



Dog killed by Opelika police officer

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Staff Writer

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After two neighbors complained to the Opelika Police Department of a "large German shepherd and little white dog on the loose," a dog was shot and killed after "trying to bite" a police officer.

The pet owners want to know why it took a bullet to end the attack saying they believe another measure could have been used. They later asked police if "pepper spray" or "firing a shot in the air" could have been used instead but were told neither would have worked.

Ann Marie and Eric Rowlett of Opelika, who had been vacationing in Florida, say they got a cell phone call around 2:30 to 2:45 p.m. Sunday informing them that their dog Sheba had been shot and killed. The Opelika police officer who had fired shots was the one who had called the couple to explain to them what had happened.

"The officer called and told us he had shot our dog one time and then she made her way over to the neighbor's yard where he shot her two more times," Ann Marie said. "He said he shot her twice more because he did not want her to suffer, but I question that. All vets have answering machines on Sunday. Just wish we'd been given the opportunity to save her, but that decision was made for us."

Opelika police Capt. Melvin Harrison said the officer in question had tried to contact the pet owners before the incident took place, "to no avail."

Ann Marie denies that.

"I feel like there is more to this. Our caller ID showed a call at 2:35 p.m. There was never a message left," she said. "Then we got a call on my husband's cell phone with a message saying Sheba had been shot and to call back. My husband immediately did."

Harrison said the first attempt to read the dog's tag on its collar did not cause alarm.

"The officer said it appeared to be friendly and later left," Harrison said. "Another complaint was called in. The officer again tried to call the pet owners, to no avail. He tried to open the gate to their yard in hopes (the dogs) would go back in."

The officer was still on the phone when the German shepherd charged at him and began biting at him. The dog backed him into the fence and hemmed him up. He said he threw the phone down trying to keep the dog away. He finally had to draw his pistol to keep from getting bit. The first shot fired didn't kill the dog instantly. The dog crawled to the next door neighbor's shed. The officer then called the lieutenant on shift and asked permission to shoot the dog again so it would not suffer. The officer also got permission from the neighbor to come on property to shoot the final two shots to kill the dog."

It was Earl Hardy's yard that Sheba crawled to. And he says there were not three shots but a total of eight.

"I heard five shots go off," Hardy said. "I didn't see when he originally shot the dog. I saw the dog

get up and come back around the fence and go down the trail that's between my house and theirs. She went to my shed and laid down. There were two officers who followed. The officer who originally shot the dog handed his pistol to the other officer and said to him 'he couldn't do it.' So the other officer took the pistol and shot the dog twice. But she wasn't dead. So, the other officer took his pistol back and shot the dog a third time which killed it."

Eric Rowlett had wanted the police officer who shot their dog to come to their house and explain to the couple's 8-year-old and 10-year-old "why he had to shoot Sheba and to apologize for it."

"He told me he was not the one who should apologize that I was the one who should apologize to my children for our dog getting out," Eric Rowlett said.

When asked if he was surprised his dog attacked the officer, Rowlett said, "No, we got her as a guard dog. We don't live in the best of neighborhoods. I work nights and my wife and kids are home alone."

Both gates had been locked while the couple was out-of-town, having left Tuesday morning and rushing back Sunday. Ann Marie's grandmother had been taking care of the pets in the couple's absence.

"Sheba was very protective of our property," Eric Rowlett said. "I just wish he would have gotten back into his car and waited for me to tell him the gates were locked."

Ann Marie said this was not the first time Sheba had "jumped the fence" saying it had happened only once before when the family was not home. At that time, a police officer had called for back-up, and they were able to safely get Sheba back in the fence. "An athletic dog," Sheba could jump the family's 6-foot-tall wooden privacy fence.

"This has been traumatic for my family, for my children," Ann Marie said. "I just don't believe there was no other choice. I don't want this to happen to another family. Sheba was a very special dog. We took time to pick her out and make sure she would be compatible with our children."

Still struggling with the loss of a "family member," Eric Rowlett said it will haunt him for life.

"The bad thing about it, she didn't bite anybody, just when he touched the fence, he said 'she snapped,' " Rowlett said. "I'm not saying there's an injustice. I guess it's my fault she got out. It's just been bothering me for two days. She was shot three times. Once initially, and then she crawled next door. There was a lot of blood. It's had a real bad effect on me. Can't seem to get it off my mind."

Harrison said he was sorry this incident had to occur but said officers are trained to protect themselves from any situation and that includes dog bites.

"No doubt, this dog had to be viciously attacking our officer for him to fire shots," Harrison said. "We sympathize with the Rowlett family. Pets are like family members. We hate that it happened."

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