

JAN 8 1975

## In Strickland Case

# Two Easton Police Fined Month's Pay

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Easton City Council last night fined Police Officers John R. Harman and William M. Crouse 30 days pay each for filing false reports in the shooting death of Robert V. Strickland Sept. 23.

In the same resolutions establishing the men's guilt and setting the fines, council ordered the policemen returned to duty "forthwith." Just how soon was not made clear. The men have been suspended with pay since the day after the shooting.

At the same time, council urged police officials to re-evaluate the department's training procedures and requested a written report from Police Chief John Young on measures to prevent similiar incidents.

The incident involving the two officers occurred after Strickland, 25, of Easton, a felony suspect, was shot and killed while fleeing police in the Lehigh Valley Railroad yards on the city's South Side. Harman and Crouse reported they fired their shotguns at the man when he turned toward them and reached for

his waist. No weapon was found on or near the victim.

The following day, Harman admitted to Det. Lt. Chester Pensyl that only Crouse had fired, and Crouse's corroboration followed. Harman said he went to the Hugh Moore Park shortly after the shooting and fired his shotgun into the ground to support his false report. He said he was trying to relieve his junior partner of some of the criticism and retributions Crouse feared he might receive as a result of the slaying.

The distortions were made public in November in a re-

port on the shooting by Northampton County Dist. Atty. Charles Spaziani. The district attorney exonerated the officers of criminal wrongdoing in the slaying, but recommended departmental discipline in the coverup.

On Nov. 20, Easton Mayor Fred L. Ashton Jr. brought four charges or specifications against Harman and two against Crouse.

Council last night found Harman guilty of three of those charges and Crouse guilty of the two against him.

Harman was found guilty of filing a false report, being an accessory to such a filing (conspiracy) and failure to comply with departmental regulations involves Harman's unauthorized discharge of his shotgun.

He was found not guilty of failing to follow an order by Sgt. John Daws, who led the raid, directing him to a particular location at Kennedy Gardens Apartments, where Strickland was staying

Crouse was found guilty of filing a false report and of  
*Please turn to page 2, col. 3*



# Two Easton Police Fined JAN 3 1975 Month's Pay in Coverup

*Continued from Page One*

being an accessory to a filing (conspiracy).

The fine for each policeman amounts to \$791.66, to be paid within a year. Harman said he presumes the money will be taken out of his pay, and added, "I feel this verdict was just. I'll be glad to get back to work." He said the four months of hearings and his suspension will not affect the performance of his duties.

Of the four councilmen who drafted the resolutions, only John Masterson, head of the police and fire committee, offered dissent. He said he felt the action against Harman was "very severe." However, Masterson voted for the resolutions, both of which passed unanimously.

The fifth council member, Mrs. Carol Harman, wife of Officer Harman, did not participate in any council proceedings connected with the shooting.

Crouse was not available for comment.

Three other policemen received less severe punishments for having knowledge of the coverup but not reporting it. They are Daws and Officers Anthony Cappellano and Thomas Mangiafico.

According to testimony at a council hearing Dec. 9 and 10 on the charges against Harman, the three were present when Harman suggested the coverup.

City council sat as an administrative body in a Civil Service case at that hearing.

Also revealed at the hearing was a proposal by Crouse to

plant a starter pistol near where Strickland fell. Daws said Crouse approached him at the Easton Emergency Squad shortly after the shooting and made the proposal. Daws said he informed Pensyl of the plan, which was not carried out.

In a letter to Ashton, dated yesterday, council said the proposal by Crouse constituted a violation that came under the conspiracy charge. The letter made no mention of pursuing the matter.

However, council did have some things to say about the coverup and proposal to plant a gun near where Strickland was shot. In its letter to the mayor, council declared: "The actions of Officers Harman and Crouse, and others with whom they acted in concert, represent a marked departure from the expected response of line officers in such situations. The officers permitted personal pressures to override their obligation to report fairly an official police incident. Others abetted it."

"In troubled times," the letter continued, "where the police department needs the full cooperation and support of all its citizens—in times such as our own—officers cannot look to contrivances in order to justify their actions. Instead they must rely on sound police procedures, acceptable in law, with due regard to the officer's rights and those in the public with whom he must deal."

"We believe the field reactions of the Sergeant and other officers involved signal a need for close official exam-

ination into the methods the Department uses in training and preparing officers for street duty. We believe that officials in the Department should take immediate steps to examine its organization and structure, and institute immediate corrective measures to avoid such lapses in the future."

"It is clear that they (the officers) experienced shock as a result of what occurred," the letter said, "and while in such a state yielded to a fear that others would not agree that they acted in the line of duty. If this fear is understandable, it is nevertheless inexcusable in police officers entrusted with such an important community function. This must not happen again."

Council also declared the "chain of command" in the police department must be responsible for the officers' actions and take corrective measures.

"We request a full written report to Council from the Chief of Police within 30 days to confirm his assessment of what occurred and what action has been taken to prevent recurrence of such police problems," the letter said. "In addition, we ask the Mayor as Acting Department Director to provide Council with all information necessary to assist in this endeavor."

At the same time, council said it felt "the starter pistol incident to be as serious an element in this case as any other." The councilmen noted the Nov. 20 charges did not contain reference to the incident even though top police officials were aware of the proposal.

The letter to the mayor also criticized the "antiquated Civil Service statute," which council said did not allow sufficient choice of punishments. Under the law, council had to choose between dismissal or the 30-day suspension without pay.

Saying some will find the punishment too lenient while others would declare it too severe, Council added, "No solution is perfect. But we do not believe that discharge of these officers will serve to restore confidence in the department. We believe that discharge of the officers would serve to divide to greater degree the various community and Departmental sentiments which arise from the incident."