

Atlanta Police Nearly Killed 80-Year Old Woman— Two Months Before Kathryn Johnston

Radley Balko | May 4, 2007, 9:10pm



From today's *Atlanta Journal*:

Two months and a day before Kathryn Johnston, there was Frances Thompson. The 80-year-old Thompson was in her bedroom the afternoon of Sept. 20, when she heard a terrible crash and shouting. Startled and confused, she grabbed a pistol and was immediately confronted by three Atlanta narcotics officers. "They had masks covering their face. I thought I was being robbed," she recalled. "They pointed those big guns at me."

Lead officer Gary Smith said repeatedly "Police! Drop the Gun!" from behind his raid shield, according to a police report. Thompson, who had pointed the gun at the intruders, put down the black revolver as officers searched her apartment for a drug dealer named "Hollywood."

No one else was home. No drugs were found. And her pistol was a toy cap gun.

The two incidents share striking similarities: Two elderly women living alone with guns; police battering in a door; faulty reports from street-level dealers helping narcotics officers; and police parsing the truth, if not outright lying.

They also lived a little more than a mile apart. And let's not forget, in **March 2005** narcotics agents conducted yet another raid on the house *next door* to Johnston's, which again turned up nothing. You have to wonder, at what point should Atlanta's judges start to question these officers' competence? More support for my recommendation that every large police department in the country keep a searchable database of every warrant applied for, issued, and executed. Mistakes need to be documented. And if the same judges continue to issue warrants to bad cops, they need to be held accountable, too. Ditto for prosecutors. Three wrong-door raids in the same neighborhood within the same 18-month period?

And of course, we now know of those other two raids *only* because of Kathryn Johnston's death. How many other wrong-door raids *haven't* we heard about? It's pretty clear now that the police were treating these neighborhoods like a war zone, with no consideration whatsoever for these peoples' civil rights.

More:

The team did not have a no-knock warrant as they did in the Johnston case. But narcotics agents are allowed to quickly batter in a door if they hear the residents scurrying around, presumably hiding drugs, *or if they hear nothing*. The team that day heard nothing, the police report said.

Emphasis mine. So if they hear something, they can break down the door. And if they *don't* hear something, they can break down the door. Meaning—as I've been arguing for some time—there's really no difference at all between a "no-knock" warrant and a "knock-and-announce" warrant, at least when it comes to giving the people inside a chance to avoid the show of violence. The problem lies with the license the warrant gives the police to make a destructive, volatile entry into a private home.

The prior raid seems to have been based on a wholly manufactured warrant as well. The affidavit states that an informant went into this old woman's home, and came out with a bag of cocaine. More evidence that this sickness permeates the entire Atlanta narcotics police unit, and isn't the work of a few rogue officers. More:

She never made a fuss about the incident.

"I thought it was all over with," she said. "I didn't know what to do. There's no one but just me. I thought I was just supposed to get over it."

Which is what I've found a lot of low-income, powerless people (or for that matter, even **wealthier, more privileged people**) tend to think. They're terrified and embarrassed. And so they never report what happened. They never go to the media. And they're certainly not going to call the police. Which suggests that awful **as this map is**, the real picture is likely quite a bit worse.

And as if this story couldn't get any sadder:

But what about the people who were mentioned in the affidavit — those supposedly going in and out of the apartment to buy drugs?

The police report answered that question: "We were advised that Ms. Thompson's son had just passed away and that there have been people and church members in and out of her apartment."