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- The Lucasville Five -- inmates sentenced to death for their roles in the prison uprising -- have proclaimed innocence from the start.
- Prosecutors cut deals to get inmates to snitch on inmates.
- One inmate, convicted for his role in the death of a corrections officer, is now a free man.

Some facts are not in dispute about what happened in Lucasville, Ohio, 30 years ago this month.

Inmates at the Southern Ohio Correctional Facility launched an uprising. It continued for 11 days. By the end, they had killed 10 men in shockingly gruesome style. The death of correctional officer Robert Vallandingham made a bad situation infinitely worse.

But three decades on, still under dispute is this: Did the state of Ohio convict the right men for Vallandingham's death?

The five inmates sentenced to death for their roles in the 1993 Lucasville riot continue to push their claims of innocence through the courts and continue to maintain that some of the real culprits in Vallandingham's murder were not held to account.

What happened in April 1993?

Muslim inmates had planned a disturbance for April 11, 1993 – Easter Sunday of that year – to protest a medical test that included alcohol, a violation of their religious beliefs.

Events quickly turned violent after a group of inmates attacked a guard and grabbed keys to the L-block section of the prison. By

nightfall, they'd killed five inmates and placed their bodies in the yard, stabbed a sixth to death and taken 12 guards hostage.

The situation spiraled out of control because inmates were on edge over an array of grievances: crowding, program cuts, cell lockdowns and searches and a spike in snitching. On the latter count, Arthur Tate, warden from December 1990 to December 1993, set up a P.O. box for inmates to send in letters about "violations of laws and rules of this institution."

By the time the rampage ended April 22, and some 400 participating inmates surrendered, the interior of L-block was nearly destroyed, 10 men were dead, dozens more were injured and Lucasville had earned its place in U.S. prison history for one of the longest and deadliest riots.

Robert Vallandingham became collateral damage. His only offense in April 1993: He was a correctional officer who became a hostage.

Vallandingham 'liked going to work'

Vallandingham, 40, had hired on in Lucasville exactly two years before his death. A native of Minford, Ohio, just nine miles to the east, he'd earlier worked as a cable lineman and hospital security guard.

"He loved it, he really liked going to work," his wife, Peggy Vallandingham, told The Enquirer 20 years ago, declining a request for an interview now.

When Vallandingham did not walk out of the prison with other hostage guards in 1993, his wife said, she felt cheated. "Not that I wanted them dead instead of Bob, but I wanted Bob to be alive, to be walking out with them."

Four days into the Lucasville events, on April 15 between 10:30 and 11 a.m., inmates strangled Vallandingham in a shower in L-block, then wrapped his body in a sheet and dumped it in the prison yard.

The officer's death was a turning point in events, recalled Howard Wilkinson, a retired Enquirer reporter who covered the uprising. "It made it very real and very terrifying for people," said Wilkinson, now

reporting for Cincinnati's WVXU-FM. "Suddenly this whole thing was serious and it was affecting the community."

Vallandingham, a star athlete at Minford High School, served in the U.S. Army with time in Vietnam. He and Peggy had a son, also named Bobby, then 19 and serving in the U.S. Navy. His funeral drew more than 1,000 people, news reports at the time said.

In 1994, Peggy Vallandingham joined a wrongful death lawsuit over her husband's death, winning a \$850,000 settlement the next year from the state of Ohio.

In 2004, corrections officials installed a memorial that includes Vallandingham's name at a corrections facility in Orient, Ohio. In 2007, a Little League park in Minford was named for him.

This year, the prison in Lucasville will observe the 30th anniversary of the uprising with a moment of silence and 21-gun salute. Vallandingham will be remembered there and at later annual memorial events in Lucasville and Orient for staff who have died in the line of duty.

Killing of an officer: 'You just can't have that'

As Vallandingham's death elevated the crisis in Lucasville, it would also shape the prosecution of the crime to come.

"I think the death of Mr. Vallandingham impacted it quite a bit," said Mike Allen, a Cincinnati attorney who served as Hamilton County prosecutor from 1998 to 2005. "From a public safety point of view, you just can't have that. The perpetrators of that crime had to be punished."

Piepmeier, longtime chief assistant prosecutor in the Hamilton County prosecutor's office, was on site just after the riot ended. He discovered the chaos that would direct his strategy.

"This was a crime scene inhabited for 11 days by 400 and some inmates that did their best to destroy everything in site."

