

SubPatrolman Clifford L. Cornish | Cincinnati Police Department



Age: 25
Served: 3½ months
June 2, 1925 to September 14, 1925

OFFICER

Records on which we can usually rely are uncharacteristically varied regarding Clifford's personal data. We find at least five

dates of birth on official documents. Even his military records show two dates of birth six years apart. Based on a census taken in 1900, we feel comfortable in establishing his birth on September 24, 1898 in Ramsey, Illinois to Kentuckian Ludwig "Lud" Nuton Cornish and Minerva "Minnie" (Graham) Cornish of Illinois. In June 1900, the family was living in Woodford, Kentucky in the Market House. By 1910, the family moved back to Illinois. Minnie died from cancer when Clifford was 16 or 17.

Clifford enlisted in the United States Army on October 9, 1915, five months after the sinking of the Lusitania. He was assigned to the Coast Artillery Corps (CAC) and promoted to Private 1st Class on December 20, 1916 at the age of 18.

On November 14, 1917 Private Cornish, seven months after the United States entered into World War I, married a Canadian, Martha Isabel Graham, in Portland, Maine.

On March 4, 1918, the Army created the 72nd Artillery regiment within CAC. On or about July 31, 1918, at 19 years old, he was promoted to Corporal. Corporal Cornish left Montreal, Canada aboard the H.M.T. Takada on August 17, 1918, bound for St. Leonard, France. He was still 19 when he was promoted to Sergeant on September 30, 1918.

While the regiment was training in Saint Leonard, Germany signed the Armistice. Hostilities ended in November 1918 and the 72nd was never deployed to the front line. During January 1919, he transferred to Pauillac, France and assumed occupation and garrison duties. On March 13, 1919, Sergeant Cornish boarded the USS Panaman transport to Hoboken, New Jersey and Fort Merritt. The regiment disbanded in April 1919. Sergeant Cornish was honorably discharged from the regular Army on May 6, 1919, at the age of 20. It is possible, based on later newspaper reports, that Sergeant Cornish remained in the CAC until 1921.

We suspect that Sergeant Cornish's marriage, for all intents and purposes, ended while he was in France. While Martha remained in Portland, there is no indication they ever lived together as husband and wife after the war. However, they did not divorce.

Clifford moved to Cincinnati along with his brother, Carl, and his father, and his father's new wife and two children. He and Carl worked as truck drivers and boarded at 423 W. 7th Street. His father worked as a carpenter while living on Hamer Street.

In 1925, 150 men tested for the position of Substitute Patrolman in the Cincinnati Police Department. After tough intellectual testing and physical examinations and investigations, only 37 were certified by the Cincinnati Civil Service. Clifford Cornish finished 17th. He was sworn in as a Substitute Patrolman on June 2, 1925 and assigned to District 5 (1024 York Street). He and his partner, Patrolman Thomas Coleman, were directed to clean up the Clark and Harriet Streets area which had become a haven for bootleggers and narcotics dealers.

MURDERER

John Henry Whitfield, alias Henry Warfield and Henry Whitfield, was born July 2, 1889 in Hopkinsville, Kentucky to Tom and Lizzie (Woolrich) Whitfield. In 1906, at 17, he was living in Cincinnati at 308 Perry Street. On April 16, 1917, at 25, while working as a laborer and living at 539 Carlisle Street, he married another Kentucky transplant, 19-year-old Goldie Landers.

Whitfield was drafted into the United States Army on June 19, 1918 and served in Company C of the 520th Engineers. The 520th was tasked with logging operations in France. In less than a year, he was discharged on June 17, 1919 and returned to Cincinnati.

Whitfield was involved in petty crime, with several arrests for violations unworthy of notice by newspapers. But on June 15, 1922, using the name Henry Whitfield, he was indicted by a United States Grand Jury for violating the Harrison Act for the sale of narcotics. He turned state's evidence and helped send Narcotics Inspector Byron M. Roberts to Leavenworth Penitentiary. Whitfield was then sentenced to only nine months in a minimum-security prison in Dayton, Ohio. Three months later, while assigned as a "trustee," he escaped. He returned to Cincinnati as 'Henry Warfield' and to the bootlegging/narcotics culture.

