

Accused ComSta Killer Arraigned Tuesday, Charged With Murder

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Brianna Gibbs/KMXT

Jealousy and workplace conflict could have been the motive behind the murder of two men at Coast Guard Base Kodiak last April. And the accused killer, James Michael "Jim" Wells, could potentially face the death penalty. Tuesday marked the first of what will likely be many court appearances for Wells, who was arrested Friday for the deaths of Coast Guard Electrician's Mate First Class James Hopkins and retired Chief Boatswain's Mate Richard Belisle. The bodies of both men were found by coworkers, shot to death, at one of the buildings at the ComSta on April 12th. Belisle was working for the Coast Guard as a civilian contractor at the time, as was the accused, Jim Wells.

The 61-year-old Wells pleaded not guilty during his arraignment in U.S. District Court in Anchorage on Tuesday. Following the arraignment, U.S. Attorney Karen Loeffler made a statement to the press and said Wells' indictment alleges six counts.

-- (Wells Update 1 :32 "The first four counts are all premeditated murder of these two individuals. The reason that there are four counts is simply that the first two counts charge murder in the first degree on, basically on federal property. The next two charges are similar premeditated murder of an employee in the course of their job, of their duties. So there are just two different ways to charge this, one is on federal property and one is of an officer and employee of the United States .")

She said counts five and six charge possession and use of a firearm in relation to a crime of violence.

-- (Wells Update 2 :21 "The murders carry, at this time, a maximum penalty of life as presently charged. I will let you know that all of these charges are death penalty eligible offenses. At this point, the maximum is charged is life in prison.")

Loeffler said there's been no decision on whether the death penalty will be sought. She said it is a long process that requires review back in Washington D.C.

The sum of the facts as gathered are in the criminal complaint filed by FBI agent Elizabeth Oberlander, which was unsealed during Wells's arraignment on Tuesday.

Oberlander wrote that Wells's pickup truck was identified driving past the main gates of the Kodiak Coast Guard Base on surveillance video at 6:48 a.m. the morning of the murders. The complaint indicates that there is probable cause he drove his truck to the airport and picked up his wife's car, and drove that to the communications station. Officials say he avoided surveillance cameras when he arrived at the station at 7:09 a.m., entered a building and shot Hopkins and Belisle multiple times. Following that, the prosecution believes he left the area at 7:14 a.m., switched cars at the airport once more, and drove past the Coast Guard base in his pickup truck at 7:22 a.m.

Hopkins and Belisle were found by a coworker in the rigger building, where antennas are repaired. The complaint reads that .44-caliber jacketed soft point bullets were recovered from the bodies. Similar ammunition was found at Wells's home shortly after the killings, but no murder weapon.

Following the murders, Wells provided an alibi, saying he was late to work because of a flat tire. He even called and left that message for both Hopkins and Belisle. But the prosecution contends that forensic testing suggests a nail gun was used on his tire and it had not been driven after the nail was put there, which Wells had claimed.

Court documents show disciplinary actions as a possible motive. A new supervisor, who is identified as "Witness B" in the complaint, began work in July 2010. Witness B said there were several disciplinary instances that resulted in shouting matches between the witness and Wells, often times loud enough to be heard by coworkers.

The complaint details a particular case, in September 2011, Wells was accused of filling his personal vehicle at a Coast Guard base gas station using a work fuel card. Following that, Wells met with the commanding officer and Witness B and was asked to sign a letter of caution. Then, in November 2011, Wells was accused of removing trees from the communications station for his personal firewood use.

The prosecution says it was around this time that Belisle asked the supervisor if he could be disassociated from Wells. Another witness reported that Hopkins and Wells's relationship also had tension, most likely because Hopkins often had to correct Wells's work. Complaints started coming in from other employees at the station against Wells, saying work wasn't being completed. Following those, the supervisor, or Witness B, met with Wells and said he needed to "be a part of the process or retire," which led to a heated argument.

Wells's run-ins with the supervisor, combined with extended absences, ultimately led to him not being allowed to attend a national conference. It is reported that Hopkins and Belisle were invited to that same conference.

The complaint says one witness said Wells's star was fading while Belisle's was rising, despite Wells wanting to be the "top dog";

Wells is scheduled to appear at a detention hearing on Monday.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.

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