

Worker stands in line of fire

BY GREG KOWALSKI
STAFF WRITER

"I could have been killed in a blink of an eye," said Leroy Stapleton. But instead of shooting Stapleton, the man who shot one person and wounded two others at the Ford Wixom plant Thursday turned his gun in another direction.

A 28-year-old Ford veteran, Stapleton had just hung up his coat in a locker room near the plant entrance at about 11:20 a.m.

"I heard a bam-bam-bam," said Stapleton. "But I thought they were doing some construction." He walked out of the locker room and saw a man, later identified as Gerald Atkins, 29, dressed in military fatigues, trying to turn the knob on a committee room door. It was locked. The man turned to face Stapleton and said, "What do you think of this?"

That was the moment of fate. Stapleton said nothing.

"I tried not to make eye contact," he said. "People were yelling at me to get the hell out of there, but I wasn't going to move."

That proved to be the right decision. The gunman, who authorities said was armed with a fully automatic M-16 assault weapon loaded with armor-piercing ammunition, turned away and went into another office before going to the plant cafeteria where he continued shooting dozens of rounds.

Stapleton said of the gunman, "He didn't seem like he was shook up. He was really cool."

That was Stapleton's first encounter with the armed man Thursday. Later in the afternoon, Stapleton was with a group of other employees gathered in a small building across a parking lot away from the main plant. By that time, the gunman had left the main building and moved into a series of tunnels under the plant.

Stapleton was near several men who were sitting in a pickup truck when they saw man's head

pop up out of a manhole cover. "At first they thought he was another employee," Stapleton said. It turned out to be Atkins.

"He told the guys to get out of there because there could be some shooting," Stapleton said. They ran for cover, and Stapleton said he believed Atkins shot several times at the police helicopter that landed nearby.

Stapleton said the incident left him shaken, but couldn't speculate on how the employees would react when they come back to work today.

"I never want to go through this again," said Stapleton. And he wondered, "If he was just shooting people, why did he let me go?"

That is just one question investigators are asking in the aftermath of the shooting. Atkins was cornered in the tunnel and surrendered to police at about 4 p.m. He was arraigned in Novi's 52nd district court-1st division Friday afternoon before Judge Michael Batchik. Atkins did not enter a plea, pending advisement from a court-appointed attorney, which he requested at the arraignment.

Before being captured he allegedly shot and killed plant manufacturing manager Darrell Izzard, 57, as Izzard was trying to take cover, and wounded Oakland County Sheriff deputies Gerald Petruska and Matt Miller.

Miller was hit in the left shoulder and a bullet grazed his stomach. He and Petruska had gone to the plant in response to a call about the shooting. Petruska was being hailed as a hero after he was shot in the leg while pulling Miller out of the line of fire.

Izzard, of Brighton, was shot as he walked down a hallway. Plant manager Jeff Haller said, "His loss deeply affect all of us. Emotionally, we're dealing with what happened here."

Atkins, who grew up in Farmington Hills lives in Wixom, was not a Ford employee, but early reports said he was looking for a woman he knows who works at the plant.



Troubled past: Gerald Atkins stands for a police photo following a 1986 Farmington Hills shooting incident.

Atkins from page A1

two nearby houses, a Michigan Bell Telephone building and at least six passing cars. Atkins' parents were in Florida at the time.

It was a miracle that no one was injured in that incident, police said.

Two of the cars had children and one of them, an infant, was nearly struck in the head by one of the 50 or more shots fired.

"This was a vicious attack," Dwyer said of that incident. "It showed that he was out of control. One of the bullets missed a baby by less than a foot."

Police obtained a search warrant and found two .22 caliber rifles, a .30-30 Winchester rifle, a shotgun, a .38 revolver and more than 100 rounds of ammunition in the house.

Neighbors and the drivers were outraged at the time.

"I had been sitting in the dining room, standing at the refrigerator or using the kitchen phone — all common places to be at 4:30 in the afternoon — we probably would have taken several bullets," said a man whose house sustained \$1,000 in damage.

Jim Sturdy, a former Farmington Hills firefighter and longtime resident, remembers the incident, but didn't notice that his car had been hit until afterward.

"It was too close to home," Sturdy said. "And when we heard about this case, my daughter realized that she goes to the same church as the victim."

Sturdy said he had strong feelings about the handling of that incident by the judicial system.

"Had they done their job 10 years ago, this might not have happened," Sturdy said.

Police had sought a warrant for assault with intent to commit murder and then assault with intent to do great bodily harm less than murder, a 10-year felony.

■ 'This (the 1986 incident) was a vicious attack. It showed that he was out of control. One of the bullets missed a baby by less than a foot.'

William Dwyer
—chief of police

But Atkins was charged with malicious destruction of property over \$100. "It's more than 10 years old, so I don't remember why they did not seek the higher warrant," Dwyer said. "Our officers did everything by the letter."

"If he would have been dealt with in the first place, maybe this wouldn't have happened," Dwyer said. "He was out of control. All the indicators were there that he would do something."

Dwyer said he was shocked when he first realized that Atkins was the man police had captured after the shooting death of Izzard and the wounding of two Oakland County deputies.

Atkins was arraigned Friday afternoon in 52-1 District Court in Novi on 26 charges including first-degree murder, which carries a mandatory life sentence for conviction. He is in the Oakland County Jail without bond.

The killing struck home for Cowan, who had been neighbors with Izzard for 12 years in Milford.

"He was a great neighbor who would give you anything you wanted," Cowan said. "I had just seen his wife at a wedding a couple of weeks ago. He (Izzard) was negotiating a contract with Ford and couldn't be there."

"Yesterday (Nov. 14) was not a good day for me," Cowan said.

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