactic that every interrogator learns in the police academy.

Later, Wright may have been stumped. He wanted to say something that he thought the officers wanted to hear, but he repeatedly denied doing the crime.

The interrogators kept pushing until Wright became silent. He hung his head. He "teared up." He gasped. Even so, the officers accused him of

holding something back. Wright's silence continued.

The Breakdown

Finally, Holt said, "Travis, that's enough. I'm going to put you back in the cell block." Then Wright "just broke down." According to Holt's testimony:

[Mr. Wright] started crying. He was very upset. There were visible tears coming down. He was sobbing. And I said, Travis, whatever it is, tell me the truth. Whatever it is, just tell me what is bothering you. Why are you so upset. [Mr. Wright] continued to cry. I moved closer to him. I said, Travis, whatever it is, we can get through this. Why are you so upset? What got you crying? [Mr. Wright] continued to cry. Eventually I was directly next to him, closer than both defense counsels are. I put my right arm on his left shoulder. I said, Travis, talk to me, what is the matter here, what is bothering you so much. Take a deep breath. He physically took in a breath, exhaled it. He kind of stopped crying. I said, now Travis, whatever it is, we can get through this together. But tell me what has got you upset? There was a pause and then he started in with different details of happened.

The Final Story

Wright suddenly offered up an amazing list of self-incriminating details. He said that on April 11, 1999, the night of the murder, he attended a dance at the YMCA. (Records show he wasn't at the "Y" that night.)

He said he walked to The South End and planned to stay overnight with his cousin. (The cousin had moved away 2 years earlier.)

He said he went behind a house at 715 Atlantic Street "to take a leak." He walked toward an empty car when a man came at him and grabbed him. He shook himself free and ran to the front of the house. Then, thinking the man might be coming around the house, he went into the back again. The man reappeared, grabbed Wright, and started to choke him. (Expert medical witnesses said that the victim was so drunk he couldn't stand up. His blood-alcohol level was .40—four times greater than the DWI threshold.)

Wright said he stabbed the man, using his left hand. (The autopsy indicated a left-handed killer. Wright is right handed, but in the confession, he said he switched the knife to his left pants pocket so he could put a bag of chips in his right. He also pointed out on a ruler that the knife had a six-inch blade.)

There were two stabs. One stopped short and one went deep. He described the direction of the

thrusts. (These statements matched the medical report in precise detail.)

Wright said the man was standing up when he stabbed him. (Medical experts testified that the victim was flat on his back and drunk in the front right seat of an abandoned car when he was stabbed. If the victim had been standing, blood would have flowed profusely on the victim's and the murderer's clothes. Also, neither the typed confession nor statements by the officers described how Wright managed to get the victim into the car—especially problematic because a large boat was positioned so close to the right front door that it had to be taken off before the body could be removed.)

Holt asked Wright to draw a diagram of the crime scene. He could not do it. So Holt drew the diagram for him, showing the positioning of the streets, the house, and the backyard. Then he asked Wright to draw where the abandoned car was placed. (Wright's placement of the car was at least 100 feet from where it actually was. More important, neither Holt nor Wright drew the large boat so close to that right front door. Everyone seemed oblivious to the boat until the defense counsel discovered it in the crime scene photos.)

Wright said he killed the man at 2:00 a.m. (A witness saw the victim alive later on the same day. One medical expert opined that the victim died around 1:30 p.m.)

Wright said that he threw the knife off the Pulaski Street Bridge. (The next day, state police scuba divers scoured the water bottom and found no knife. Wright named other locations, but no knife was found. Finally Wright said he was lying about having a knife all along.)

The typed confession contained a curious ending:

In the beginning of this statement, I told P.O. Holt and P.O. Lynch that when Sgt. Lupinacci asked me about the stabbing I said I did not know anything. This is not true. He said to me that if I helped him he could help me possibly with the robbery I was arrested for this morning. I told the sergeant that I did know something about the stabbing and then started to talk to them.

"He told us things that only the killer could know."

During the trial, the interrogating officers voiced this statement repeatedly—as if it were some kind of conviction-clinching mantra. The prosecutors echoed the mantra as well. Even those waiting for a verdict heard the jury shout at least twice

from inside the deliberation room, “But he told the detectives things that only the killer could know!”

Anyone who studies false confessions knows that this catchall statement is *always* stated freely and promiscuously—as long as no electronic recording had been made of the interrogation.

The Outcome

The prosecutors claimed that Wright did not have mental retardation. They argued vigorously that he was “intelligent and streetwise.” The defense attorney stated that if the interrogation had been videotaped, there would have been no need for a defense attorney.

- Shortly before the trial ended, the prosecutors reduced the charge from murder to first degree manslaughter.
- On December 1, 1999, a jury found Wright guilty.
- On January 25, 2001, Travis Wright was sentenced to 17 years in prison.
- An appeal is being filed. The appeal will also cite other errors the trial court made that are not connected to the confession.

Conclusions

Most detectives, when asked about the ingredients of a good investigation, will recite the following drill:

- Get evidence, get evidence, get evidence!
- Find witnesses
- Try for a confession

In this case, however, the lone confession and the interrogators’ added testimony came across like a bright neon sign on a foggy night. It came across so vividly, the jury failed to pay close attention to numerous exculpatory facts that were presented as well. This happens often when the defendant is unfairly devalued because of poverty, membership in a minority group, or mental disability.

When legislatures mandate the videotaping of interrogations:

- Judges and juries will see and hear for themselves everything that went on during the interrogation. There would be no guessing.

- Verdicts of guilt or innocence will be more accurate.
- Postconviction appeals will be lessened.
- Thousands of dollars will be saved in court costs.
- Hundreds of hours of court time will be saved.

Police departments may say it is too early to make such a high jump. They fail to see that we now live in The Electronic Age, and they may need to get cracking to catch up.

Police departments may say the cost will be too high. They are wrong. When I drive the 100 miles from Hartford to Darien, I pass 14 Radio Shack Stores. For \$399.00, I can get an RCA audio camcorder from anyone of them that would be perfect for an interrogation room.

Police departments may say that their integrity will be questioned. When I was a very young man, I worked in the communications division of the Colorado State Patrol. I knew many officers well. Most were so utterly honest they would never soil their conscience by fudging evidence. There were others, however, who would lie through their teeth to get a conviction if they knew they would not get caught.

There is a crucial need for citizens who are willing to stick their noses into cases like Wright’s. It is true; we now live in an age of intense professionalism, but pay attention:

- Skilled professionals, when called upon to testify, can only appear in court when they take the witness stand. The rule of sequestration states that they cannot even sit in the audience before or after they testify.
- Lawyers can work intensely on a case, but when the case ends they must move on—if they want to make a living doing what they do.
- Citizens of the free world can do some things that professionals cannot. They can form a circle of friends, sit in court through every day of a trial, approach the media about the defendant’s disabilities, and raise awareness in the community. When all fails, citizens can organize support groups and prison visiting groups—all of whose members are determined to keep a convict from disappearing into the bowels of a prison and being forgotten by all on the outside.

Reference

Connecticut v. Wright (2000). Stamford Criminal Court, Part A. Case No. CR99012882. November 3-December 1.

The author was present at the trial discussed in this paper. He saw and heard everything the jury saw and heard.

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