

'Friendly Fire' Killing of Detective: 42 Shots, 7 Officers, 11 Seconds

By Michael Wilson, Ali Watkins and Ali Winston

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The call came in just after dark on Tuesday — a masked man with a gun was robbing a T-Mobile store in Queens, holding two employees in a back room.

Within minutes, the first police officers arrived, and two officers and a sergeant ran inside, officials said. More officers pulled up outside, and still more. The man in the store advanced quickly toward the officers inside, pistol raised. They retreated out of the store.

Then everything went wrong.

Seven officers opened fire toward the store — a total of 42 shots within 11 seconds, the police said. “It goes from zero to 60,” said Chief Terence Monahan, the Police Department’s highest-ranking uniformed officer.

When the barrage of gunfire ended, two men lay bleeding on the sidewalk outside the store.

Neither was the robber.

They were brother officers, struck in a crossfire of police bullets. One of them, a veteran detective, Brian Simonsen, died from his wounds. A sergeant was hit nearby — “I’m shot,” he said into his radio. “Perp’s still in location.”

The man in the store was wounded and quickly arrested. In a final, terrible twist, the gun he had carried turned out to be fake, the police said. Lethal in appearance, but harmless.



Detective Brian Simonsen
New York Police Department

[Citing the detective’s death, Mayor Bill de Blasio canceled a political trip to New Hampshire.]

Those 11 seconds of blind confusion will be parsed in the days and weeks ahead, as the police do an internal investigation to learn how such a chain of events could occur and how a recurrence could someday be prevented.

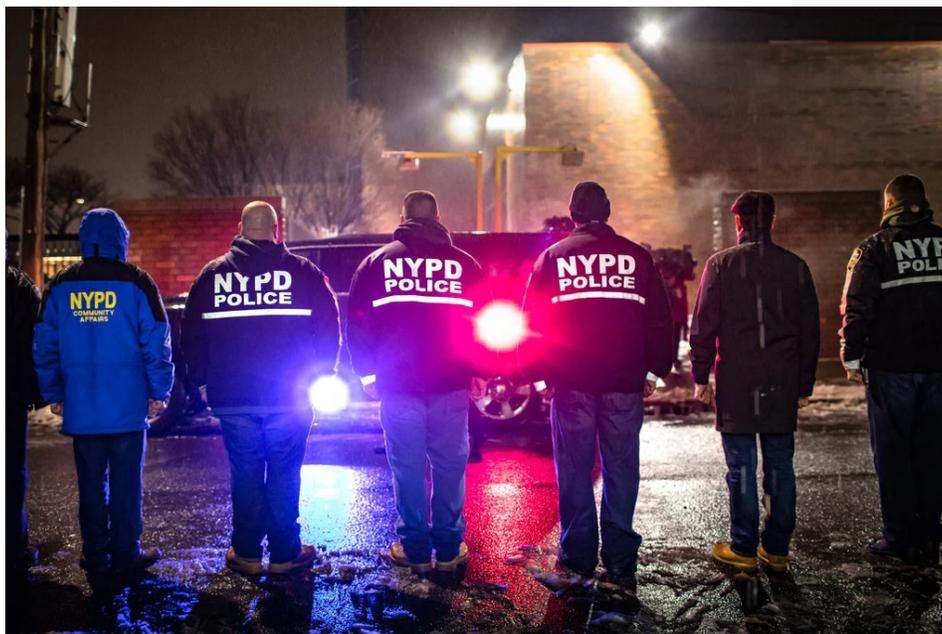
Detective Simonsen, 42, a 19-year veteran, was fatally shot in the chest, the police commissioner said. He was the first New York City police officer to be killed in the line of duty since July 2017. The sergeant who was struck, Matthew Gorman, 34, underwent surgery for a gunshot wound to his hip and was expected to recover.

The robbery suspect was identified as Christopher Ransom, 27, of Brooklyn, who has history of prior arrests for minor crimes and whom the police were seeking in connection with a cellphone store robbery in January. He was shot eight times, the police said, and was in stable condition at New York Hospital Queens. He was charged with murder and robbery.

New details released on Wednesday gave some shape to the confusing initial accounts of the chaotic event. Details of fatal police shootings in New York City can be slow to emerge in the initial 24 hours, in part because police investigators do not typically interview the officers who have discharged their weapons right away for legal reasons related to the Fifth Amendment. Instead, investigators begin by gathering the accounts of officers who were present but did not open fire.

The police in the area heard the call from a dispatcher shortly after 6 p.m. on Tuesday, relating a bystander's account of a man with a gun in the T-Mobile store forcing two employees into a back room. A parade of officers responded on their own radios to say they were en route: "Show me going," they said, according to a recording of the radio dispatches on Broadcastify.

The dispatcher responded with the standard police directive to drive safely: "Arrive alive," and added, "No sirens, guys."



Police officers lined up outside the Jamaica Hospital Medical Center on Tuesday night waiting for the body of Detective Brian Simonsen to be transported to the city morgue. Stephen Speranza for The New York Times

Detective Simonsen and his boss, Sergeant Gorman, were among the first to reach the store, both in plain clothes, along with some uniformed officers. Sergeant Gorman and two uniformed officers entered the store at about 6:12 p.m., Deputy Chief Kevin Maloney of the Force Investigation Division, which investigates all police shootings, said at a news conference on Wednesday.

Mr. Ransom emerged from a back room and raised the imitation pistol, walking toward them, Chief Maloney said. The three officers retreated outside, and Mr. Ransom walked to the store's front door. He made motions as if he were firing the gun at the officers outside the store.

