

Officer Involved Shooting of Larry Lanehart

Gardena Police Department

Officer Ryan Sproles, #101476

J.S.I.D. File #17-0224



JACKIE LACEY

District Attorney

Justice System Integrity Division

December 11, 2019

MEMORANDUM

TO: CHIEF THOMAS KANG
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FROM: JUSTICE SYSTEM INTEGRITY DIVISION
Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office

SUBJECT: Officer Involved Shooting of Larry Lanehart
J.S.I.D. File #17-0224
L.A.S.D. File #017-00043-3199-055

DATE: December 11, 2019

The Justice System Integrity Division of the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office has completed its review of the April 30, 2017, non-fatal shooting of Larry Lanehart by Gardena Police Department (GPD) Officer Ryan Sproles. We have determined that Officer Sproles acted in lawful self-defense when he fired his weapon at Larry Lanehart.

The District Attorney's Command Center was notified of this shooting on April 30, 2017, at approximately 2:27 p.m. The District Attorney Response Team responded to the scene and was given a briefing and walk-through by Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department (LASD) Detective Bob Kenney.

The following analysis is based on reports and other materials, including recorded interviews of witnesses, 9-1-1 calls, radio communications, body-worn videos, dash camera videos, traffic camera videos, and photographs submitted to this office by LASD Homicide Bureau. The voluntary statement of Officer Sproles was considered in this analysis.

FACTUAL ANALYSIS

On April 30, 2017, at approximately 11:00 a.m., Larry Lanehart and his fiancée, Erica W., engaged in a verbal argument in their apartment. Erica W., along with her three young children from another relationship, left the apartment and drove to a nearby church located on Denker Avenue in Gardena. Shortly thereafter, Lanehart drove to the same church in his Chevrolet Malibu. Lanehart continued arguing with Erica W. on the street outside the church. Erica W.'s

children ran out of the car and into the church. Lanehart took Erica W.'s cell phone so she could not call the police.

At approximately 11:43 a.m., two separate witnesses called 9-1-1 and reported a disturbance in front of the church. One caller told the dispatcher he saw children running from a car, and another described it as a domestic dispute. Sproles responded to the call for service. At approximately 11:46 a.m., Sproles arrived at the church driving a distinctively marked black and white police car and wearing a distinctively marked police uniform. Sproles did not have a partner officer in his car. Sproles was equipped with a body-worn camera and his car was equipped with a dash camera.

As Sproles arrived, Lanehart reversed his car into a parked car on Denker Avenue, and Lanehart proceeded to quickly drive south on Denker Avenue. Videos from Sproles' dash camera and Gardena traffic cameras at several intersections show that Sproles followed Lanehart south on Denker Avenue. Lanehart failed to stop at the stop sign as he turned right onto 162nd Street. Lanehart failed to stop for a red light as he turned right onto Western Avenue going northbound. Sproles activated his emergency lights and siren as he approached Western Avenue in an attempt to conduct a traffic stop. At times, Lanehart travelled at approximately 80 miles per hour in a 35 miles per hour zone as he weaved through moderate traffic.¹ Lanehart drove through another red light at the intersection of Western Avenue and Redondo Beach Boulevard. As Lanehart approached the intersection of Western Avenue and Marine Avenue, he collided with another car and his car skidded into the curb past the northeast corner of the intersection. Approximately one minute elapsed from the time Sproles activated his police car's lights and sirens until Lanehart crashed and disabled his car.

Within approximately ten seconds after the collision, Sproles stopped his police car behind the driver side of Lanehart's car. Lanehart exited his car and faced Sproles. Sproles radioed information about his location and the collision. Sproles exited his car, pointed his service weapon at Lanehart, and loudly commanded him to get on the ground. Simultaneously, Lanehart yelled back at Sproles, and then knelt by his open driver door.

¹ Lanehart's speed is estimated based on Sproles' speed as indicated by his police car dash camera software.



Lanehart exited his car.



Lanehart knelt on one knee after Sproles ordered him to get on the ground.

