

**The Murder of Booker T. Spearman:
Uncovering a Pattern of Police Brutality with Impunity in
Hawkinsville, Georgia**



**Meredith Stuart, Northeastern University School of Law
Civil Rights and Restorative Justice Clinic
Fall 2018**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| I. Introduction..... | 2 |
| II. A Pattern of Police Brutality in Hawkinsville, Georgia..... | 4 |
| A. Two Police Murders: Booker T. Spearman and Willie Pless..... | 5 |
| B. Documenting Police Violence Against the Black Community in Hawkinsville..... | 7 |
| III. White Victims Attract National Attention..... | 10 |
| A. The Killings of Louis Passmore and Lon Asman..... | 11 |
| B. The Local Response: Supporting Bragg in the Aftermath..... | 12 |
| C. The Department of Justice Investigates..... | 14 |
| 1. Blaming the Victims..... | 14 |
| 2. Protecting Bragg..... | 15 |
| 3. The Absence of Black Voices in the DOJ Report..... | 17 |
| D. No Indictment from the Grand Jury..... | 18 |
| E. Essie Passmore’s Letter..... | 18 |
| IV. Conclusion..... | 20 |

I. Introduction

Dear Sir:

There is a policeman in Hawkinsville, Ga. who has killed at least four Negroes in the period of the past five years. He has beaten and shot a number that far exceeds the number that he has killed. Either the last of 1945, or the first of 1946, he shot and killed a helpless drunken Negro. It is said that this man had handcuffs on and was inside the jail when the shooting took place...

I think something should be done about this maniac. It is said that he was once in an insane asylum. I reported the acts of this policeman to the Atlanta N.A.A.C.P., but nothing has been done about it. This man's name is Tom Braggs [sic].¹

- George F. Lambert, Letter to NAACP New York Chapter
July 7, 1946

In the summer of 1946, George Lambert was in Simsbury, Connecticut picking tobacco at a summer job for Cullman Brothers, Inc.² It is unclear whether Lambert ever set foot in Hawkinsville, Georgia, whether he ever knew the unnamed black man about whose death he wrote, or whether he ever received a response to his letter. What is clear is that Lambert knew that James Thomas Bragg, the police chief in Hawkinsville, was routinely using excessive and lethal force against people of color – and he was asking someone to stand up to him.

Five years after Lambert's initial appeal for help, Bragg killed two white soldiers who were AWOL from the nearby Robins Air Force Base.

¹ Letter from George Lambert to NAACP New York Chapter, July 7, 1946. NAACP Legal File, 1940 – 1951, Police Brutality, H (as noted on folder).

² In the 1940s, Cullman Brothers and other Connecticut tobacco farms partnered with Morehouse College and other Historically Black Colleges and Universities to employ southern black students in the summers to meet their labor needs. The students lived in dormitory style housing owned by Cullman. Based on the return address on the letter he wrote, George Lambert was likely one of those students. Martin Luther King, Jr. worked and lived on the Cullman Brothers farm in the summers of 1944 and 1947. "Laboring in the Shade," ConnecticutHistory.org, <https://connecticuthistory.org/laboring-in-the-shade> (last visited Dec. 8, 2018).

³ He claimed that he was forced to shoot and kill the soldiers in self-defense when he was transporting them back to military custody and they attempted to take his gun from its holster.⁴ Unlike the death that Lambert reported, the killing of the two soldiers made national news and led to an FBI investigation on behalf of the Department of Justice (“DOJ”).⁵

This case started with one unnamed victim and grew to reveal a pattern of police brutality in Hawkinsville that was enacted with impunity. Through the course of this investigation, it was determined with reasonable certainty that the name of the man in Lambert’s letter was Booker T. Spearman. There appears to be little information about Spearman’s life or his death. As a result, much of his story is revealed through the perpetrator, a police officer who continually used lethal force against people in his custody, and through the efforts of those who sought to hold that officer accountable.

³ “Warner Robins Solider Pair Killed by Chief,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, Atlanta GA, p. 1 (May 12, 1951).

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ DOJ Litigation File, A1 COR 144, 144-19M-101 (1951).

