

Jury Deliberates Just One Day in CommSta Murder Trial

Friday, 25 April 2014

The Associated Press/Jay Barrett/KMXT A federal jury in Anchorage today (Friday) convicted James Wells of murder in the shooting deaths of two of his co-workers at Coast Guard communications station Kodiak two years ago.

Wells, 62, was charged in the 2012 shooting deaths of Coast Guard Petty Officer 1st Class James Hopkins and retired Chief Petty Officer Richard Belisle. Wells did not testify at his trial.

Jurors began deliberating yesterday (Thursday) afternoon, and a day later, found Wells guilty of two counts each of first-degree murder, murder of an officer or employee of the United States, and possession of a firearm in a crime of violence.

Outside the courtroom, Hopkins' widow, Deborah, said she was satisfied with the verdict and now her husband could rest. She said the guilty verdict will help with closure, but not completely.

Federal prosecutors earlier said they would not seek the death penalty if Wells was convicted. He faces life in prison, and his sentencing was set for July 8.

Federal public defender Rich Curtner had no comment on the verdict.

The victims were found in the morning of April 12, 2012, in the CommSta rigging shop, where antennas are built and repaired. Hopkins, 41, was an electronics technician from Vergennes, Vermont. Belisle, 51, was a former chief petty officer who continued service to the Coast Guard as a civilian employee.

Prosecutors contended Wells, also a retired Coast Guardsman employed as a civilian technician, resented the growing influence of Belisle and Hopkins in the shop where he had been a nationally recognized antenna expert. Prosecutors said Wells meticulously planned an alibi, sneaked onto the communications station and gunned the two men down.

According to the government's theory, after the shootings, Wells went back home and called Hopkins' work phone, leaving a message saying he would be late for work because of a flat tire. Prosecutors say the flat tire was a ruse to give him a cover story for committing the murders.

According to authorities, Wells told the FBI he started driving to work, detected a soft tire, stopped at a hotel near the Kodiak airport entrance, checked the tire and returned home to change it.

A security camera at the nearby Coast Guard main gate recorded his truck heading for the communication station shortly before 7 a.m. and driving in the opposite direction toward his home 34 minutes later.

Wells' wife was out of town the day of the shooting, and her blue SUV was parked at the Kodiak airport not far from the communications station. Investigators believe a blue vehicle seen in blurry security footage belonged to Wells' wife and concluded he switched cars, waited for Hopkins to drive by, followed him to the communications station and shot him and Belisle.

Curtner and defense attorney Peter Offenbecher of Seattle contended authorities too quickly focused on Wells and ignored other possible suspects. They said prosecutors had no eyewitnesses, no confession, no murder weapon and no physical evidence linking Wells to the homicides.