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Witnesses: Homeless man did not threaten deputy who shot him dead

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IOWA CITY -- Two men who watched a Johnson County deputy shoot a homeless man to death Friday night tell a story that's sharply different from the account police have so far provided.

The 26-year-old homeless man was not wielding a knife and did not lunge at the deputy before the deputy fired, said Brock Brones and Mike Tibbetts, both of Iowa City.

"There was no knife, there was no lunging," Tibbetts said. "I saw a cop shoot a guy in cold blood."

Brones, 22, and Tibbetts, 40, who both work for a telecommunications company in Iowa City, got off work at 7 p.m. Friday and drove with another co-worker to Old Capitol Brew Works to have a drink. As their vehicle was coming out of the alley next to City Electric, which was blocked by bags of cans and bottles and some broken glass, they saw the episode unfolding to their left and turned off the radio so they could hear what was going on.

A skinny black man was lying on the pavement with his head against the tire of a car about 40 feet away. He was missing teeth, his clothes were dirty and he had blood on his torso. The deputy, wearing civilian clothes, had a gun pointed at the man, and a third man -- whose side was covered in blood -- was standing next to the deputy telling him to shoot, Brones and Tibbetts said.

The homeless man on the ground appeared to be drunk, they said. The deputy told him not to get up, or he would shoot, Brones and Tibbetts said.

"I don't give a f---," the homeless man responded.

The deputy repeated the threat, and ordered the man to stay down. Again, the homeless man said he didn't care. Then he stood up, spread his arms, and stumbled a few feet to the side before the deputy shot him in the chest from about 15 feet away, Brones and Tibbetts said.

The two men insisted the homeless man had no knife when he was shot.

In fact, Brones said, the homeless man was wobbling, and, though he disobeyed the deputy, he never made a threatening move.

"It wasn't aggressive," Brones said. "He was just drunk."

Police squad cars soon arrived, and the deputy, who Tibbetts said looked stunned, held up his badge for police to see.

Police have not identified either the deputy or the man he killed, saying it is because "this is an active investigation" and the dead man's family hasn't been notified.

Iowa City police said it's unlikely they will release more information before Monday. Johnson County Sheriff Lonny Pulkrabek has declined to comment.

The deputy has been placed on administrative leave.

"It's just standard operating procedure following a traumatic incident such as this, until the outcome of the Iowa City police and DCI (Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation) investigation," said Sgt. Dan Quiles of the Johnson County Sheriff's Office.

Brones and Tibbetts said the deputy was wearing shorts and a shirt, but police said he was on duty. "He's a civil deputy, but, yeah, he was on duty," Quiles said.

The incident started, police said, when a patron and his wife left the Hawkeye Hideaway in the 300 block of Prentiss Street and saw the homeless man fiddling with bags of cans and bottles in the alley next to City Electric, where several bottles lay broken on the pavement.

An argument ensued, police said, and the homeless man stabbed the patron, whom friends identified as John Bohnenkamp, a University of Iowa

maintenance worker and a regular at the Hawkeye Hideaway.

The deputy drove by the scene in a tan-colored vehicle, stopped, jumped out, drew his gun, and trained it on the homeless man , police said.

From then on, the detailed account Tibbetts and Brones gave The Gazette is at odds with the police account, particularly in how it describes the moments before the deputy fired his gun.

In a statement, the Iowa City Police Department said, based on preliminary information: "The deputy confronted the knife-wielding transient. The transient ignored the deputy's repeated commands to drop the knife. Instead, the armed transient advanced threateningly toward the already injured Iowa City resident and was shot by the deputy."

Tibbetts and Brones insisted that account is not true.

"He could hardly stand," Brones said of the homeless man .

Bohnenekamp underwent emergency surgery Friday night at University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics, but was released Saturday afternoon. He answered the telephone at his home Saturday night but declined to comment.

"Stop calling me, because I'm not going to say a word," he said.

The Gazette checked the backgrounds of the witnesses who dispute the police account of the shooting. Brones has nothing but traffic citations on his record. Tibbetts was convicted of operating while intoxicated in 2000 and 2006 and has two minor drug convictions on his record, but no felonies and no prison time.

His record, he said, has "absolutely nothing to do with" what he saw Friday on Prentiss Street.

"I could be Hitler, at this point, and it doesn't change what I just saw," Tibbetts said.

In 1996, many Iowa City residents were enraged after a police officer shot and killed Eric Shaw, 31, who was inside his father's Iowa City business, talking on the telephone at night. Police were investigating an open door, and Officer

Jeffrey Gillaspie shot Shaw when the two startled each other just inside the building.

Gillaspie was never charged with a crime, and resigned from the police department.

Shaw's family won a \$1.5 million settlement from the city.