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Governor Reduces Sentence of Kern County Convicted Murderer Steven Bradley

On Friday, March 27, 2020 amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, Governor Gavin Newsom found time to issue commutations of sentences for 22 convicts, including convicted Kern County murderer Steven Bradley.

The Governor's commutation order for Bradley relegates Bradley's horrific crime to a single sentence: "In 1987, Steven Bradley killed Claude Baker, a gas station employee, during a robbery." The Governor's clemency order fails to describe the full circumstances of the crime, which are detailed below:

On September 7, 1987, at 2:30 a.m., Steven Bradley drove to a Shell station at 2600 White Lane, in Bakersfield. Bradley worked at a Shell station across town and knew Claude Baker, the attendant at the White Lane location. Bradley went to the White Lane Shell station to get gas and robbed Mr. Baker. During the robbery, Bradley motioned two customers to walk toward him, and produced a shotgun, causing the two customers and Mr. Baker to begin running away. Claude Baker fled the gas station and was crossing White Lane, running away from Bradley. Rather than let the victims flee and take whatever property he wanted, Bradley chased down Mr. Baker and shot him with the shotgun in the back from 5 feet away. Baker, wounded and disabled, continued to try and run away. Bradley, unsatisfied with merely wounding Baker, approached the wounded Baker while he was on the ground in the center divider, stood over him, and fired a second blast with the shotgun from point-blank range, killing Baker. Bradley then went to the service station and emptied the cash register.

Bradley fled in his vehicle, and responding officers initiated a high-speed pursuit where Bradley exceeded speeds of 100 mph through Southwest Bakersfield while ignoring stop signs and traffic lights. The pursuit culminated with Bradley turning in a cul-de-sac and intentionally accelerating toward and ramming two police cars at 40 mph, causing major damage to all of the vehicles. Officers ran up to Bradley's car and pulled the shotgun out of Bradley's lap while he was still in the driver's seat. Bradley resisted arrest, attempted to pull a 10-inch knife from under his leg, and also attempted to grab one of the officers' handguns. After the struggle to arrest Bradley, officers found a handgun hidden under a blanket on Bradley's passenger seat. When questioned about his arrest, Bradley stated about the officers, "I wish they would have killed me."

While in the patrol car after being arrested, Bradley admitted that “I had to...he knows me,” in reference to the killing of Mr. Baker.

Steven Bradley was found guilty by a Kern County jury of First-Degree Murder with special circumstances and Robbery, along with firearms enhancements and sentenced to Life in Prison Without the Possibility of Parole in September of 1988. The case was eligible for the death penalty, but the jury deadlocked on whether the death penalty or life without parole should be imposed. In response, and relying upon the punishment of life without the possibility of parole, the District Attorney waived the death penalty in 1988 after the jury deadlock during the penalty phase. The Court of Appeal affirmed the conviction and the appropriateness of the Life Without the Possibility of Parole sentence, stating:

“[The] defendant is not a youthful or immature offender. Moreover, the circumstances surrounding the offense demonstrate defendant decided to rob the service station attendant in order to get money to leave town. He killed his victim to avoid detection. Defendant downed the victim with one shot, chased him and fired a second time at close range as the attendant struggled to get up out of the street. Defendant was the only participant in the crime. He was apprehended only after a high-speed chase.”

The commutation of Bradley’s sentence does not immediately grant his release, but it gives Bradley an opportunity at release in future parole hearings by reducing his Life Without Parole sentence to 32 years to Life in prison.

The commutation was issued over the objections of the Kern County District Attorney’s Office.

Notified of the Governor’s decision, District Attorney Cynthia Zimmer commented: “To cover up the robbery he had already committed, Steven Bradley wounded, then executed the victim at close range with a shotgun, led police on a high speed chase endangering the entire community, and then continued to grab for a knife and more firearms to increase his body count. Governor Newsom’s clemency order, issued amidst a public health emergency, intentionally glosses over Bradley’s crimes in a drastically misguided effort to justify his potential release. The Kern County District Attorney’s Office will continue to strongly oppose any possibility of parole for this convicted killer.”

Witnesses and jurors from the case, as well as surviving family members of Claude Baker are encouraged to contact the District Attorney’s Office at (661) 868-2340 for information regarding participation in future parole hearings.