

Arrest in death of Detective Chris Jones

Man charged in crash that killed police officer

Frank Wallace Budka, 45, was driving under the combined influence of methadone and marijuana at the time of the accident, the county DA said.

By **GEORGE MATTAR** and **MATT COUGHLIN**
STAFF WRITERS

Middletown Detective Chris Jones' cuffs were used for the last time Wednesday when one of the fallen officer's squad mates slapped them on the man authorities say caused Jones' death.

Nearly three months after the fatal crash that killed the 11-year veteran, Frank Wallace Budka, 45, of Middletown, was arrested in his Foxwood Manor Apartment about 2:30 p.m. He put up no resistance as Officer Robert Weber, one of Jones' many friends on the force, put the cuffs on Budka before Weber, Detective Jeffry Sproehnle and Sgt. John Michniewicz took him to a waiting police car.

Moments later, as 20 cops and a grieving widow watched, a trembling Budka was charged with homicide by vehicle while DUI, homicide by vehicle, involuntary manslaughter, recklessly endangering another person, DUI, several drug charges and traffic offenses.

"My heart goes out to all of his family," Budka told the newspaper as he was led off to prison after being arraigned in district court. "I pray for (Jones) every day."

Budka is being held on \$1 million bail. He faces a mandatory minimum of three years in prison if found guilty of homicide by vehicle while DUI and could face more than 30 years if convicted on all charges.

"This is a tough day for all of us," acting Public Safety Director Patrick McGinty said while thanking investigators. "I am happy with the charges and the bail."

District Attorney Michelle Henry said that Budka was charged because he was driving recklessly and under the combined influence of methadone, which was prescribed, and marijuana at the time of the accident.

"His doctor warned him about the dangers of taking methadone with other controlled substances," Henry said. "This was a horrific accident and he had been warned about this kind of conduct and he didn't care. He chose to ignore those warnings and he got behind the wheel of a car and, as a result of that, Officer Jones is dead...Bucks County lost a wonderful police officer."

Police said Budka's arrest came 84 days after the crash because of the extensive investigation into the suspect's alleged drug use and the time-consuming reconstruction of the accident.

On the morning of Jan. 29, Jones had stopped a car on the shoulder of the Route 1 Superhighway about 528 feet north of the I-95 southbound exit ramp, according to court records. He had just issued a ticket and was walking back to his patrol car when Budka's Toyota Corolla clipped a Grand Prix in the left lane and swerved into the cruiser, pushing it over Jones and pinning him underneath, police said.

The 37-year-old husband and father of three was pronounced dead at St. Mary Medical Center in Middletown several hours later.

Police said Budka's knee was injured in the accident, which crushed the front end of his Toyota. He was also taken to St. Mary. Officers suspected Budka was under the influence at the time and samples of his blood were taken.

Budka claimed he was driving about 35 to 40 mph, "50 mph at most," according to court records.

However, one of the accident investigators, Bristol Township Sgt. Steve Mawhinney, determined that Budka "operated his motor vehicle at a speed that was greater than reasonable and prudent under the conditions and potential hazards that existed." Henry added that the reconstruction of the accident showed that Budka was driving about 63 mph at the time of impact.

During interviews by investigators, Budka claimed he didn't drink, sometimes smoked marijuana but had only taken a prescription blood thinner the night before the crash, according to court records. He later added he'd also taken prescribed amounts of methadone and Dilaudid — a powerful painkiller made from opium — the night before the accident, police said.

Authorities said Budka had been prescribed use of methadone as a treatment for pain and was being treated for circulation problems for several years. Henry said Budka hasn't been working and has been on disability during that time.

According to court records, Budka's doctor had him sign a document stating he knew he was not to use cocaine or marijuana while taking methadone and Dilaudid and that a possible side effect of the prescriptions was impaired cognitive function.

Yet, blood tests showed there was THC — the active chemical in marijuana — and methadone in Budka's blood, according to court records. Urine tests also showed the presence of benzoylecgonine, a byproduct of metabolized cocaine, police said.

The amount of methadone was consistent with Budka's prescription, Henry said. However, according to court records, a forensic toxicologist told investigators that the concentration of marijuana found in Budka's blood has been associated with impairments including erratic driving, mental confusion, speeding and slurred speech. And the amount of THC indicated marijuana had been smoked within hours of the blood sample being drawn.

During a search of Budka's apartment on the night of the accident, police found 34 grams of marijuana and numerous pieces of drug paraphernalia commonly used for smoking marijuana and cocaine. They also confiscated three switchblades. A pipe for smoking drugs was also found inside Budka's Corolla.

However, the arrest waited as investigators gathered evidence.

Sgt. Mark Wert, who was Jones' supervisor for five years, said, "I can't say it's a day of relief, but it is a day I have been waiting for...This was not a freak accident. This was avoidable."

The officer's widow, Suzanne Jones, was surrounded by officers, family and friends in the courtroom as Budka was charged. She declined comment, but the family later issued a statement saying: "We are pleased with the arrest of the person responsible for causing the accident."

The statement also thanked the investigators for their work and the community for its support.

Matt Coughlin can be reached at 215-949-4172 or . George Mattar can be reached at 215-949-4165 or .

