

# WWII vet's death a textbook case of excessive force, but no hashtag for him

---

 [chicagotribune.com/news/columnists/kass/ct-john-wrana-textbook-police-force-case-kass-0111-20150111-column.html](https://chicagotribune.com/news/columnists/kass/ct-john-wrana-textbook-police-force-case-kass-0111-20150111-column.html)

John Kass

□

John Wrana, the 95-year-old World War II veteran killed by police, wasn't killed for selling illegal "loosie" cigarettes on the streets of New York.

And he wasn't killed by an officer on the street in a small town outside St. Louis, just after wrestling for the cop's gun and punching the cop in the face.

When John Wrana died, entertainers and NFL players and basketball stars didn't identify with him. They didn't raise their hands up or wear T-shirts with his name, there was no hashtag justice for him, or protests, or public anger.

But if there ever were a textbook case about the use of excessive force by police and the killing of an innocent American, it's this one.

And trial is scheduled to begin this week in south suburban Markham in the courtroom of Associate Judge Luciano Panici. A Park Forest police officer, Craig Taylor, stands accused of felony reckless conduct in connection with Wrana's death.

Wrana served his country in India and Burma in the U.S. Army Air Forces and built a business and liked to play cards and shoot dice, and even have a drink on occasion. He died just weeks shy of his 96th birthday.

And he was in his room alone at an assisted living center in suburban Chicago on a night in July 2013. That's when five suburban cops rushed him.

One officer had a Taser and police riot shield, others had handguns, and one was armed with a 12-gauge Mossberg pump shotgun. The police said later they were afraid for their lives, though Wrana used a walker to get around.

What bothers me is that Taylor is the only cop charged by Cook County State's Attorney Anita Alvarez.

There were others there with him. Police supervisors, others with higher rank.

Yes, Taylor pulled the trigger. He pumped the shotgun and pulled the trigger again and again, firing beanbag rounds at close range into the old man's guts, according to state investigators. So Taylor should wear the jacket, yes. But he wasn't in command. And he wasn't alone.

Unlike other, more celebrated police killings I mentioned above, the Wrana case hasn't generated all that much national attention, even though it is perhaps the perfect illustration of excessive force by law enforcement.

And someday perhaps, someone will explain to me why this one hasn't generated more discussion.

The death of Eric Garner, a black man selling "loosie" single cigarettes in New York, and his last words, "I can't breathe," received national attention.

A grand jury declined to indict a white police officer who'd been accused of causing Garner's death with a forbidden chokehold, and there were angry protests and shouts of "What do we want? Dead cops!" And later, two police officers were assassinated in a parked vehicle.

Earlier there was the police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo. Brown was black. According to evidence presented to the grand jury, he began punching a police officer, wrestling for the gun, and was shot to death.

The grand jury declined to indict the white officer in the case. There were riots and looting in Ferguson.

What followed were the ugly politics of race.

Wrana is white. Taylor, the officer who pulled the trigger of the shotgun, is African-American.

I'm uncomfortable mentioning race in connection with this crime. I know people use it easily, but I've avoided it because there is no information that race had anything to do with it. For months I didn't know what race the cops were. To me it's immaterial.

But I'd be lying if I didn't wonder how this story would have been covered if the races were aligned for optimum racial political leverage.

What if Wrana had been a black WWII veteran, perhaps one of the famed Tuskegee Airmen, and Officer Taylor had been white?

It would be national news, with editorial boards weighing in on excessive force and political actors lining up, all the usual suspects preening and fronting themselves off for TV time. But would it change the facts? No.

And facts, not skin pigment, are what matter. So what happened, happened. And John Wrana didn't have to be killed by police, who said they couldn't handle a feeble old man. They could have used a pillow, a mattress, a blanket. But they killed him.

Like Brown and Garner, Wrana was resisting, too. Unlike them, he wasn't large or powerful. He resisted because he was afraid and delusional, perhaps paranoid, symptoms attributed to a reported urinary tract infection. Wrana had refused treatment.

The police were called to the nursing home. According to authorities, they initially thought Wrana brandished a 2-foot-long machete, which turned out to be a shoehorn.

They said he had a knife, though. And five cops with all that equipment couldn't disarm a 95-year-old man. They fired a Taser, but that didn't work. They rushed him. Wrana moved forward, according to investigators for the state police, and that's when Taylor began firing the shotgun.

According to state investigative reports of the shooting, Taylor fired and fired and fired at close range. The beanbag rounds travel at speeds of about 190 miles an hour. The rounds tore Wrana up. He bled to death internally.

And after all this time, after so much silence from authorities, after so much silence from political officials who avoided mentioning John Wrana, we'll have something in this case I've been waiting for: testimony under oath.

I told you I wouldn't let this go. I'll be there Tuesday.

[jskass@tribpub.com](mailto:jskass@tribpub.com)

*Twitter @John\_Kass*