Between 1923 and September 1925, he was shot twice by his 'peers.' On the night of September 13, 1925, Whitfield was hanging around the bootleggers and narcotics dealers at Clark and Harriet Streets and armed with a .38 caliber revolver loaded with bullets that he modified into 'dum-dum' bullets.

BACKGROUND

In the four to five years before September 1925, more than a half dozen Cincinnati officers were shot in the "Black Belt" of the Fifth District. In the three years between April 1922 and May 1925, two acting detectives, [Frank Hueftlein](#) and [Anthony Tekulve](#), two patrolmen, [Lawrence Klump, Jr.](#) and [William Bond](#), and a Merchant Patrolman, [Joseph Vonderheide](#), had been murdered within or outside the Fifth District. There would be two more murdered by the end of 1925.

Patrolmen were deployed in the Fifth District as two-man walking beats. Patrolmen were allowed one off day each month. Patrolman Coleman, Cornish's partner, was scheduled off on September 13, 1925. Due to manpower shortages in the Department, only eight men were working in the Fifth District that night, even though

16 was determined to be the adequate complement. Patrolman Cornish was walking their beat alone.

INCIDENT

Late that night, Patrolman Cornish, as he had done with his partner for weeks, attempted to clear the bootleggers, narcotics dealers, and loiterers from Clark and Harriet Streets. Most of them moved on, but Whitfield stubbornly stood on the southwest corner and muttered to others standing there, "If that --- frisks me, I'm going to kill him!"

As Patrolman Cornish approached, Whitfield swung at him. Patrolman Cornish sidestepped the punches and knocked Whitfield to the ground. Whitfield pulled his revolver and fired five times, striking Patrolman Cornish once through the visor of his cap; the bullet entering his head just over his left eye. A bystander, David Jones, standing in front of his own home at 1200 Harriet Street, was wounded in his left hip. Whitfield ran down an alley and escaped.

Patrolman Cornish's sidearm was still holstered when other officers arrived on the scene. He was transported to General Hospital.

The shooting drew a crowd of several thousand, some in favor of the officer and some in favor of the criminal. For a time, a riot loomed, but with sufficient numbers, police were able to disperse them.

DEATH

Patrolman Cornish died a few hours later on September 14, 1925

at 1:40 a.m. becoming the fifth officer killed in the Fifth District in three years. His father identified his remains.

He was predeceased by his mother and, two weeks earlier, by his nine-month-old stepbrother, Henry Cornish. Patrolman Cornish was survived by his father, Ludwell Cornish; brother, Carl Cornish; stepsiblings, Elmer Cornish, Sarah Cornish, and Joseph Cornish, and estranged wife, Martha. Funeral services were held at 2 p.m. on Wednesday, September 16, 1925 at the Henry Gildehaus Company Chapel at 1408 Vine Street. He was buried in Vine Street Hill Cemetery. His escort detail included Substitute Patrolmen Charles Kohl, Frank Drees, Fred Kimball, and Joseph Casey.

INVESTIGATION

Major Eugene T. Weatherly and Lieutenants Seebohm and Venn questioned those still standing at the scene of the shooting. The witnesses almost universally told them that they had seen nothing. Of the 200 in the area at the time of the murder, almost none stepped forward with information. Their almost universal answer was, "I don't know, boss." Few, however, did let investigators know what happened with a promise of anonymity. Police were also warned that Whitfield boasted that he would not be taken alive and that he was heavily armed.

In the morning of September 14th, hours after the murder, police scoured the city, as did the police of northern Kentucky and Hopkinsville, under orders to "Get him!" But with manpower shortages, there were no additional officers working on the manhunt in Cincinnati. Officers were disgruntled, believing that had the Department's complement been filled, Patrolman Cornish's murder would have been averted.

