

The Enigmatic Case of Tyrone Mitchell

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Tyrone Mitchell is what I categorize as an “aberrant adult” school shooter, meaning he attacked a school that he had no current or recent connection to. In fact, that particular building didn’t exist when he was young. Mitchell grew up across the street from 49th Street Elementary and had attended the school,¹ but later, his childhood home was razed to make room for the new school building. Whether the destruction of his home had anything to do with his attack is unknown.

In fact, much of Mitchell’s life remains unknown. Perhaps the central fact is that he and his family were followers of Jim Jones, the cult leader who induced hundreds of people to drink poison in his compound in Guyana. Mitchell and his fiancée, Mary Lou Hill, wanted to go to Guyana with the rest of Mitchell’s family, but were delayed in getting passports.² Hill reported that Mitchell’s mother, father, grandmother, four sisters, and a brother all died in Jonestown.³ In one day, Mitchell lost most of his family (18 November 1978). He reportedly had “a nervous breakdown” after this.⁴ His uncle, Caesar Henderson, commented, “For the last 5½ years ... he lived in pure hell. I think his life changed from the day it was confirmed that his whole family, except for his sister Linda, died.”⁵

In the immediate aftermath of Mitchell’s rampage, a lawyer reported that he had represented Mitchell; he claimed Mitchell did go to Guyana and escaped death only because he was at a dentist appointment. The lawyer later retracted this, saying he never represented Mitchell and had confused him with someone else with the same last name.⁶

What do we know about Mitchell’s life prior to the loss of his family? A friend of his, Anthony Brooks, said that Mitchell was popular at Carver Junior High and Jefferson High School, from which he reportedly graduated. In high school, he ran on the cross-country team.⁷ Another classmate, Ronnie Love, said that Mitchell was “wild all his life,” commenting, “He had

a short fuse ... He could go off at any time.”⁸ In 1973, Mitchell was arrested for burglary.⁹

What was Mitchell like in the time between the loss of his family and his rampage attack? There are conflicting reports regarding drug use. A deputy police chief reported that Mitchell was well-known to the police department “for his irrational behavior ... and as a user of PCP.”¹⁰ The same article, however, noted that his fiancée denied that Mitchell used drugs. Detective Steve Morgan, who found Mitchell’s body in his apartment, reported not finding any drugs in the home and stated that Mitchell had no drug-related arrests on his record.¹¹ His uncle, Willie Lee Mitchell, claimed that Mitchell had a serious drug problem.¹² There are obviously conflicting reports, and at this point, there is no way of knowing if Mitchell used drugs or not.

He did, apparently, drink alcohol. Willie Mitchell said, “He

TYRONE MITCHELL

Date: **24 February 1984**
School: **49th Street Elementary School**
Location: **Los Angeles, CA**
Age: **28**
Killed: **2**
Wounded: **12**
Outcome: **Suicide**
Shooter population: **Aberrant adult**
Psychological type: **(unknown)**
Attack type: **Random (no specific targets)**

For an explanation of the populations, psychological types, and attack types, see “About the Site” at schoolshooters.info.

drinks a lot. He drinks every day.”¹³ A reporter wrote, “The young people he played basketball with at nearby South Park knew him by his trademark: a can of Old English 800, a malt liquor he drank from a paper bag.”¹⁴ After his death, “No PCP or other drugs of abuse were detected” in his body, and only a minimal trace of alcohol.¹⁵ Whether he drank before his tragic losses or began drinking afterward is not known.

His most problematic behavior involved the misuse of firearms. In December 1979, he was convicted for “firing a .30-caliber rifle into the air after a dispute with his uncle.”¹⁶ He was fined \$500 and placed on two years of probation. Mitchell was occasionally seen walking around the neighborhood at night with a rifle or shotgun.¹⁷ Three weeks before the attack, he fired shots into the empty schoolyard of 49th Street Elementary.¹⁸ After his attack, it was said that he “fired at jets bound for Los Angeles International Airport several times in the past two weeks.”¹⁹ Less than two weeks before his rampage, his uncle filed a complaint with the police after Mitchell reportedly pointed a machine gun at him.²⁰ In fact, police reportedly “called to the Mitchell home several times in the years before the shooting, in response to reports from relatives and neighbors that Mitchell was threatening them or firing weapons into the air at passing airplanes.”²¹ A neighbor said, “He’d always do it between 12:30 and 1:30 (in the afternoon) . . . He’d shoot at the planes with the rifle, then wait about 20 minutes, and then shoot at them with a machine gun.”²²

At the time of his attack, Mitchell lived with Mary Lou Hill on the second floor of a house belonging to his uncle (Willie Lee Mitchell), who lived on the first floor.²³

He reportedly was unemployed, but had “periodically attended a state university in nearby Long Beach.”²⁴ He reportedly didn’t work because “county officials had declared him ‘unemployable’ five years earlier because of an ‘anxiety neurosis’ characterized by excessive fear or dread.”²⁵ This must have been not long after the deaths of his family members.

