

# Jury Convicts Harrelson In Judge Wood's Murder

By Dan Balz

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AUSTIN, Dec. 14—With half its members weeping openly, a San Antonio jury today found professional hit man Charles Harrelson guilty of murdering U.S. District Court Judge John H. Wood Jr., the first federal judge assassinated in this century.

Spectators said the weeping was "for Liz" Elizabeth Chagra, the wife of the drug dealer who prosecutors say paid Harrelson \$250,000 to kill Wood. She had become a born-again Christian in jail, and testified tearfully that she was a dupe for her domineering husband and not part of the conspiracy.

She and Harrelson's wife, Jo Ann, were convicted today of lesser charges.

The verdict came after 18 hours of deliberation in a case climaxing the most intensive federal investigation since the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. The government spent about \$5 million gathering evidence in the case, which had top priority not only because it involved a federal judge but because it was part of the government's war against drug peddlers.

Harrelson, 44, was convicted of shooting Wood, known as "Maximum John" for his stiff sentences in drug cases, in return for a \$250,000 payment from convicted drug dealer Jamie "Jimmy" Chagra, prosecutors charge. Harrelson also was convicted on charges of conspiracy to murder Wood and conspiracy to obstruct justice.

Jo Ann Starr Harrelson, 41, who was convicted earlier of fraudulently buying a rifle like the one used to kill Wood, was convicted of obstructing justice. Elizabeth Chagra, 38, was convicted of conspiracy to murder Wood and obstructing justice.

Spectators in the courthouse that is named in Wood's memory said at least half the jurors were weeping as the six verdicts were read this morn-

ing. One sobbed uncontrollably.

The three defendants sat silently as the verdicts were announced. Harrelson, who had denied his involvement in the case on the witness stand but had written that he never killed anyone who didn't deserve it, later was quoted by wire services as saying, "This is just a necessary step in the progression of things. It was expected."

Judge William S. Sessions, a friend of Wood, set sentencing for March 8. Harrelson faces a mandatory sentence of life in prison for murdering a federal judge. Elizabeth Chagra faces up to life in prison on the murder conspiracy charge, while Jo Ann Harrelson faces up to five years in prison for obstructing justice.

"Today we showed that when Judge Wood died on May 29, 1979, justice did not die," Assistant U.S. Attorney Ray Jahn told reporters.

Jimmy Chagra, 39, who was awaiting trial before Wood at the time of the murder and now is serving a prison sentence for a drug conviction, also was indicted for murder and conspiracy in Wood's death. Chagra will be tried separately.

His brother, El Paso attorney Joseph Chagra, pleaded guilty to a charge of conspiring to murder Wood in return for a 10-year sentence. He was the key government witness during the Harrelson trial, but refused to testify against his brother, which made it necessary to try Jimmy Chagra alone.

Wood was killed by a single shot from a high-powered rifle in May, 1979, as he stood by his car outside his San Antonio townhouse. It was almost two years before federal investigators began to make headway and nearly three years before indictments were returned.

To gather evidence, the government made extensive use of court-ordered wiretaps, surreptitious tape recordings and jailhouse snitches. Defense attorneys protested that the government had bent the law to obtain the evidence, but Sessions ruled that it was admissible in court.

Joseph Chagra testified that Harrelson told him he had killed Wood "with a clean shot." But Harrelson, during four days on the witness stand, steadfastly denied killing the judge, claiming he was in Dallas on the morning of the shooting.

Harrelson described himself as a "card mechanic" who did not need the money for killing Wood because he earned a handsome living as a gambler and card cheat. In defiant testimony, he claimed he had received money from Jimmy Chagra, and also said a friend of his had told Chagra that Harrelson had killed Wood. But he maintained that all of this was an effort to bilk Chagra.



JOHN H. WOOD JR.

... jurors wept as verdicts were read