Seven officers opened fire. Detective Simonsen fired twice, and Sergeant Gorman, 11 times, the police said. Five other officers fired 29 shots among them.

"Shots fired! Shots fired!" an officer shouts, his voice cracking, according to the recording of radio traffic. Dozens of gunshots ring out in the background.

"We don't know at this point who shot who," Chief Monahan said.

Detective Simonsen, who was struck once in the chest, was not wearing a bulletproof vest. He and Sergeant Gorman had been staking out a house nearby as part of a robbery investigation when they responded to the call, law enforcement officials said.

"It's not uncommon for detectives to go out without a vest, especially when they don't anticipate an apprehension or don't have a planned apprehension," said Michael Palladino, the president of the Detective's Endowment Association. "You don't expect to get involved to that degree."



An image of Christopher Ransom, 27, taken from a security camera during the robbery of a cellphone store on Jan. 19, the police said. New York Police Department

The police have viewed footage from the body cameras worn by five of the officers at the shooting, as well as surveillance video from cameras in and around the store, Deputy Chief Maloney said.

Officers rushed Detective Simonsen to Jamaica Hospital Medical Center in a squad car. "The trauma staff did their best to try to save him," Commissioner James P. O'Neill said from the hospital on Tuesday night. "We thank them for that. They were unable to do so, however."

A passing civilian drove Sergeant Gorman to the same hospital.

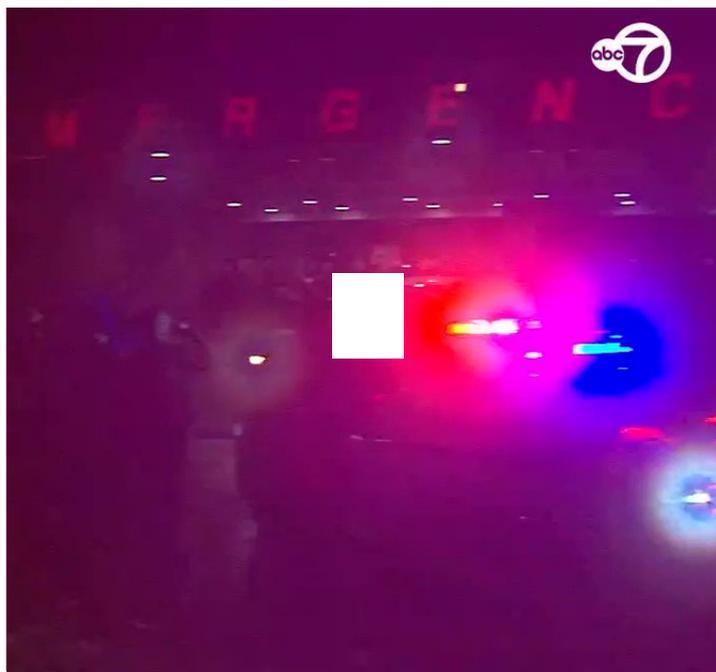


Eyewitness News

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In a moving display outside Jamaica Hospital, officers from all over the city gather to salute fallen NYPD Det. Brian Simonsen.

7ny.tv/2tJJKP3



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Mr. Ransom went to bizarre lengths in recent years to gain special access to the Brooklyn criminal courthouse. In 2013, he was charged with forging a letter from Kingsborough Community College to obtain an internship at the court, a criminal complaint said.

He was later caught in a judge's chambers, where he did not have permission to be. An order of protection forbade him from approaching two judges in the building — an order he violated later that same year, court records show.

Mr. Ransom had always had a fascination with law enforcement, friends said. He had wanted to be a police officer since he was a boy, said one friend, Frank Rios. "But he couldn't," Mr. Rios said, "on account of being autistic."

Mr. Ransom's Facebook account contained several pictures of himself dressed like a police officer or an F.B.I. agent. In 2016, Mr. Ransom was arrested after using a fake badge and uniform to try to enter the 77th Precinct station house. And in a Facebook video, someone filmed Mr. Ransom, shirtless and wearing a red cape, approaching a police station house and greeting officers, thanking them for their service. He said he was a superhero.



Bunting hangs at the 102nd Precinct where Detective Simonsen worked for his entire career before he was killed in the line of duty on Tuesday. Uli Seit for The New York Times

“I just want to save people’s lives,” he said.

Detective Simonsen was a deeply familiar face in the 102nd Precinct. He spent his entire career there. He knew the neighbors and local businesses. He was a regular at the bodega near the precinct, where he chatted with employees and insisted on paying for his daily bottle of water.

Described by a family member as “a classic guy’s guy,” Detective Simonsen loved sports — especially New York ones — and was known as the life of the party in his large, but tight-knit community in Riverhead in Long Island.

“I can genuinely say he was the nicest, kindest person I’ve ever met in my entire life,” Terry Legrady, a neighbor and former patrol partner, said.

Detective Simonsen represented his colleagues as a union delegate. For that reason, he should not even have been at work on Tuesday evening: Mr. Palladino said the detective had attended a delegate meeting that morning, which excused him from his shift. He showed up anyway, eager to work on a robbery pattern with his sergeant.

“This was a guy who loved that community. This was his life. He loved the 102nd Precinct,” Chief Monahan said. “He loved the people of that community. He loved the cops of that community.”

As part of the departmental review, the tactics used in the shooting will be examined. The positioning of two groups of officers on opposing sides of the store entrance will almost certainly be looked at with a critical eye. “You want to avoid that crossfire situation,” Chief Monahan said.

It remains unclear whose bullet killed Detective Simonsen. The officers involved in the incident are said to be distraught.

“They’re all going through a lot of emotional distress,” said Chief Monahan. “This is the worst thing you could go through as a Police Department.”