

# New Evidence Indicates That

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## Mark Essex Was Not Alone

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NEW ORLEANS — Louie Mae Robinson finished her Sunday morning cooking early on Jan. 7 and strolled outside to relax. She looked at her wall clock on the way out. It was, she recalls, just about 10:30 a.m.

Mrs. Robinson stood against her front gate and looked around. She says Mark Essex's car, a blue Chevy with Kansas tags, was still parked at the curb a few doors down Dryades Street.

It wasn't supposed to be. As police first reconstructed it, Essex, a black Navy veteran, had already left his shack in the adjoining backyard for the last time—driving his car to a neighborhood near the police station where he abandoned it, stole another car and shot a grocery store proprietor, all between 10 and 10:30 a.m.

But according to Mrs. Robinson, Essex's car, far from being abandoned, hadn't moved all morning. "It was there when I went to the grocery store, too," she says firmly, "and I went twice—once at 8 and once at 9:30. No mistake about that. I always look to see what cars are on the street."

What the New Orleans police think of those observations, which they obtained only Monday, is not yet known.

In announcing the slain gunman's identity last week, Police Superintendent Clarence Giarrusso indicated that Essex drove his stolen car more or less directly to the downtown Howard Johnson's Motor Lodge for a final, defiant burst of arson and murder on Jan. 7.

While not ruling out a tightly knit conspiracy, Giarrusso said it was just as plausible at that point to conclude that Essex acted alone.

Since then, investigators

have become steadily more secretive. Among the leads they are said to be checking out are unconfirmed reports that a black couple working with Essex rented a room in the hotel and that a group of blacks, perhaps including Essex, had dinner together in a room on the hotel's 15th floor the night before the bloodshed.

Chief Giarrusso told a Kiwanis Club luncheon Tuesday that some evidence is being withheld to protect the rights of any suspects who might be charged.

Aside from what police are keeping to themselves, Mrs. Robinson's statements are the freshest signs thus far that the 23-year-old Essex had partners. Along with her neighbor, 76-year-old Edwin W. Wilson, she says she saw Essex himself on Dryades Street too late in the morning for him to have

started the fires and sniper attacks in the hotel. Wilson has already said that Essex gave him a ride to church around 10:45 a.m. Mrs. Robinson, 39, says she saw the two drive off together—in Essex's car.

Beyond that, her account indicates that even if Essex stole another car and shot a grocer earlier in the morning, he had to have at least one accomplice with him for the ride back to the Dryades Street neighborhood.

The reason is that the stolen car, evidently bearing Essex's fingerprints, was found that Sunday night, Jan. 7, on the fourth floor of the Howard Johnson's garage nearly two miles from his shack at 2619½ Dryades Street. Conceivably Essex could have left that auto in the garage if he had his own car parked at or near the hotel for a quick ride home. But according to Mrs. Robinson, it was parked on Dryades Street all the while. Wilson, whose tiny apartment at 2615 ½ Dryades

Street overlooks Essex's shack, says he wandered out of his rooms around 10:45 a.m. He wanted to get to 11 a.m. Sunday services at Union Bethel A. M. E. Church—services that he misses "only two or three times a year"

Mrs. Robinson, who lives in the same frame tenement, says she chatted with him when he came out and recalled his worrying aloud that he might have to walk the 11-block distance.

"By that time," she says, "the boy (Essex) came out," apparently from his backyard shack, but empty-handed as he got into his 1963 Chevy.

Wilson flagged him down as he was about to drive off.

"He (Essex) laughed and said, 'what's the matter? You want me to give you a lift?'" Mrs. Robinson related. "He (Wilson) said, 'yep, I'm going to be late.'"

Essex, Mrs. Robinson said, "didn't say he'd be late for nothing. He wasn't in any hurry. He could have told Mr. Wilson a lie, but he gave him a ride."

It takes about seven minutes—including a short detour to the church—to drive to the hotel at the moderate speed that Wilson said Essex maintained.

That would make Essex's arrival at the hotel close to 10:52 a.m., which is when the New Orleans Fire Department says the first of three alarms was turned in. These were what seemed almost simultaneous blazes on the 8th and 18th floors when the first fire trucks arrived some two minutes later. Fire officials are convinced that they could not have been set by one man.

"There is at least one more and he walked away from it," declared Fire Superintendent Louis San Salvador. "I can't believe we've caught all the gunmen."

Says Dave Fontaine, director of the city's fire prevention division, which is con-

ducting its own investigation: "I was one of the first (fire officials) over there. My personal opinion is that there were three or more people involved. I think the FBI and the Secret Service would tell you the same thing."

Second District fire chief Victor Civello, in charge of the first contingent of firefighters, said he first noticed the flames on the 18th floor when he got to the hotel. But he and other fire officials now believe that the first blazes were set on the 8th floor—where one hotel guest, Robert Bemish, is convinced he was shot by a taller gunman with a different rifle and where a Jefferson Parish deputy, David Munch, says he spotted what he took to be a "woman

standing next to the black sniper who took a shot at him. Both Bemish and Munch said they thought their assailant had a goatee. Essex was clean-shaven.

