

Shocking testimony reveals police inaction in Conn. horror home invasion

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Podunk local cops wasted more than half an hour assessing the Connecticut home invasion and setting up a vehicle perimeter -- time the two attackers used to strangle the mother in her living room and set the fire that claimed the lives of the two girls upstairs, according to shocking testimony today.

The revelation -- which suggests perhaps the family could have been saved but for police bungling -- came on day three of testimony in the murder trial of crack addict Steven Hayes, charged as one of the two monsters who launched a rein of rape and murder against a Cheshire, CT family on a Monday morning in July, 2007.

Here's the horrifying **chronology of inaction**, according to trial documents and testimony:

9:17 a.m. Nurse and mother of two Jennifer Hawke-Petit, 48, receives a time-stamped receipt for a \$15,000 withdrawal from a local bank teller. The terrified mom has bravely told the teller and the manager that she, her husband Dr. William Petit, and their daughters, Hayley, 17 and Michaela, 11, were being held hostage in their home, and that she needed the money for ransom. Bank employees watch as Hawke-Petit takes the cash, and is driven away from the bank, allegedly by defendant Hayes.

9:21 a.m. Bank manager Mary Lyons calls 911, relaying Hawke-Petit's account, and specifying that the mom appeared "petrified."

9:26 a.m. First details of the "possible" hostage situation, and the bank employees' description of Hawke-Petit's vehicle, as allegedly driven by Hayes, is broadcast on police radio. Captains begin deploying a half-dozen marked and unmarked police vehicles around the perimeter of the Petit home.

9:27 a.m. One of the captains tells the units not to approach the house. No fire, ambulance, state police or other emergency authorities have yet been contacted.

9:44 a.m. Another of the captains, Robert Vignola, puts out a radio transmission indicating the perimeter is still being set up -- and that no one is to even call the house until that perimeter is ready.

9:54 a.m. A police radio dispatch indicates someone -- Petit, the victim father, as it turns out -- was calling out for help in the invaded home's back yard. Petit, who would be the sole survivor of the invasion, had broken free from the basement, and -- bleeding profusely from blows to the head, and with his ankles still bound -- was rolling his body across two yards to summon help.

It was at this moment, Vignola testified in New Haven Superior Court this morning, that Hayes and his co-defendant, Joshua Komisarjevsky, 29, ran out of the Petit home and peeled out down the driveway, driving Hawke-Petit's SUV. Inside, fire began to sweep through the house -- fueled, prosecutors say, by gasoline sprayed through the living room by the two men.

But even at this point, a half hour after police were notified of the incident, no fire, ambulance, state police or other emergency authorities have been alerted, according to this morning's testimony.

Only after the SUV crashed into a police cruiser soon after, one block away, and a plume of smoke began to rise from the rear of the home, did Capt. Vignola call the fire department.

Hawke-Petit was already strangled on the living room floor; her body would be charred beyond recognition. Upstairs, the rising torrent of choking smoke was claiming the lives of the two girls.

Some 40 minutes after Hawke-Petit's calm and courageous notification of the bank teller, she and her daughters were dead or dying.

Vignola and other officers tried immediately to enter the burning house, but they were not dressed in fire-protective gear, and the heat and smoke were too strong. Only after two failed attempts to enter the inferno did Vignola call the Connecticut State Police major crime squad, he testified. "I knew that we had a major incident, obviously," he told jurors.

Asked, during cross examination by public defender Thomas Ullman, why so little was apparently done, Vignola noted that there were no external signs of violence at the home, and that there had been initial "confusion" over what was even going on.

"The banker was very confusing from the start," the captain said. The teller was not even fully convinced that Hawke-Petit's "hostage situation" story was true, he said. "But the bank manager had said (to police) that Mrs. Petit was petrified?" asked the defense lawyer. "That's correct," Vignola conceded. **Police were merely following state protocol, the captain explained.**

"It's been our training in Connecticut since 2001," he said. "We were building on information we had. There was no violence. The information from the start was very confusing. I was establishing a rescue team," he insisted. "I had no idea if there was any act of violence. If there had been any indication of violence, I would have been the first one through the door."

"But you had a bank manager calling, that Mrs. Petit was petrified?" pressed the defense lawyer -- who, in an attempt to diminish his client's culpability and save him from lethal injection, is working to establish that police shared in responsibility for the deaths.

"The information we had was of a possible hostage situation," Vignola answered, stressing the word "possible." "But the worst time in a hostage situation is after the hostage takers have the money, isn't that correct?" asked the defense lawyer.

"I don't have that information," the captain answered, his voice defensive.

"Not excusing what happened, the fact was, you were too late, correct?"

Prosecutors' objection to that question was sustained by the judge.

In other testimony this morning, another officer described the defendant's words upon being taken into custody, as he was asked if anyone was still inside the house. "I don't know," Det. Joseph Vittelo, said Hayes responded. "Things just got out of control."

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