Given that, prosecutors and investigators with the Ohio State Highway Patrol were left with virtually no physical evidence. Few hostage guards, most blindfolded while held captive, agreed to testify. Prosecutors had to make their cases with inmate-on-inmate testimony.

“If all you have is ‘snitch’ testimony, you have to accept it for what it is and do the best you can with it,” Piepmeier said.

Prosecutor: ‘We will ... say you did help us out’

The state brought cases against 50 inmates for the 10 deaths in Lucasville. It won convictions in 47.

Inmates who agreed to testify against other inmates were given deals. Many were moved to other prisons. Some got reduced penalties for their roles in the violence.

“We told them, ‘Look, when your time comes up for parole, we can’t promise you anything but we will go before the board to say you did help us out,’” Piepmeier said.

And yes, some assailants likely got a pass. “A couple of names surfaced as being major players in the riot, but no one would agree to testify against them,” Piepmeier said.

Prosecutors filed charges against inmates whose names came up again and again in conversations with informants, he said. They included the Lucasville Five, the three sent to death row for killing Robert Vallandingham among them.

Prosecutors used Ohio’s law on complicity, under which anyone present and assisting at a homicide can likewise be found guilty.

Part of their evidence included what became known as Tunnel Tape 61, one of a collection of secret FBI recordings of inmates leading the riot.

The evidence was flawed, the Lucasville Five and their advocates have long argued. In the recording in question, the leaders did not decide they would kill a guard to force the prison to restore water and

electricity in the L-block. Instead, they decided they would reconvene later that day to take up that question.

One of the inmates in that first meeting had run out of patience, according to “Lucasville: The Untold Story of a Prison Uprising,” a detailed investigation of the case by lawyer and civil rights activist Staughton Lynd.

Anthony Lavelle, head of the Black Gangster Disciples prison gang, “stormed out of the morning meeting and proceeded to mobilize his ad hoc death squad,” Lynd wrote in his account.

Vallandingham was dead about two hours later.

30 years of legal filings

The five men sentenced to death for their roles in Lucasville have fought for attention to their claims of innocence for 30 years. All have slow-moving federal lawsuits, seeking to stop their executions.

- Carlos Sanders, now legally Siddique Hasan, was prayer leader of the Sunni Muslims in Lucasville. He believes he was pinned as the instigator of the riot and charged in Vallandingham's death because he took issue with the prison's plan to test inmates for tuberculosis. “I became the prime scapegoat and, by implication, the bogeyman who controlled what others did and the Islamic figure who the rest of the world can hate,” he wrote in a 2014 essay. He considers his original trial a sham and said in a phone interview that he was not even present at the meeting captured in Tunnel Tape 61.
- Jason Robb, who was affiliated with Lucasville's Aryan Brothers, was sentenced to death for killing both Vallandingham and inmate David Sommers. Prosecutors tried the two murder charges together as a single “course of conduct.” In so doing, “the prosecution inevitably caused the Robb jury to be prejudiced” and more likely to convict, Lynd argued in his book. In his federal suit, Robb said that prosecutors presented insufficient evidence; that his trial lawyers were ineffective, failing to even offer a closing statement; and that his trial judge coached a hung jury to recommend a death sentence.
- James Were, now known as Namir Mateen, also received a death sentence for his involvement in Vallandingham's death. He was

convicted in both 1995 and 2003, winning a second trial because he was denied a hearing about his mental competency before his first trial. His federal appeal notes that he is "mildly mentally retarded" and thus not eligible, under federal law, for the death penalty.