II. A Pattern of Police Brutality in Hawkinsville, Georgia

“[H]e began to tell me about happenings of a disturbing sort – of shooting of Negroes at the jail after arrest and before trial, of beatings at the hands of the police, of forcible entrance into homes without proper warrant and wanton destruction or removal of property.”⁶

- Rev. Edwin J. Grimes, Letter to the SRC
March 13, 1946

Hawkinsville, Georgia is the county seat of Pulaski County. In 1940, it was a town of about 3,000 people, just under half of whom were African Americans.⁷ In 1940, Spearman worked as a garbage man.⁸ In this way, he was unusual. While most of his black neighbors worked in agriculture, lumber, and domestic service, Spearman was employed by the city.⁹ He was married to Luvenia Spearman, who worked in domestic service.¹⁰ There is no evidence that they ever had children.

In March of 1946, two months after Spearman was killed, Harold L. Tigg of the Southern Regional Council (“SRC”) visited Hawkinsville. His visit was prompted by a letter from Reverend Edwin Grimes, a white pastor of the white Methodist Episcopal Church. Grimes described black residents living in constant fear of lawless assaults at the hands of police officers

6 Southern Regional Council Case Reports, Letter from Rev. Edwin J. Grimes (1946), Series I; Reel 17.594; Frames 1363-64.

7 Hawkinsville Population Guide from 1969 Book, Hawkinsville GA (Sonam Vashi) (July 2018).

8 Booker T. Spearman, Census (1940), Booker T. & Luvenia Spearman.

9 Southern Regional Council Reports, Situation at Hawkinsville, (1946), Series I; Reel 17.594; Frames 1361-62.

10 Booker T. Spearman, Census (1940), Booker T. & Luvenia Spearman.

and the “shooting of Negroes at the jail after arrest and before trial.”¹¹ He wrote to the civil rights organization that was promoting interracial cooperation and urging whites to help their black neighbors obtain equal protection.¹² He asked for guidance on how to improve the racial dynamics in the town.

A. Two Police Murders: Booker T. Spearman and Willie Pless

After his visit to Hawkinsville, Tigg reported that “Bragg had a legendary reputation... It is said that he beats and shoots Negroes at the slightest provocation. It was said that he had killed two and run some out of town.”¹³ This report is substantiated by Bragg himself, who admitted to killing Booker T. Spearman in 1946 and Willie Pless in 1942.¹⁴

Booker T. Spearman died on January 5, 1946, within days of the dates provided by Lambert in his letter to the NAACP.¹⁵ His death certificate classifies his death as a homicide.¹⁶

The cause of his death was stated to be “pistol wounds of neck, abdomen, and hand.”¹⁷ While

11 Southern Regional Council Case Reports, Letter from Rev. Edwin J. Grimes (1946), Series I; Reel 17.594; Frames 1363-64.

12 Grimes addressed his letter to the Georgia Committee on Interracial Cooperation. In 1944, the Georgia Committee on Interracial Cooperation merged with the Southern Regional Council. This paper will refer to the Southern Regional Council (“SRC”).

13 Southern Regional Council Reports, Situation at Hawkinsville, (1946), Series I; Reel 17.594; Frames 1361-62.

14 DOJ Litigation File, A1 COR 144, 144-19M-101 (1951) at 53-54.

15 Booker T. Spearman, Georgia Death Certificate (Jan. 5, 1946).

16 *Id.*

17 *Id.*

Lambert's letter states that the victim was shot while in jail, Spearman's death certificate indicates that he was killed on the street.¹⁸ Spearman was born on January 4, 1919. He turned 27 the day before he died.¹⁹

In 1951, Bragg admitted to an FBI agent that he had shot and killed Spearman during an arrest.²⁰ The agent was interviewing Bragg in connection with a DOJ investigation into the recent killings of the two white soldiers. Bragg did not indicate why he was arresting Spearman, but claimed that while handcuffed, Spearman pulled out a switchblade knife and swiped at Bragg, cutting his belt, his shirt, and, just barely, his skin.²¹ According to Bragg, Spearman then attacked him a second time. Bragg justified shooting and killing Spearman, stating that he jumped backwards, drew his gun, and fired "in order to protect his own life."²²

The archives of the local newspaper, a weekly called Hawkinsville Dispatch and News, sheds no further light on Spearman's death. Unfortunately, the issue most likely to have reported Spearman's death, published on January 10, 1946, is missing from the archives at the University of Georgia. The next available issue is January 31, which made no mention of his death or a police shooting. The issue published on January 3 indicates that Hawkinsville enjoyed a "quiet holiday season" with few arrests for minor infractions, but none of them for drunkenness.²³

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ DOJ Litigation File, A1 COR 144, 144-19M-101 (1951) at 54.

