

# Sniper Case Widens

## Witness, Police in Conflict

By George Lardner Jr. and Austin Scott  
Washington Post Staff Writers

NEW ORLEANS, Jan. 13 — Every Sunday, on his way to church, Edwin L. Wilson, 76, wanders outside his tiny apartment off Dryades Street to see if he can pick up a ride.

Last Sunday morning, he says, Mark James Robert Essex gave him a lift.

"That was about 10:45 or 10:50," Wilson said. "I know because my church lets in sharp at 11:00 a.m. I wasn't there no more than about 10 minutes before church started . . . I guess he was already dead when I realized that was the guy that took me to church."

Wilson's account conflicts directly with the police ver-

sion of the spree of murder and arson at the Downtown Howard Johnson's Motor Lodge that same day. Essex was killed by police gunfire on the hotel rooftop that night, his shattered .44 magnum carbine lying in pieces around him.

But he may not have been at the hotel when the shooting started — not if Edwin Wilson is to be believed. Despite official post facto pronouncements that Essex might have been the only gunman, holding off hundreds of officers even in death, it looks as though he had to have help.

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### ORLEANS, From A1

The first fire alarm for the blazes that broke out in one hotel room and hallway after another was sounded at 10:45 a.m. A sudden burst of gunfire cut down a fireman scaling a ladder at 11 a.m. By then, it seems, the sniper attack and assaults on hotel guests had already been under way for several minutes.

But after it was all over Monday afternoon, when police finally stormed the hotel roof, only Essex's corpse and the rifle he bought in his home town of Emporia, Kan., last April were found.

Against those facts, Wilson's recollections are startling, but they are just one of the signs suggesting other persons and perhaps other guns behind the gunfire that, aside from Essex, left six dead and about 20 wounded.

• According to the hotel's stairway in the concrete rooftop bunker for the elevator shafts that led to a little utility room beside the elevators on the hotel's 18th floor. It is not clear when police discovered this possi-

ble avenue of escape.

• Many of the officers and newsmen at the scene reported hearing repeated shouts of defiance after Essex was killed, and some are convinced they saw another gunman. One Jefferson Parish (county) deputy said he saw another person in a full-length coat, whom he thought to be a woman, standing next to the sniper who opened fire on him.

• Other witnesses are convinced that the rash of fires which broke out in rapid succession were too widespread to have been set by one man. "The first fire was on the 18th and the next fire was on the eighth floor," one hotel guest who was standing on the street reported.

"Then a fire would break out in the front of the building, then the back. Fire would break out in several different places all of a sudden."

A 23-year-old veteran who came out of the Navy last February "hating white folks," Essex has been accused by police of starting that bloody Sunday with a car theft sometime after 10:00 a.m. in another section of town.

Authorities have also suggested that Essex may have been responsible for the shooting of a white grocer in the same neighborhood where he is supposed to have stolen the car.

The grocer, Joseph Perniciaro, 33, had been questioned several times in a search for leads about the New Year's Eve shootings of two policemen in that vicinity, shootings that have also been tied by ballistics experts to Essex's rifle.

But who shot Perniciaro? The Rev. Samuel Cooley, associate minister of the Home Mission Baptist Church just across the street from "Joe's Grocery," says he was in the middle of

the intersection—on his way to church—when he saw a black man with a rifle rush out of the little corner store.

"It was a different fella," he said Friday afternoon when asked if the gunman were Essex, a dark-skinned black man whose picture had by then been widely publicized. "He (the grocery store gunman) was a light brown . . . I couldn't tell whether he had a goatee. He ran away down Gayoso Street."

Essex was clean shaven, but some witnesses at the Howard Johnson shootout said they saw a sniper with a goatee.

New Orleans Police Supt. Clarence Giarrusso said the other day that he, for one, was "not satisfied" that there was any connection between the attack on Perniciaro, who was wounded in the shoulder, and the carnage at Howard Johnson's.

But he voiced no doubts that Essex was the one who had stolen a car at rifle point from Marvin Albert outside Albert's nearby home at 1506 S. White St. during that same hour.

"We do know that he [Essex] commandeered an automobile by placing a rifle on someone," Giarrusso declared at a press conference.

Chief Giarrusso also told reporters that the stolen car was a 1963 Oldsmobile, then turned newsmen over for further details to his chief of detectives, Maj. Henry Morris, who said it was a '68 Chevrolet.)

After driving off from Albert's home, police said, Essex hit a parked car a couple of blocks away, then sped off, winding up at the hotel some two miles away. Giarrusso said officers spotted the fleeing car at one point, but lost it in traffic. Morris said the stolen vehicle was found Sunday night on the fourth floor of the hotel's built-in garage.

Essex would hardly have had time to do all that and give a neighbor a ride to church. The drab shack at 2619½ Dryades St., where he lived is less than a five-minute ride from the hotel, but Marvin Albert's home is just as far away in another direction.

According to churchgoer Wilson, moreover, Essex was driving "his car. . . the car he

always drove" when he took him to church. It was a blue 1963 Chevrolet with Kansas tags that Essex's father bought him for \$295 shortly before the slain sniper moved to New Orleans in mid-August.

