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Jury Considers Unusual Case of Manslaughter

Tampa

By Bill Duryea

Tampa_ During a week in five different homicides were being tried in Hillsborough Circuit Court , perhaps the most legally compelling of them was the one that carried the least penalty.

Late Thursday afternoon a six-person jury began deliberating whether Jeff Thomas Williams, 19 is guilty of manslaughter and aggravated assault with a firearm in connection with the shoot death in July 1993 of Jason Jetton, a 20-year old from Clair Mel

The manslaughter case, which the lead prosecutor calls “ a brain teaser, perfect for a law school exam,” is unusual for several reasons.

Among the peculiarities is the fact Williams did not fire the shot that killed Jetton. The fatal shot, fired accidentally, came from the gun of Jetton’s best friend, William “bubba” Sullivan

Nonetheless, they were both charged in the killing. Sullivan, 25 pleaded guilty to manslaughter, on Monday and received 10 years of probation. If convicted, Williams could face some prison time, but not the long terms that accompany a murder conviction.

But perhaps the most unusual aspect of this case is that while the co-defendant were charged with assaulting each other, they were also charged with killing someone else.

Jason Jetton was only a bystander in the fight ended his life.

Not only have I never prosecutor a case like this , I don’t know anybody who has tried a case like this , Assistant Hillsborough State Attorney Leland Baldwin said on Thursday.

On the night of July 17, 1993 Jetton was with a group of friend drinking and playing baseball at a public park in Clair Mel. Sheriff deputies told them to take the party elsewhere and the ended up at a friend’s house.

Sometime that evening Jetton’s pager went off. It was a girl he had dated, Jeff William 17-year-old sister, Lindsey , Jetton called her at her brother’s house.

During the conversation another man who had dated Lindsey got on phone and began to argue with Jetton, Baldwin said.

The gauntlet was thrown down and Jetton and his friends piled into two trucks and driver to the Brandon Oaks apartment complex where Jeff Williams lived.

What happened when Jetton and his friends led by Sullivan arrived in the parking lot about 1:50 am in July 18, is what the jury needs to sort out.

Prosecutors say Sullivan, who has a reputation as being handy with his fists, only intended to brawl. But he was met by Williams armed with a .22-caliber rifle with a sawed-off stock.

Thought there were between five and 15 of Williams friends in the parking lot, Baldwin said "only one person armed himself. That was Jeff Williams.

"The only person who exacerbated this situation is the man over there", she said pointing to Williams. Sullivan she said "only went for his gun only after he saw one in William's hands."

Mark Gatesman, William's attorney, said such a scenario defies credulity.

He described Sullivan as the aggressor, quoting Sullivan as a man "who doesn't back down from a fight."

Williams was simply meeting defending himself from a threat he know was on its way to his door step. He met force with force" Gatesman said.

Sullivan got out of his truck with a 30-30 rifle in his hands and pointed at Williams "You want a piece of this. " according to Gatesman.

Interesting , Sullivan said that is what Williams said to him , Baldwin said.

There two men squared off. Who struck who first is not clear, but something knocked the barrel of Sullivan's gun swinging it to the side.

The gun fired and a bullet tore through Jetton's left side slicing through several organ before coming out the other side. He bleed to death.

The jury, which will resume its deliberations their morning must answer some tough questions before it can find Williams guilty of manslaughter and aggravated assault with a firearm.

We he being culpably negligent when he pulled a gun in a parking lot crowded with people? Was he threatening Sullivan with deadly force?

Or, as the defense argues, was Jetton death a tragic accident brought on by none other than his best friend?