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.*

In the 1951 FBI interview, Bragg also admitted to killing Willie Pless.²⁴ Bragg claimed that Pless was robbing “Cap Reagan’s store” and that he was “forced to shoot to save his own life” when Pless attempted to attack him with an ice pick.²⁵ Willie Pless died on January 24, 1942.²⁶ His death certificate indicates that he was shot in the head and back with a shotgun “during a robbery by policeman.”²⁷ Although his death occurred on January 24, his death certificate wasn’t signed until February 10, nearly three weeks later.²⁸

Pless’s death was reported in the *Hawkinsville Dispatch and News* under the headline “Burglar Killed Last Thursday by Police.”²⁹ According to the newspaper’s report, Pless (referred to as “Willie Lip” in the paper), and an accomplice named Frank Jelks, attempted to rob a warehouse owned by Pless’s employer, L. C. Ragan.³⁰ Two police officers, including Bragg, responded to the robbery. Pless is reported to have “attempted to run into the officers and knock

23 “Quiet Holiday Season Enjoyed,” *Hawkinsville Dispatch and News*, Hawkinsville GA, Page 1 (Jan 3, 1946).

24 DOJ Litigation File, A1 COR 144, 144-19M-101 (1951) at 53-54.

25 *Id.*

26 Willie Pless, Georgia Death Certificate (Jan. 24, 1942).

27 *Id.*

28 *Id.*

29 “Burglar Killed Last Thursday by Police,” *Hawkinsville Dispatch and News*, Hawkinsville GA, Page 1 (Jan 29, 1942).

30 *Id.*

them out of the way.”³¹ He was shot and killed when he refused to obey commands to halt.³²

Jelks reportedly fled, but either turned himself in or was apprehended later. Jelks was convicted for attempting to commit larceny and sentenced to 12 months in prison or \$300 plus 3 months.³³

Records indicate that Jelks paid the fine.³⁴

B. Documenting Police Violence Against the Black Community in Hawkinsville

Reverend Grimes’ letter to the SRC and Tigg’s field report in 1946, combined with the DOJ investigation in 1951, document numerous acts of police brutality by the Hawkinsville Police Department and by Bragg in particular. In 1951, Hawkinsville’s Superior Court Clerk Israel Manheim recalled that before the deaths of the two white soldiers, Bragg had killed “about three” people “in the line of duty.”³⁵ At that time, there were rumors that Bragg had killed as many as twelve people, mostly black.³⁶ The FBI agent found no records of coroner’s inquests into the deaths of individuals killed by Bragg prior to 1951.³⁷ He also found no records of a Grand Jury indictment or a “no bill” against Bragg during that period.³⁸

³¹ *Id.*

³² *Id.*

³³ Misdemeanor Sentence Register, State Prison and Parole Commission, GA, Frank Jelks (Jan 16, 1943)

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ DOJ Litigation File, A1 COR 144, 144-19M-101 (1951) at 53.

³⁶ *Id.* at 51-53.

³⁷ *Id.*

In addition to the documentation that Bragg killed at least four people in the line of duty between 1942 and 1951, there is also evidence that he and the Hawkinsville Police Department under his leadership committed numerous other acts of police brutality. The following is an attempt to summarize known acts of police brutality aimed at members of the black community which occurred between 1942 and 1951 in Hawkinsville, Georgia.

In March of 1946, two months after Spearman's death, a bus driver called the police about a black soldier who refused instructions to move to the back of the bus. The responding police officer fired a tear-gas cartridge at the soldier, beat him severely, and arrested him.³⁹ The white version of the story is that the beating was "richly deserved" because the soldier was "out of his place" and because he drew a knife on the policeman.⁴⁰ The next day, the soldier was tended to by the barber and put on a bus out of town.⁴¹ His head and face were so bruised that he had trouble speaking.⁴² But he told the barber that the tear-gas cartridge had rendered him defenseless and that he was beaten again at the jail.⁴³

Reverend Grimes mentioned this assault in his letter to the SRC. As a result, Harold L. Tigg visited Hawkinsville and wrote up his observations, reporting that the police in

38 *Id.*

39 Southern Regional Council Case Reports, Letter from Rev. Edwin J. Grimes (1946), Series I; Reel 17.594; Frames 1363-64.

