

## **Pine Lake policeman fatally shot**

Alleged assailant runs, found dead by DeKalb SWAT team

**BYLINE:** JEFFRY SCOTT, KAREN HILL

**DATE:** August 12, 2005

**PUBLICATION:** Atlanta Journal-Constitution, The (GA)

**EDITION:** Home; The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

**SECTION:** Metro News

**PAGE:** D1

Postal employee John Strock was putting the last bundle of mail on his tractor-trailer just before the mayhem broke loose Thursday afternoon at the **Pine Lake** Post Office. A fellow postal worker yelled at him: "Get inside!" Once inside, crouched in the back of the post office with other employees, he heard gunfire. Bullets smashed through the front door and clattered against the metal post office boxes in the front of the building while two terrified customers slammed themselves against the floor. A man carrying a gun came through the front door. Strock peeked out. "All I could see was a guy lying on the floor with blood around his head," said Strock.

In the parking lot outside, **Pine Lake** police Officer Francis Ortega lay mortally wounded, shot in the head, witnesses said, by the man who had fled into the post office. The gunman, also wounded in an exchange of gunfire with police, later was found dead when SWAT officers stormed the post office. The shooting started just before 5 p.m. Thursday after Ortega and other officers pulled over a green Suburban on Rockbridge Road, the main street through the DeKalb County community of about 600 people. Witnesses said Ortega struggled with a man before he was shot in the head at point-blank range. It's not clear who shot the alleged gunman, who has not been identified.

"At this point we don't know whether it was self-inflicted or an officer returned fire," said DeKalb police Sgt. Charles Dedrick. Artrail Printup, 24, who works across the street from the post office, said she was looking out the window when she saw a green truck being pulled over by police in the parking lot of the post office. She said there was one squad car at first and then a second police car pulled up. "I saw [the man] get out of his car and walk towards the police car," Printup said. "When an officer started looking like he was going to arrest him, the man jerked around and started fighting. He put the first police officer in a headlock, and then I saw he had a silver gun and he shot the other officer, it looked like in the head." Printup said the first officer "got away and then they exchanged gunfire. It busted out the windows of the car. They shot seven or eight times. Then he ran into the post office and I never saw him come out."

Four postal employees escaped from the back of the post office, said Paul Krenn, a spokesman for the U.S. Postal Inspection Service. Megan Keiper, 24, a DeKalb schoolteacher, was driving home from Coralwood School past the post office when she heard gunshots. "I had no clue what was happening," she said. "I heard several, several shots -- pop, pop, pop. I saw a girl run out of the post office, a little older than me." Then the squad cars started pulling in. I saw people behind the bushes. I saw officers run and get behind their cars trying to take cover."

**Pine Lake** Mayor Greg Zarus said Ortega had only been with the city Police Department for a short time, but that he was "one of the friendliest and a favorite" among officers. **Pine Lake** police Sgt. Milton Smith said Ortega was a part-time officer with a wife and a daughter younger than a year old. He said Ortega was "pleasant in every category that you can think of." In 1999, **Pine Lake** was stung by complaints that its Police Department was harassing motorists on the short stretch of Rockbridge Road that runs through town. News reports that the town had built its \$1.2 million budget mostly on traffic fines led to protests from African-American activists that the predominantly white city government was preying on black motorists for extra revenue. A four-month investigation concluded that, while **Pine Lake's** ticketing policies could be considered a "cash cow," they were neither racially motivated nor illegal.

The Associated Press and staff writers David Simpson and Don Plummer contributed to this article.

Photo

RENEE HANNANS HENRY / Staff

DeKalb County's SWAT team prepares to enter the post office where a man who allegedly shot a **Pine Lake** officer fled.

Graphic

Staff

Map of **Pine Lake** locates area where a police officer was