On Friday afternoon, 24 February, Mitchell opened fire on the schoolyard from the safety of his own apartment. He gunned down children as they were released from school, firing 57 shots.²⁶ He hit 14 people, killing 2. Mary Lou Hill offered to go to Mitchell in an effort to get him to stop shooting, but police stopped her, fearing that he would use her as a hostage. The officers shot tear gas canisters into the home and then broke down the door with a battering ram. Mitchell was found dead, having shot himself.²⁷

Why did Mitchell go on a rampage when he did? Mitchell left no clues. Mary Lou Hill identified two stressors, however, that occurred a few days before his attack. First, his uncle wanted him to move out. Second, he and Hill had an argument because he wanted to get married she didn’t want to marry yet.²⁸ One reason she didn’t want to marry was that he had no job.²⁹ Shortly before the attack, a friend heard Mitchell complaining about “how Mexicans had taken over the neighborhood,”³⁰ yet

the attack was not targeted against Mexicans.

In fact, there apparently were no targets, unless for some unknown reason he wanted to kill the students at his former school. Alternatively, since he committed the attack from his own apartment across the street, perhaps he simply shot people at the school out of convenience.



Based on my research, most school shooters were psychopathic, psychotic, and/or traumatized. There simply is not sufficient information, however, to place Tyrone Mitchell into one of these categories.

Though I’ve defined the characteristics of traumatized shooters by their childhood experiences, perhaps the magnitude of Mitchell’s loss of virtually his entire immediate family warrants his being categorized as a traumatized shooter, albeit of a different kind. What connection might have existed, however, between the deaths of his relatives and the shooting of children remains elusive. Alternatively, his reported short temper, being “wild” all his life, committing burglary, and pointing guns at people might suggest a psychopathic personality. Alternately, shooting at jets with a machine gun might have been due to paranoid or grandiose delusions. In addition, his drinking and possible drug use add further complications to the puzzle.

Though he cannot be categorized into one of the three types, it is interesting that as with many other shooters, in addition to longstanding problems, there appear to have been more immediate stresses: pressure to move out of his uncle’s house and his fiancée’s refusal to get married. There was also possible financial stress due to his unemployment, as well as impaired functioning due to his substance use.

This case is unusual in terms of location. Most rampage school attacks have occurred in rural, small town, or suburban areas. The fact that the attack occurred in a major metropolitan area makes it unusual, though far from unique.

Another point of interest is that the perpetrator was African American. The stereotype of school shooters is that they are white males. Though the stereotype is true more often than not, the extent of racial, ethnic, and gender diversity among school shooters is often overlooked. In the sample of eleven aberrant adult shooters I presented in my book *School Shooters: Understanding High School, College, and Adult Perpetrators*, only 36% of them were white males (compared to 79% of secondary school shooters). Thus, though African American school shooters are rare, Mitchell was another aberrant adult shooter who was not a white male. Also, most of the attacks I’ve studied that occurred in urban areas have been committed by college or aberrant adult shooters, rather than secondary school shooters. Mitchell is another example of this. The significance of these apparent trends is not known, but as more cases are studied, the emerging patterns might shed light on the factors behind the attacks.

NOTES

Most of the articles cited can be found online at <http://stevenwarran.blogspot.com/2013/07/tyrone-mitchell-marcus-topel-and-mary.html>

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- 25 Sandy Banks and Marita Hernandez, "Schoolyard Shooting Tragedy Spurs Plan to Provide Experts: County to Assist Police With Mentally Ill," *Los Angeles Times*, 24 February 1985.
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- 28 "Schoolyard Sniper."
- 29 Associated Press, "Sniper Attack 'Sort of a Footnote,'" *The Register-Guard*, 26 February 1984, p. 9A.
- 30 Covington, "Tracking the Killer's Dark Mind."