40 *Id.*

41 *Id.*

42 *Id.*

43 *Id.*

Hawkinsville had resolved to put black soldiers, returning from service overseas, “back in their place.”⁴⁴ While it is unclear from Grimes and Tigg whether it was Bragg or another officer who assaulted the soldier on the bus, Bragg admitted in the 1951 interview to arresting a man who had allegedly attacked a bus driver, shooting that man in the leg during the arrest.⁴⁵

Grimes also reported the story of a black restaurant owner whose home was invaded and vandalized, his furniture and clothing destroyed, and \$700 stolen from him.⁴⁶ The robbery was allegedly committed by a uniformed policeman and a “helper.”⁴⁷ After the robbery, the owner was told to leave town and was threatened that if he was seen again “we’ll shoot first and ask questions afterwards.”⁴⁸ The man fled, and a search was made to find him, presumably to kill him in order to prevent an investigation into the robbery.⁴⁹ Grimes did not have firsthand knowledge of this incident, but the story had been reported to him.

In the same 1951 interview where he admitted to killing Spearman and Pless, Bragg admitted to shooting a black man by the name of John Henry Porter in the leg.⁵⁰ Bragg stated that as he was arresting Porter for robbery, Porter tried to disarm him. Shooting Porter in the leg,

44 Southern Regional Council Reports, Situation at Hawkinsville, (1946), Series I; Reel 17.594; Frames 1361-62.

45 DOJ Litigation File, A1 COR 144, 144-19M-101 (1951) at 54.

46 Southern Regional Council Case Reports, Letter from Rev. Edwin J. Grimes (1946), Series I; Reel 17.594; Frames 1363-64.

47 *Id.*

48 *Id.*

49 *Id.*

50 DOJ Litigation File, A1 COR 144, 144-19M-101 (1951) at 54.

Bragg claimed, was necessary. Porter was convicted on March 17, 1947 and sentenced to two consecutive 12-month sentences.⁵¹ He was discharged on October 23, 1948.⁵² Bragg also admitted to shooting a black man in 1943 whose name he did not recall.⁵³ Bragg claimed that he had arrested the man and was transporting him to jail when the man pulled a switch-blade knife out of his shoe top and attacked Bragg.⁵⁴ According to Bragg, he was forced to shoot the man to save his own life.⁵⁵ It is unclear from the report of the interview whether the man survived.

51 Misdemeanor Sentence Register, State Dept of Corrections, GA, John Henry Porter (March 1947)

52 *Id.*

53 DOJ Litigation File, A1 COR 144, 144-19M-101 (1951) at 54.

54 *Id.*

55 *Id.*

III. White Victims Attract National Attention

*“Not long ago it is said that white and Negro children going to school had some argument and an adolescent white girl said to a Negro girl, ‘Bragg is sick, but I am here.’ Officer Bragg’s name is used to frighten little children and all Negros.”*⁵⁶

- Harold L. Tigg, SRC Field Report
March 16, 1946

On the night of May 11, 1951, five years after Lambert’s letter, Bragg shot and killed Privates Louis L. Passmore and Lon G. Asman, two white soldiers were AWOL from the nearby Robins Air Force Base. They had been arrested in Hawkinsville, and Bragg was transporting them back to the military’s custody. Bragg’s young son, Tommie, was in the back seat of the car when the shooting took place.

The killing of these two white soldiers by a local police chief made national news and was widely reported.⁵⁷ NAACP Executive Secretary Walter White decried the “wanton slaying” of the servicemen and seized upon the killings to urge the passage of federal legislation to protect all men in uniform, black and white, from attacks by local police and civilians.⁵⁸ White was advancing this legislation foremost to protect black soldiers, like the unnamed veteran who was assaulted in Hawkinsville, from a white backlash that sought to put them “back in their place” after they returned from service abroad.

56 Southern Regional Council Reports, Situation at Hawkinsville, (1946), Series I; Reel 17.594; Frames 1361-62.

57 See i.e. “Police Hold Cop Slayer of Two GIs,” Arizona Republic, Pheonix AZ, Page 1 (May 14, 1951); “Two Soldier-Prisoners Killed in Car by Georgia Police Chief,” St. Louis Post-Dispatch, St. Louis MO, Page 3 (May 12, 1951); “Charge Murder to Police Chief in GI Killings,” Chicago Tribune, Chicago IL, Page 32 (May 13, 1951).

58 DOJ Litigation File, A1 COR 144, 144-19M-101 (1951) at 100.

Passmore and Asman's deaths indicate that Bragg's lawlessness crossed racial lines. Despite the race of these victims, and the national media coverage of their deaths, Bragg continued to kill with impunity and with the protections of the system.