Other fires were found later on the 9th, 15th, 16th and 17th floors. Sometime before any of them started, as early as 10:30 a.m. by some accounts, a slender black man accosted a Negro maid named Carrie on the 11th floor and took her passkeys. "Don't worry," he reportedly assured her, "We're only shooting whites today."

Alerted to reports of fires being set by a man with a gun, the hotel's assistant manager, Frank Schneider, 62, went upstairs with a desk clerk to check them out. Probable the first to be killed, he was later found dead on the 11th floor. The desk clerk was seriously wounded, shot in the back.

By midafternoon, six persons had been killed, including Deputy Police Superintendent Louis Sirgo and two police officers. Essex was shot down in a dash across the roof Sunday night. Po-

lice scoured the hotel Monday night after storming the roof but found no one despite persistent reports of other snipers. Only Essex's riddled corpse and his shattered rifle were recovered.

According to investigators, Essex began his day with the car theft and the shooting at the grocery store a few blocks away, although the sequence remains unclear.

Marvin Albert, of 1506 S. White St. in the black Broadmoor section, says his car was taken from him at gunpoint at about 10:15 a.m. He had just stepped out of his frame apartment and was warming up his cream-



Associated Press

Mark Essex lying dead on the Howard Johnson's roof.

colored 1968 Chevrolet Chevelle when a lone black man with a rifle persuaded him to give it up.

Albert says he is satisfied that the thief, dressed in green fatigues and a dark shirt, was Essex. "The man

that took my car, he's the dead guy—the sniper," he said.

From Albert's home, it is a short 4½ blocks by foot-bridge over the Melpomene Canal—slightly more by car—to Joe's Grocery where police had been checking periodically for leads in the nearby shootings of two policemen on New Year's Eve.

A black police cadet, Alfred Harrell Jr., was shot first, killed by a sniper's bullet while he was chatting with a white lieutenant at the entrance to the police department's central lockup. Patrolman Edwin C. Hosli was critically wounded 18 minutes later while responding to a burglary alarm tripped off in a warehouse close to the spot where Harrell was shot down.

Chief Giarrusso said the person who shot Hosli apparently had an accident in the warehouse before fleeing and "lost a great deal of blood."

According to sources close to the investigation, the grocer, 33-year-old Joseph Perniciaro, supplied a description that first led to a man looking very much like Essex but who was eventually discarded as a suspect. The discard was described as having been "on the fringes" of the militant Republic of New Africa.

The next Sunday, Jan. 7, Perniciaro was shot in his store between 10 and 10:30 a.m. by a man in green fatigues and a dark jacket. The cashier in the store, a 17-year-old girl who wants to be kept anonymous, has identified the gunman as Essex, who was found on the hotel roof in green fatigues and a dark shirt.

But two other witnesses,

who had not been contacted by police when they were interviewed, think it was someone else. The Rev. Samuel Cooley of Home Mission Baptist Church, across the street from the grocery store, said he saw the gunman stride out of the store and hurry away on foot, south on Gayoso Street.

"It was a different fella," said the Rev. Mr. Cooley after widespread publication of Essex's picture.

"He was lighter than I was," said a young woman named Hattie, who had been in the grocery store to buy some milk and who does not want to be identified. "Mark Essex was dark. He had a neat bush. The other boy in the store, his hair wasn't combed. It was kind of a reddish color."

Hattie said the gunman walked into the store, pointed his rifle at "Mr. Joe." And said, "Come on, I mean you. Come on." She said she was easing out the door when she heard the gun go off. Like the Rev. Mr. Cooley, she saw the assailant "walk at a fast pace" down Gayoso and turn left on Thalia Street, in the direction of Albert's home.

Albert, however, has little patience with all the talk about differing skin complexions even though Essex's was chocolate brown.

"Any Negro they take a picture of, what color does it come out?" he demanded. "It comes out dark, doesn't it?"

Albert said he hopped into a police car after reporting his Chevy stolen and joined in a search for it. Police spotted it at one point but lost it in traffic, he said. Not long after that, he says, the officers drove him to the Howard John-

son's, "evidently" on a report that it might be there.

"I was hoping that it would be," he said, "but I didn't know until that night."

Essex's car was found the next day abandoned, according to a police official, "in the vicinity of the expressway" between the police department's central lockup and Joe's Grocery—some 32 blocks from the Howard Johnson's. But Essex would have had no time at all to dump it there after giving neighbor Wilson a ride to church.

Essex's .44 Ruger carbine has been tied by police ballistics experts to both the New Year's Eve shootings and at least two of the hotel murders. His type O blood was reportedly the same type found in the warehouse where Hosli was slain.

For what it is worth, however, a well-placed source reports that a careful post-mortem inspection of Essex's bullet-torn body showed no trace of a week-old wound of the size that might be expected from the blood in the warehouse. The source did not know whether police might have "shot the evidence" away.

One Draydes Street neighbor has reported noticing a black visitor at Essex's shack some five times since the Christmas holidays when Essex abandoned vocational courses here. But most neighbors claim to have seen far less than Mrs. Robinson who says:

"The only thing I ever seen him with was a black power paper. You know, what Negroes stand on the street selling. Muhammad Speaks, that's it. Every time he came in, he had one of those."