On September 15, 1925, Detectives Michael McShane and Leonard

Hayes received information regarding Whitfield hiding out at 1221 Gest Street. They notified Detective Chief Kirgan and Detective Sergeant Walter B. Fricke. They and Detectives Frank A.B. Hall, Robert Ecker, Victor Odensass, and [Fred Seebohm](#) hurried to and surrounded the house. They found Whitfield hiding under a bed on the second floor. He meekly surrendered. They also found in a dresser drawer the murder weapon with bullets that he modified into dum-dum bullets. They matched those found in Patrolman Cornish's body. "I killed the officer," he confessed, "I cannot distinctly recall what happened." Without further discussion he was transported to Central Station where he registered in his legal name of John Henry Whitfield.

When questioned at headquarters, Whitfield told the detectives, "I killed the officer." He claimed self-defense, "I was coming home from the boat races Sunday when the policeman came along and told me to get off corner or he would smack me. He did smack me. I shot in self-defense." The detectives filed a charge of Murder against him.

JUSTICE

Whitfield was arraigned in front of Judge Samuel Bell, Cincinnati Municipal Court, on Wednesday, September 16, 1925. He waived his right to a preliminary hearing and was bound over to the Hamilton County Grand Jury with no bond.

Hamilton County Prosecutor Charles S. Bell ordered the case to be presented to the Grand Jury at once. On September 22nd, the Grand Jury returned an indictment for Murder of the First Degree. At his Common Pleas Court arraignment, Judge Fred L. Hoffman set a trial date of November 2, 1925. Former Judge Arthur C. Fricke signed on as Whitfield's attorney.

Thirteen days before the scheduled trial, in the middle of the afternoon of October 20, 1925, a burglar, John Edward McKibbin, shot and killed Patrolman Allen J. Althoff at a call box at 5th and Race Streets. This set up a situation where four 1st Degree Murder cases were going to be tried in the month of November, two for murders of patrolmen.

Jury selection began on November 2nd. The case went to trial before Common Pleas Court Judge Stanley Struble. Attorney William Thorndyke joined Fricke in Whitfield's defense. Assistant Prosecutor Louis Schneider joined Prosecutor Bell. The prosecution produced six witnesses and rested on November 6th. Whitfield testified on November 7th that after he was knocked to the ground, "the officer was going for his revolver..., so I just shot him." With that, and the testimony of Whitfield's friends, the defense rested. After a prosecution's rebuttal witness and closing arguments, the case went to the jury on November 9th. It was apparent in reading the newspaper accounts, the reporters were certain of Whitfield's fate. It must have also surprised the defense when the jury came back with a Not Guilty verdict on November 10th.

Whitfield was held by federal authorities and returned to Dayton to complete his sentence there.

EPILOGUE

There is little likelihood that Whitfield returned to Cincinnati considering every policeman in the city knew he escaped justice for assassinating one of their own. He was in Hopkinsville on August 9, 1940 when someone put a bullet through his heart.

A jury convicted McKibbin of Patrolman Althoff's murder, but recommended mercy. Four years later, during 1929, he contracted

tuberculosis and died on November 24, 1935.

In 1932, Martha Cornish sought to divorce Patrolman Cornish in order to marry Walter E. Brown in Portland, Maine. Upon finding that he had died seven years before, she married Brown on August 24, 1932. She then filed for widow's pension from the date of his death to the date of her second marriage. The Trustees of the Police Relief Fund voted to deny her request. In November 1932, Mrs. Brown filed a mandamus with the Hamilton County Court of Common Pleas to force the Trustees to pay her \$6,708 (more than \$150,000 in 2025 dollars). We find no record of the results of her suit but considering the independent nature of the Police Relief Fund and its purpose to sustain grieving widows, we find it unlikely that her suit was successful.

If you have information, artifacts, archives, or images regarding this officer or incident, please contact the Greater Cincinnati Police Museum at Memorial@Police-Museum.org.

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