A. The Killings of Louis Passmore and Lon Asman

Passmore was originally from Hawkinsville. He and Asman went AWOL from Robins Air Force Base and were staying with Passmore's mother.⁵⁹ On May 11, 1951, they were arrested at the Georgia Grill, a Hawkinsville bar.⁶⁰

Around 7:30 p.m., Officer Woods, who had made the arrest, called Bragg at home to inform him that the two men were in custody.⁶¹ Recognizing that Passmore was AWOL, Bragg finished his dinner, put his son in the car, and decided to drive Passmore and Asman back to Robins Airforce Base.⁶² Passmore reportedly asked Bragg to deliver them back to the base "as they did not want to spend the night in a 'filthy jail.'"⁶³ Realizing that the next day would be Saturday, and that several drunks were likely to be arrested, Bragg told investigators that he had decided to transport the two men back to the base that night because he was worried about the jail getting too crowded.⁶⁴

However, Bragg may have had another reason for driving the two soldiers back to Robins Airforce Base that night: in 1951, the military gave a \$15 reward to anyone who detained an

⁵⁹ *Id.* at 74.

⁶⁰ *Id.* at 16.

⁶¹ *Id.* at 69.

⁶² *Id.*

⁶³ *Id.*

⁶⁴ *Id.*

AWOL soldier and held him for the military to pick up.⁶⁵ The reward was increased to \$25 if the soldier was delivered back to the nearest military base.⁶⁶

On the drive to the base, the two soldiers were handcuffed together and sitting in the front of the car with Bragg: Passmore in the passenger seat, Asman in the middle.⁶⁷ Tommie was in the back seat. As the car approached the bridge crossing the Big Indian Creek on state highway 341, Bragg claims that the two men attacked him.⁶⁸ Asman, who was sitting with his left arm around the back of the driver's seat wrapped his left arm around Bragg's throat and began to choke him, yelling at Passmore to "get his gun and kill the SOB."⁶⁹ While Asman was choking him, Bragg stated that Passmore reached across the front seat and grabbed Bragg's revolver, which was holstered on Bragg's left side.⁷⁰ Citing a surge of "super human effort," Bragg says he managed to regain control of the gun.⁷¹ He then fired at the two men until the gun was empty.⁷²

⁶⁵ *Id.* at 103.

⁶⁶ *Id.*

⁶⁷ *Id.* at 69.

⁶⁸ *Id.*

⁶⁹ *Id.* at 70.

⁷⁰ *Id.*

⁷¹ *Id.*

⁷² *Id.*

Edgar A. Long, a truck driver for the Dixie Transport Company, was en route to Fitzgerald, Georgia that night.⁷³ As he approached the bridge crossing Big Indian Creek, around 9:45 p.m., he observed Bragg's car stopped on the bridge.⁷⁴ Long was asked to help Bragg and another motorist on the scene move Passmore's body into the back seat. Reports from witnesses and from Bragg himself indicate that Asman was breathing when Bragg drove off to the nearest hospital, located at Robins Air Force Base.⁷⁵ Both men were pronounced dead on arrival at the hospital.⁷⁶

B. The Local Response: Supporting Bragg in the Aftermath

A coroner's jury, which was impaneled at Robins Air Force Base hospital, immediately after Passmore and Asman were pronounced dead, determined that Bragg killed Passmore and Asman in self-defense.⁷⁷ The verdict was signed by the jury in the early morning of May 12, 1951 at 1:46 a.m.⁷⁸

Despite the self-defense verdict from the coroner's jury, Essie Passmore and Rachel Sanders, mother and wife of Louis Passmore, respectively, swore out a warrant for murder

⁷³ *Id.* at 34.

⁷⁴ *Id.*

⁷⁵ *Id.* at 35, 70.

⁷⁶ *Id.* at 27.

⁷⁷ *Id.* at 27, 55.