After Lanehart knelt, Sproles started to say something else into his radio when Lanehart looked into the passenger compartment of his car and reached for something with his left hand. Sproles fired seven rounds from his service weapon, a .45 caliber Glock, at Lanehart. Lanehart leapt into his car and exited through the front passenger side door yelling with his hands up.² Lanehart was grazed by a bullet on his right forearm causing a minor injury. Lanehart was arrested without further incident.

Lanehart was unarmed and there were no weapons in his car. Two cell phones, one of which belonged to Erica W., were located on the driver seat cushion. Each one of the seven rounds Sproles fired impacted the driver side of Lanehart's car.

² Neither the body-worn, nor the dash cameras captured audio with sufficient clarity to understand Lanehart's words immediately prior to or after the shooting.



Lanehart looked and reached inside his car moments before Sproles fired his service weapon.



Lanehart looked back at Sproles before he fired his service weapon.



Lanehart entered his car after Sproles started shooting.

Statement of Officer Sproles

Sproles was interviewed by LASD investigators after he reviewed his body-worn and dash camera videos. Sproles stated that when he arrived to the church, several pedestrians directed his attention to Lanehart's car driving away at a high rate of speed. As he saw Lanehart driving away, a woman told him, "He just hit my car!" Sproles saw Lanehart run a stop sign and continue to drive erratically. He saw Lanehart almost crash into other cars as Lanehart ran a red light turning northbound on Western Avenue. Sproles activated his lights and siren and followed Lanehart at speeds of up to "the high 80's" until Lanehart crashed.

After the crash, Sproles believed Lanehart's car was disabled. Sproles intended to do a felony traffic stop and he was going to wait for back-up, but Lanehart exited his car. Sproles also exited his car and heard Lanehart make some comments about "killing" somebody or something while looking at him. Sproles ordered him to get on the ground and "had him at gunpoint the whole time." Sproles "never told him anything about his hands." Lanehart put one knee on the ground and "scooted closer to the open doorjamb of his car while staring at [Sproles]." Lanehart had his left hand near the driver seat of his car, inside the car, and out of Sproles' view. "Within a couple of seconds he looks inside his car and reaches, like leans and reaches further into his car . . ." Sproles "thought he was going to pull out a gun and shoot." Sproles believed Lanehart "was going to reach in and get his gun and engage [him] in a gun battle." In response, Sproles fired his service weapon.

Statement of Larry Lanehart

LASD investigators interviewed Lanehart on the afternoon of the shooting. He stated that he had an argument with Erica W. at their apartment. Erica W. left their apartment with her children and drove to a church, and shortly thereafter he drove to the church to speak with her. Lanehart continued arguing with Erica W. while she was seated in her car, which was parked in the street by the church. Lanehart took Erica W.'s cell phone because he did not want her to call the police. He stated that he returned to his car and reversed into another car as he drove away.

Lanehart stated that at some point he saw a police car with its lights activated following him, but that he did not stop. He stated that he was driving too fast and got into a car accident at the intersection of Marine Avenue. When his car came to a stop, Lanehart said the officer shot him one time for "no reason" while he was still seated inside his car. After the shot was fired, he exited the passenger side of his car and surrendered. Lanehart denied exiting his car after he collided with the other car before Sproles fired his service weapon.

Statement of John M.

John M. was driving north on Western Avenue and approaching Marine Avenue when he heard a siren and pulled over. He watched as Lanehart collided with another car. He saw Sproles' police car come to a stop behind Lanehart's car. Lanehart "jumped out" of the car and yelled, "Shoot me! Kill me!" He saw Lanehart turn back and reach in the car after the officer told him to get on the ground. He believed the officer "did everything right."

Statement of Myrtle B.

Myrtle B. was driving north on Western Avenue when she heard sirens approaching. She was pulling over when Lanehart crashed into her car. She saw Lanehart get out of the car, and the “officer said something to him.” Lanehart bent down and reached into the car. She believed Lanehart was reaching for a gun, and “that’s when they shot because they probably thought the same thing.”

