

3 killed after suspect released - Dearborn Heights man suspected in global killing spree was first questioned in January

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DEARBORN HEIGHTS -- Preliminary DNA evidence linked a **suspect** to the slaying of a prostitute in Dearborn Heights last month -- just a few weeks before police think the same man strangled up to three more women found dead Monday in Detroit.

But Wayne County prosecutors would not issue a warrant for John Eric Armstrong in March, because they were seeking a more complete genetic analysis that might have connected him to the murder of Wendy Jordan, a 39-year-old Detroit woman found dead Jan. 2 in the Rouge River.

Set free **after** police questioning last month, Armstrong, 26, is now in custody, accused of stalking and murdering three reputed prostitutes whose bodies were spotted alongside Conrail tracks by a passing train passenger Monday.

Detroit police and FBI agents also believe Armstrong is responsible for a string of international killings, stretching as far away as East Asia and Israel, while he was serving on the aircraft carrier USS Nimitz.

Authorities, working with Armstrong's earlier DNA samples and confessions they say he gave **after** his arrest Wednesday, have tied him to at least seven killings and are investigating other leads.

"This guy has created terror around the world," Detroit Police Chief Benny Napoleon said. "He's a serial killer. He's a sick person."

Armstrong, a native of Newbern, N.C., settled in the Detroit area with his wife and child **after** spending eight years in the Navy, where he worked as a fueler. He used the skills he learned in the military to get a job at Detroit Metropolitan Airport, where he refuels airplanes for Signature Flight Support.

He lives with his family in northeast Dearborn Heights.

Armstrong's transition from suburban dad to accused serial killer unfolded rapidly and by chance **after** a passenger on a train passing through southwest Detroit reported what appeared to be corpses near the tracks.

The bodies turned out to be three women, all prostitutes, police said. They were **killed** at different times, then dumped in the isolated area, Napoleon said. The first body had been placed in the area up to four weeks ago, the second three weeks ago and the third Monday, he added.

Napoleon accused Armstrong of strangling the women inside his car while he was engaged in sexual intercourse with them. Armstrong also had sex with some of his victims **after** they died, Napoleon alleged.

"We got a very sick and dangerous man off the streets," he said. "He may have targeted prostitutes because he didn't believe police would investigate those murders as aggressively."

Detroit police Wednesday only identified one of the three victims found near the Conrail line: Kelly Hood, 33, of Detroit.

Hood's sister, Shannon Hood of Muskegon, was outraged that police had a suspected killer in custody, but let him go to apparently commit more killings. "It hurts knowing that someone like that could walk away," Hood said.

Investigators contend Armstrong also may have tried to strangle three other Detroit prostitutes over the past few weeks. They said he may have been looking for another victim at the time of his arrest.

Officers from Detroit's 4th (Fort) Precinct obtained a description of Armstrong from one of the prostitutes he tried to strangle. The woman told police he was driving a black 1998 Jeep Wrangler.

Around 12:30 a.m. Wednesday, the officers stopped Armstrong on Michigan Avenue, near Lonyo, on Detroit's southwest side.

Police say he confessed to the slayings.

Police are working with international investigators as well as the U.S. Naval Investigative Service to determine if any similar killings have occurred in ports of call the Nimitz has visited over the past eight years. Authorities believe he is linked to slayings in in four states and six foreign countries: Norfolk, Va. Washington Hawaii Thailand Singapore Hong Kong Japan Korea and Israel.

Ironically, it was Armstrong who initially raised the suspicions of police when he called and told them he had found a body in the Rouge River.

Dearborn Heights Detective Lt. Gary Tomkiewicz said Armstrong told police he spotted the body while he was leaning over a bridge getting sick.

"It was unusual circumstances," Tomkiewicz said. "It was just the way he acted."

Investigators sent a sample of his DNA to State Police for analysis.

In late March, a member of the prosecutor's homicide section reviewed the Dearborn Heights investigative report and was made aware that Armstrong's DNA matched a semen sample taken from Jordan's body, said Richard Padzieski, chief of operations for the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office.

"In the final analysis, I could say, 'Geez, if they had gone forward, maybe some people would be alive,' " Padzieski said. "We wanted the final DNA findings before we went ahead."

Padzieski was told that final DNA tests from the State Police Crime Lab in Lansing were needed before a warrant could be issued. Padzieski said he had nothing in writing, just an oral report from police.

The warrant wasn't denied, just delayed, pending final tests, Padzieski said.

"This is a recent change in policy, to wait for the final report," Padzieski said. "Lately, we have been waiting because we had a couple of cases where the final report was not forthcoming at the time of exam."

Preliminary examinations must be conducted 14 days **after** arraignment.

Police believe the murders in Detroit could have been prevented if Wayne County prosecutors would have acted on the police recommendation to issue an arrest warrant for Armstrong.

"We wish we had gotten a warrant earlier," Dearborn Heights Deputy Police Chief Michael Gust said. "It is unfortunate that there have been more murders."

Legal experts said that DNA is revolutionizing the way police crack cases like this.

"DNA has scientifically broadened the way in which law enforcement can investigate crime," said Larry Dubin, a criminal defense expert at the University of Detroit-Mercy. "There now can be less of a reliance on eyewitness testimony when DNA testing is possible."

That would be especially important in a case like this one where police have almost no witnesses.

The FBI identifies a serial killer as someone who kills three people over a period of time. They operate methodically and take breaks. They are different from mass murderers, who kill a large number of people at one time, and spree murderers, who go on a spree during a few days.

"It means that they are killing machines," said James Fox, a criminal justice professor at Northeastern University in Boston. "They are usually sexual predators. The most common type of serial killer is a sexual predator who dominates, rapes, strangles and molests his victims for the sake of fulfilling his sexual fantasy."

Fox said Armstrong fits the profile of a serial killer.

"Prostitutes are the most common category of victims of serial killers. They are the easiest targets because for a few dollars, she'll get in his car," said Fox, who has written several books on serial killers. "He can frequent an area where prostitutes walk and window shop to pick and choose his victim. He can find a woman that most closely fits his fantasy."

The **suspect** 's job also allowed him to kill around the world, Fox said.

"For him, preying on prostitutes was a hobby," he said. "He did it when he had some free time to kill."

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