⁷⁸ *Id.* at 27

against Bragg on the afternoon of Saturday, May 12, 1951.⁷⁹ Bragg then surrendered himself to the Houston County Sheriff.⁸⁰

The next day, Hawkinsville's City Commissioners called a special meeting. One of the commissioners told the others that he had made a "lengthy and thorough investigation of the entire case" and believed that Bragg had killed Passmore and Asman in self-defense.⁸¹ The three commissioners, Bob Masee, Bob Rush, and Harold Dean, gave Bragg a full and unanimous vote of confidence, citing their peer's personal investigation into the matter and the coroner's jury verdict in their resolution.⁸² They also commended Bragg for his outstanding record as a law enforcement officer.⁸³

The question of whether to indict Bragg for the murder of Passmore and Asman was originally scheduled to be heard by a grand jury on Monday, May 14.⁸⁴ However, the grand jury adjourned without taking action on Bragg's case, and his hearing was rescheduled.⁸⁵ Bragg's

79 "Chief's Attorneys Apply for Bond," *Hawkinsville Dispatch and News*, Hawkinsville, GA, Page 1, (May 16, 1951).

80 *Id.*

81 "Commissioners Give Chief Bragg Vote Confidence, Commendation," *Hawkinsville Dispatch and News*, Hawkinsville, GA, Page 1, (May 16, 1951).

82 *Id.*; "Houston Grand Jury No Bills Bragg Case," *Hawkinsville Dispatch and News*, Hawkinsville, GA, Page 1, (August 1, 1951).

83 "Commissioners Give Chief Bragg Vote Confidence, Commendation," *Hawkinsville Dispatch and News*, Hawkinsville, GA, Page 1, (May 16, 1951).

84 "Chief's Attorneys Apply for Bond," *Hawkinsville Dispatch and News*, Hawkinsville, GA, Page 1, (May 16, 1951).

85 *Id.*

bond hearing was held on Friday, May 18, after which he was released on \$10,000 bail.⁸⁶ Bragg then resumed his duties as police chief, while the investigation continued and Solicitor General William West prepared for the grand jury hearing.⁸⁷

C. The Department of Justice Investigates

The killing of the two soldiers led to an investigation by the Department of Justice, which documented numerous acts of police brutality by the Hawkinsville Police Department. However, while the report dismissed Bragg's reputation for violence, it painted Passmore and Asman as aggressive, impulsive, and chronic alcoholics.

1. Blaming the Victims

The DOJ report chose to focus on Passmore's and Asman's faults and how they deviated from society's expectations instead of the police's illegal behavior. After reviewing the reports by the investigating agents, Assistant Attorney General James McInerney advised that the "exceptionally poor records and reputations of the victims" supported Bragg's justification of self-defense.⁸⁸ The federal government readily accepted Bragg's story and assertion of self-defense in light of Passmore and Asman's reputations for drinking, fighting, and deviating from military rules of conduct.

⁸⁶ "Chief Bragg Free On \$10,000 Bond," *Hawkinsville Dispatch and News*, Hawkinsville, GA, Page 1, (May 23, 1951).

⁸⁷ "Houston Grand Jury No Bills Bragg Case," *Hawkinsville Dispatch and News*, Hawkinsville, GA, Page 1, (August 1, 1951).

⁸⁸ DOJ Litigation File, A1 COR 144, 144-19M-101 (1951), at 20.

According to their military records, both Passmore and Asman went AWOL multiple times throughout their service.⁸⁹ DOJ investigators consulted the soldiers' service records and interviewed officers who were acquainted with them. Many of these officers considered the two men to be poor soldiers, destined for trouble.

Passmore had served in Europe during World War II. He was a combat veteran who earned a Purple Heart in 1944.⁹⁰ Nevertheless, he reportedly "bore a poor reputation... for fighting, especially while intoxicated."⁹¹ His record included multiple Court Martials during war and peacetime service.⁹² There is also evidence that he was the perpetrator of domestic violence. Lila Clark, Passmore's second wife, told investigators that he had assaulted her on several occasions.⁹³ She relayed that when she had discovered he was having an affair and resolved to leave him, he had threatened to kill her family.⁹⁴

None of Asman's family in California were interviewed during the investigation. Asman himself was described by a superior as "mentally inferior, a poor soldier... a very immature individual [who] was easily influenced by others."⁹⁵ The superior believed that Asman was likely

⁸⁹ *Id.* at 27-30.

⁹⁰ *Id.* at 28.

⁹¹ *Id.* at 91.

⁹² *Id.* at 90.

⁹³ *Id.* at 38-39.

⁹⁴ *Id.*

⁹⁵ *Id.* at 91.

malleable to Passmore's influence, and would be quick to follow a strong personality. His record, like Passmore's, included multiple Court Martials.⁹⁶

2. *Protecting Bragg*

FBI agents interviewed a number of people about Bragg and the Hawkinsville Police Department. Often, an interviewee would relay a rumor about Bragg from someone else, but then the source of the rumor would deny or dismiss it.

