

April 30, 2018

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AG STEVE MARSHALL ANNOUNCES COURT OF CRIMINAL APPEALS UPHOLDS CAPITAL MURDER CONVICTION FOR MURDER OF MONTGOMERY POLICE OFFICER IN 2006

(MONTGOMERY) - Attorney General Steve Marshall announced the Alabama Court of Criminal Appeals has upheld the capital murder conviction and death sentence of Mario Dion Woodward for the murder of Montgomery Police Officer Keith Houts in 2006. Woodward was convicted in Montgomery County Circuit Court in 2008.

"This case is a tragic reminder of the debt we owe to law enforcement officers who put their lives on the line every day," said Attorney General Marshall. "Officer Houts was carrying out his routine duties and during the course of a simple traffic stop, he was viciously murdered. Even after the killer's first shot cut down his victim, he proceeded to shoot the fallen officer four more times. The death penalty is a fitting punishment for Mario Woodward's evil actions."

Evidence was presented at trial regarding the crime. During his patrol in north Montgomery on September 28, 2006, Officer Houts conducted a traffic stop at about 12:30 p.m. He entered the license tag of a gray Impala vehicle into a mobile data terminal, and a video camera in his patrol car recorded the events that followed. Officer Houts walked toward the car and when he got there, Woodward shot him in the jaw, with the bullet entering his neck and severing his spine so that he instantly collapsed. Still, Woodward shot Officer Houts four more times before fleeing the scene and eventually, the state.

The Impala was registered to the father of Woodward's girlfriend, and the evidence at trial showed that Woodward had been using her car, that he had the keys, and that he and the car were gone the morning of the shooting. After the shooting, Woodward asked his girlfriend and a friend of hers to take him to Birmingham. As the three were traveling together to Birmingham, Woodward told them he had messed up and shot a police officer who had pulled him over. He made a cell phone call telling someone to get rid of the girlfriend's Impala, and threw something from the vehicle they were riding in, which the friend identified as a gun. In Birmingham, Woodward met up with another friend and continued his flight from the state, destroying evidence and confessing to one other person along the way.

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In the meantime, an investigation by Montgomery police determined that Woodward had confessed to witnesses that he had shot the officer, and that he had gone to Atlanta. A deputy federal marshal saw Woodward at a gas station in Atlanta, and when he arrested Woodward, Woodward said, "What's going on? I didn't shoot anybody." Records from cell phone towers verified calls placed from Woodward's cell phone at various locations, including that he was in north Montgomery at the time and area where Officer Houts was murdered.

The case was prosecuted at trial by the Montgomery County District Attorney's Office in 2008, and Woodward was convicted of murder made capital because he had killed an on-duty law enforcement officer and because the murder was done by shooting from inside a vehicle. After Woodward's conviction and sentence were upheld on appeal, Woodward raised new claims in state court. He primarily argued that his attorneys were ineffective for failing to present certain evidence during the guilt and penalty phases of his trial. The Attorney General's Capital Litigation Division handled Woodward's case in the Circuit Court of Montgomery County and during the appeals process, establishing that Woodward received effective counsel and a fair trial. The Circuit Court rejected Woodward's claims and the Alabama Court of Criminal Appeals agreed, affirming the Montgomery County Circuit Court's decision on Friday, April 27.

Attorney General Marshall commended Assistant Attorney Rich Anderson of the Attorney General's Capital Litigation Division for his successful work in this case.