Statement of Gilbert B.

Gilbert B. was asleep in the business adjacent to where Lanehart’s car became disabled. He was awakened by the collision and the sound of Lanehart’s car scraping the pavement as it skidded to a stop. He then heard one voice say, “Get on the ground! Get on the ground!” followed by another voice saying, “I want to commit suicide! I want to kill myself!” Immediately thereafter, he heard four gunshots, and more yelling. When he looked outside, Lanehart was already handcuffed.

LEGAL ANALYSIS

California law permits any person to use deadly force in self-defense or in the defense of others if he actually and reasonably believed that he or others were in imminent danger of great bodily injury or death. CALCRIM No. 3470. In protecting himself or another, a person may use that amount of force which he believes reasonably necessary and which would appear to a reasonable person, in the same or similar circumstances, to be necessary to prevent imminent injury. *Id.* If the person’s beliefs were reasonable, the danger does not need to have actually existed. *Id.*

In California, the evaluation of the reasonableness of a police officer’s use of deadly force employs a reasonable person acting as a police officer standard, which enables the jury to evaluate the conduct of a reasonable person functioning as a police officer in a stressful situation. *People v. Mehserle* (2012) 206 Cal.App.4th 1125, 1146.

In evaluating whether a police officer’s use of deadly force was reasonable in a specific situation, it is helpful to draw guidance from the objective standard of reasonableness adopted in civil actions alleging Fourth Amendment violations. “The ‘reasonableness’ of a particular use of force must be judged from the perspective of a reasonable officer on the scene, rather than with the 20/20 vision of hindsight... The calculus of reasonableness must embody allowance for the fact that police officers are often forced to make split-second judgments—in circumstances that are tense, uncertain, and rapidly evolving—about the amount of force that is necessary in a particular situation.” *Graham v. Connor* (1989) 490 U.S. 386, 396-397.

Lanehart escalated an argument with his fiancée that began inside their apartment to a public street in front of a nearby church. Two persons called the police to report what they believed was a domestic disturbance with children involved. Lanehart took his fiancée’s phone so that she would not call the police before driving away. When Sproles arrived in response to the 9-1-1 calls, Lanehart collided into a parked car, and then intentionally evaded Sproles’ marked police car. Lanehart drove recklessly on city streets by speeding and running stop signs and red lights.

Lanehart eventually crashed into another car, and his extreme conduct to avoid the police led Sproles to believe that Lanehart was a danger.

After Lanehart crashed his car, he immediately exited his car and took an aggressive stance toward Sproles. Sproles heard Lanehart yell the word “kill,” which was confirmed by other witnesses. Although Lanehart crouched on one knee after Sproles ordered him to the ground, he placed his hand in the passenger compartment of his car. Sproles stated he believed that Lanehart was reaching for a gun when he fired his service weapon. Videos from Sproles’ body-worn camera and his police dash camera corroborate what Sproles observed. In contrast, Lanehart’s account of what happened is in direct conflict with the video evidence. Since Lanehart claimed he was seated in his car when the officer fired one round, he did not clarify his reason for reaching inside his car after yelling a phrase including the word “kill.” Other witnesses at the scene also saw Lanehart reach inside his car prior to Sproles shooting, and opined that Lanehart was reaching for a gun.

After the shooting, it was discovered that Lanehart was not armed with any weapons. Nevertheless, if Sproles’ beliefs were reasonable when he fired his service weapon, then the danger need not have actually existed for Sproles to act in self-defense. The totality of circumstances supports Sproles’ belief that Lanehart was reaching for a gun, and Sproles was forced to make a split-second decision under the rapidly evolving circumstances prompted by Lanehart’s erratic actions and words.

CONCLUSION

We conclude that Officer Ryan Sproles’ use of deadly force against Larry Lanehart on April 30, 2017, was legally justified in self-defense. We are closing our file and will take no further action in this matter.