Lt. Colonel Eugene Cropper, for example, told the DOJ investigator that Jim Dykes, the former mayor of the nearby town of Cochran, had described Bragg as "quick tempered, hot headed, and a complex killer;" that he had killed some 12 men, mostly black, while in his custody, and always relies on the claim of self-defense or resisting arrest; and that he always empties his gun when he kills.⁹⁷

When Dykes was interviewed, he admitted that he might have called Bragg quick tempered and hot headed, but denied calling him a complex killer.⁹⁸ He then interrupted the interview to state that "he, [Dykes], was also quick tempered and hot headed."⁹⁹ Through this comment, Dykes normalized the characteristic and dismissed the idea that it could be harmful for someone with power in the local community to be impulsive and quick to anger. Dykes then admitted that he probably did say that Bragg had killed 12 men, but he refused to elaborate on where he had heard the rumor.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ *Id.* at 90.

⁹⁷ *Id.* at 52.

⁹⁸ *Id.* at 53.

⁹⁹ *Id.*

Israel Manheim, the Superior Court Clerk, told an investigator that over the course of his career, Bragg had “been forced to kill” about three people.¹⁰¹ Judge J. M. Butler remembered that Bragg “had been forced to shoot three or four people in the line of duty.”¹⁰²

It became clear through the DOJ investigation that people in town knew that police brutality, including police-involved shootings, was common in Hawkinsville. They talked about it among themselves, swapping rumors about how many people Bragg had killed, suggesting that he would “just as soon kill a man as a snake because he liked to see them die.”¹⁰³ However, when an FBI agent shined a light on the Hawkinsville Police Department from the outside, local men in power appeared to close ranks around Bragg. The police chief’s brutality was open and notorious in Hawkinsville, and appears to have been accepted.

3. The Absence of Black Voices in the DOJ Report

It is important to note that the voices represented in the DOJ investigation overwhelmingly came from the white community. While many rumors surfaced about Bragg targeting the black community with violence, the agents did not follow up on those rumors except to verify the source of the rumor. Only two pages of the over-100 page document is devoted to an agent’s notes about an interview with Bragg in which Bragg admitted to killing or

100 *Id.*

101 *Id.*

102 *Id.*

103 *Id.* at 51.

using deadly force against five black men over the course of his career as a police officer.¹⁰⁴ Yet there is no indication that the agent looked further into these incidents.

It is clear from the Lambert and Grimes letters and the Tiggs field report that black residents of Hawkinsville had knowledge of police brutality directed at their community. However, the DOJ did not investigate these reports which could have exposed abuses by the Hawkinsville Police Department under Bragg's leadership. The DOJ's refusal to investigate reports of violence perpetrated against the black community stands in stark contrast to the agent's interest in other white victims of police violence. For example, an agent spoke directly to Thomas Floyd and John Vaughn, two white victims of police brutality at the hands of the Hawkinsville Police Department.¹⁰⁵ Another agent looked for, but could not find, records of coroner's inquests, indictments, or grand jury no-bills involving Bragg.¹⁰⁶

104 *Id.* at 53-54.

105 *Id.* at 41-57.

106 *Id.* at 53.

D. No Indictment from the Grand Jury

On July 31, 1951, a Houston County Grand Jury failed to indict Bragg for the murder of Passmore and Asman.¹⁰⁷ Twelve witnesses were heard during the four and a half hour hearing.¹⁰⁸ Solicitor General William West, who presented the case, shared his doubts that a case of murder could be made out.¹⁰⁹ The military and state investigators who were present before the grand jury believed that Bragg had used bad judgment in transporting the two soldiers alone and that it may have been bad judgment to shoot them as many times as he did.¹¹⁰ However, the investigators all stated that it was necessary for Bragg to shoot Passmore and Asman in order to protect his own life.¹¹¹

E. Essie Passmore's Letter

After being absolved by the Grand Jury, Bragg continued to serve as Hawkinsville's Chief of Police. Unable to stand seeing the man who killed her son around town, Essie Passmore wrote a letter to the United States Government.¹¹² She begged someone to remove Bragg from his position on the police force:

Kind Sir

107 *Id.* at 24.

108 *Id.*

109 *Id.* at 21.