- George Skatzes – who, at 77, has been in state custody for 40 years – maintains he was framed for the homicide that sent him to prison in 1983. He'd be exonerated for his convictions for Lucasville crimes if confessions of other inmates got more attention. "The boys that committed those stepped up," he said in a phone interview. Skatzes received death sentences for the murders of inmates David Sommers and Earl Elder – with inmates also convicted for those crimes later signing affidavits that Skatzes was not involved. He believes he was held accountable for Vallandingham's death because he took a leadership position on behalf of Lucasville's Aryan Brothers – and would not cooperate with investigators afterward. Skatzes brought "calm to the chaos" during the riot, his lawyers maintain, an oft-repeated assertion about his role.
- Keith LaMar is the only member of the Lucasville Five with an execution date. As this Nov. 16 approaches, he has exhausted his federal appeals but continues to seek a new trial. His case has attracted the most attention, highlighted on a [website](#). Most recently, a podcast called "The Real Killer" is exploring his claims of innocence in 11 episodes.
- **You should know the truth':** Was Keith LaMar a scapegoat or the leader of a 'death squad'?
- **Who is Anthony Lavelle?**
- The treasure trove of documents about the Lucasville riot is rich with names of inmates implicated in killing Robert Vallandingham. Anthony Lavelle is among the most mentioned in those – and by Lucasville Five inmates and their supporters.
- Lavelle's path to crime started around 1986, with misdemeanor robbery charges in Chicago. During one trial related to Vallandingham's death, he called himself a high-ranking member of a street gang there. After arriving in Lucasville in January 1992, convicted for unauthorized use of a stolen vehicle, he became leader of the prison's Black Gangster Disciples.
- Lavelle attended the fateful "morning meeting" of inmate organizers on April 15, 1993. Testifying in four of the Lucasville

Five trials, he said the meeting adjourned without a decision on whether to kill a guard.

- From that has grown the “rogue” narrative.
- According to Lynd’s account, Lavelle thought the Muslim and Aryan Brothers leaders were “too soft” and that he and other Black Gangster Disciple inmates “would do what had to be done,” Lynd wrote in “Lucasville.”
- “Accordingly, Lavelle began to recruit a death squad of his own to kill a guard.”
- At least 14 inmates implicated Lavelle, either in court testimony or affidavits, Lynd reported, listing their names and statements. According to their accounts, Lavelle and two masked men entered L-6, the section of the L-block where Vallandingham was being held.
- When they exited, “Lavelle was laughing,” an inmate named Greg Durkin testified. “He later said that he had taken care of business.”
- Lavelle was key to the state’s case, as other inmates followed suit, lead prosecutor Piepmeier said. “Having Lavelle flip was a big turning point.”
- Lavelle said he agreed to cooperate with investigators to avoid punishment.
- “My options were to agree to plead or face the death penalty or spend a lifetime in prison,” Lavelle said in Jason Robb’s 1995 trial, according to Associated Press reporting then. “I don’t want to be on death row. I don’t want to spend the rest of my life in prison.”
- His cooperation won him a lighter sentence – seven to 25 years for pleading guilty to conspiracy to aggravated murder of Vallandingham. It also, eventually, won him his freedom.
- He was moved out of Lucasville on the final day of the riot there – to Ohio prisons in Mansfield and Chillicothe in mid-1993, then to state prisons in Virginia, Utah and Arizona, according to a spokesperson for the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction. His sentence expired Jan. 3, 2019. He could not be located to request comment.

- The prosecution would not have offered Lavelle a deal if they considered him Vallandingham's murderer, Piepmeier said.
- "If we had any credible information that Lavelle was the hands-on killer, we would not have dealt with him," he said. "We had none."

• **What's next for Lucasville Five and death penalty?**

- The Lucasville Five were targeted for leading the riot, Lynd argued. In handing down death sentences, the state could kill "potential organizers of future rebellions with one set of executions," he wrote.
- Piepmeier said investigators and prosecutors "did the best we could with a very difficult situation."
- "What we did was not perfect, and some inmates truly got away with murder," he said.
- The four prisoners convicted for Vallandingham's death continue to wait for their next day in court. Keith LaMar hopes a new trial date will pause his scheduled execution.
- As for executions in Ohio, they are already on pause. The state has not completed a lethal injection of a condemned inmate since 2018 for lack of needed drugs.
- Staughton Lynd, who died in November, called for Ohio to grant amnesty to inmates convicted for killing Vallandingham and nine fellow inmates in 30 years ago. Officials here, he said, should follow the example of New York officials, who pardoned or commuted sentences for inmates convicted in the infamous 1971 prison riot in Attica, New York.
- "Because there was no objective corroborating evidence linking any suspect to any victim during the Lucasville uprising," he wrote in a 2017 article for the National Lawyers Guild, "Ohio should ... vacate the indictments of those men."

- Piepmeier said he met Lynd and his wife and fellow activist Alice a number of times over the years. “I respect both of them a lot but disagree with them on most things.”
- The Lynds and the inmates they assisted over time, he said, would have liked prosecutors to say “we cannot charge anyone with these 10 murders or the kidnappings and brutal beatings of correction officers” for lack of physical evidence and reliance on snitches, Piepmeier said.
- “I don’t think that would have been right.”