A retired railroad and construction worker whose apartment faces Essex's backward shack, Wilson said he misses the 11 o'clock Sunday services at Union Bethel A.M.E. Church only "two or three times a year" despite the 11-block distance.

"On that Sunday morning as I was going to church — I always walk out to see if anybody is going that way — he [Essex] was out there getting in his car," Wilson

said. "I asked him which way he was going." Wilson said he got no answer to that, but "he did tell me he would take me to church."

Essex's car was reportedly found abandoned Monday in the neighborhood of Joe's Grocery and Marvin Albert's home. But presumably he drove to the Downtown Hotel after dropping Wilson off. If Wilson's chronology is correct, that at least suggests that someone else drove it off from there.

During the shooting Sunday and Monday police never questioned the impression that two or three snipers were involved. But when a room-by-room search of the hotel failed to turn up anyone else, Giarrusso later confessed that some of his men were loath to say, "Chief, he got by us."

Eventually holed up in a rooftop concrete enclosure capping a stairwell, the slight, 5-foot 4-inch Essex abruptly dashed out into the open around 9:20 p.m. Sunday, running across the roof in a zig-zag pattern, his rifle tucked under his armpit in a firing position. Police sharpshooters in a Marine helicopter shot him down with other officers adding fresh volleys from adjoining buildings.

Was he bent on suicide? Or was he heading for what Giarrusso has called the "unobvious exit" in the separate bunker housing the elevator shaft? At least two policemen trapped by the fires on the 17-story hotel's "18th floor" (there is no 13th floor) managed to get out by shinnying down the elevator

cables all the way to ground level.

The question of whether another sniper got away where Essex did not may never be answered.

Shortly after moving here in August, he took a \$12-a-week room in Jefferson Parish a few blocks from an apartment of an old Navy buddy, Rodney Frank, whom neighbors say Essex visited about "every other day." But that friendship cooled apparently in October when Frank became a Black Muslim.

"Jimmy cut out friendship with him because he didn't like the Muslims," Frank's father said. "He couldn't live the life Rodney was leading."

Essex moved out of Jefferson Parish and into the \$41-a-month shack on Dryades Street Nov. 1, according to his rent collector. There he kept mostly to himself, but one neighbor said Essex did have a visitor who started dropping in just after Christmas.

"He came four or five times, just that one fellow," said the neighbor, who asked to be kept anonymous for fear of reprisals. "I think he was a little taller (than Essex). He always came in the daytime."

No one can tell just when "kill" slogans painted on the shack's walls, were done, but none of the mottos found later were there when Essex moved in, his rent collector reported. Last week,

though, Essex was sending a new rhetoric back home to his parents in Kansas.

"Africa, this is it, Mom," he wrote. "It's bigger than you and I and even God."

By then a black police cadet, Alfred E. Harrell Jr., had been killed by a sniper's shot that police say came from Essex's gun, and another officer, white Patrolman Edwin C. Hosli, was critically wounded — again, police say, by a bullet from Essex's gun. Both officers were shot in separate New Year's Eve incidents about 18 minutes apart—not far from Joe's Grocery.

According to police, Essex's carbine was also responsible for two of the murders at Howard Johnson's. Weeks of ballistics tests remain, but police experts say none of the wounds inflicted last week-end and traced thus far — except for Essex's — came from any other weapon.

Many of the bullets went straight through their victims and can never be traced.

Police, meanwhile, are working on what Giarrusso has called the "many loose ends." They had yet to question Wilson or the Rev. Mr. Cooley when these men were interviewed by The Washington Post.

But just in case a sniper or two got away, a police spokesman reports, a round-the-clock guard has been posted at Charity Hospital here to keep on watch on Patrolman Hosli and the others wounded last week-end.



Associated Press

Mourners carry casket bearing the body of Mark Essex from St. James Baptist Church in his home town, Emporia, Kan.

## Sniper Buried at Kansas Hometown

EMPORIA, Kan., Jan 13 (UPI)—Mark James Robert Essex, who died violently on a New Orleans hotel rooftop a thousand miles from his Kansas home, was buried today in the black community which gathered to bid its "Christian brother farewell."

Essex, 23, was killed by 40 bullets fired from police rifles last Sunday as he sprinted across the roof of the downtown Howard Johnson hotel. Six other persons were killed

in the attacks, including three policemen.

Investigators have not been able to determine if Essex acted alone. They are certain, from ballistics evidence, that bullets from his carbine killed at least two people.

"We are not here today to take issues," intoned the Rev. W. A. Chambers in his eulogy. "We are not here to blame. We are not here today to solve the problem. We are here today to bid our Christian brother farewell."

A banner attached to one of

the floral displays in St. James Baptist Church read "Power to the People." The black casket bore a spray of red roses with a banner reading "Jimmy."

His parents, Mark and Nellie Essex, appeared strained by the emotional services.

During his calm and measured sermon the Rev. Mr. Chambers cited the strife which characterized the youth's existence.

"This nation is on the way to total destruction until we

learn to live together," he said.

The congregation overflowed out of the church onto the sidewalk into strong winds and temperatures which rose above freezing for the first time in days.

A funeral procession of 30 cars drove the three miles to Maplewood Cemetery. Essex' parents and his two brothers and two sisters grouped around the casket in a tent over the graveside as it was lowered into the ground.