110 *Id.*

111 *Id.*

112 *Id.* at 7.

in [sic] regards of the chief of police Thomas Bragg who killed my son ...he is still being allowed to be on the Police force just as nothing had were [sic] happened...

[He is always] putting himself in my way where I have to see him and endure it when it is more than I can hardly stand...I do think he should at least be taken off the Police force and run out of state of Ga [sic]...if he is let by with this he will kill some more of our men..."¹¹³

- Essie Passmore, Letter to US Government
December 28, 1951

Essie Passmore, unlike Lambert, did receive a response to her letter. On January 15, 1952, she was told by Assistant Attorney General James M. McInerney that since a thorough investigation found no violation of federal criminal law, there was nothing that the US Government could do.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ *Id.* at 7-8.

¹¹⁴ *Id.* at 6.

IV. Conclusion

Police Chief James Thomas Bragg was never dismissed from the force, nor was he driven out of the state. Instead, he continued to serve as Police Chief of Hawkinsville for the next two decades.¹¹⁵ He was active in the Georgia Peace Officers Association, served as their vice-president, and was named Police Chief of the Year several times by the organization.¹¹⁶ He remained actively engaged in Hawkinsville life: serving on town committees and as a judge for Pulaski County's annual harness races. In 1969, he was named Citizen of the Year by the Hawkinsville Lion's Club.¹¹⁷ His son Tommie followed his footsteps into law enforcement, becoming an agent in the Georgia Bureau of Investigation.¹¹⁸

Bragg retired from the police force around 1970, when he had a minor stroke.¹¹⁹ He had served 25 years as Hawkinsville's Chief of Police.¹²⁰ Soon after his retirement, when his health

115 "Former Police Chief Tom Bragg Dies Here," Hawkinsville Dispatch and News, Hawkinsville GA, Page 1 (Sept. 25, 1974).

116 *Id.*

117 *Id.*

118 *Id.*

119 *Id.*

120 *Id.*

returned, he began working part-time as a bailiff for the Pulaski County Sheriff.¹²¹ He worked there until the Thursday before he died, which was on September 22, 1974.¹²²

In the nine years between 1942 and 1951, Bragg killed at least four people, though reports suggest this number may be higher.¹²³ Furthermore, he deployed lethal force against many others.¹²⁴ He did so without facing investigation or indictment. Bragg's killing of the two white soldiers in 1951 was unusual in that it resulted in an investigation at all. Under his leadership, the Hawkinsville Police Force committed additional abuses.¹²⁵

Bragg enjoyed the support and loyalty of white Hawkinsville residents and local leaders throughout his career, from the Hawkinsville City Commissioners who gave him a full and unanimous vote of confidence on the eve of the Grand Jury hearing in 1951 to Roger Lawson, who published a letter to the editor the week Bragg died commending his "unflinching courage and determination to protect his township from the lawless element."¹²⁶

George Lambert, Reverend Grimes, and Essie Passmore all spoke up, each writing to a different actor, reporting Bragg for his abuses and asking for help to hold him accountable. Lambert, a young black student, wrote to the Atlanta chapter of the NAACP and then to the New

121 *Id.*

122 *Id.*

123 DOJ Litigation File, A1 COR 144, 144-19M-101 (1951) at 51-54.

124 *See Id.* at 51, 54.

125 *See* Southern Regional Council Case Reports, Letter from Rev. Edwin J. Grimes (1946), Series I; Reel 17.594; Frames 1363-64; *see also* DOJ Litigation File, A1 COR 144, 144-19M-101 (1951) at 41-43.

126 "Chief Tom Bragg," Roger Lawson, Hawkinsville Dispatch and News, Hawkinsville GA, Page 5 (Sept. 25, 1974).

York chapter after his first letter went unanswered. Reverend Grimes, a white pastor in town, wrote to the Southern Regional Council, a civil rights organization that was forming interracial committees around the South to protect black citizens. Finally, Essie Passmore, a white woman and mother of another of one of Bragg's victims, wrote to the United States Government. All of these efforts provide futile.

Lambert, Grimes, and Passmore took the right steps. They reported Bragg and his continual use of deadly force against people in his custody. Their failure to obtain justice reflects the powerful forces of racism and the misuse of power that were used throughout the Jim Crow south to terrorize blacks. Such murders with impunity had the effect of maintaining a social and economic order that intentionally excluded blacks and has had a lasting effect on blacks and on the country. By bringing these stories to light, communities may be able to better understand their tragic history, so as to engage in restorative justice and move towards a better future.