

Teasing to blame for man opening fire in gay bar

By Kia Shant'e Breaux
Associated Press Writer

ROANOKE, Va. — When Ronald Edward Gay was growing up in Canada, "gay" meant happy.

But when he entered the U.S. Marine Corps during the Vietnam era, his comrades taunted him about his last name and suggested he was homosexual. And when he would hear the word "gay" used to refer to homosexuals, he would bristle.

It was that teasing — coupled, apparently, with a series of personal crises, including a recent divorce and a fire at his home — that prompted Gay to open fire in a gay bar Friday night, police and relatives say.

A gay man was killed and six others, some of whom were not homosexual, were wounded.

Police said Gay, 54, told investigators he committed the crime because he was tired of being teased about his last name.

Gay was jailed without bail. A public defender was appointed for him, but his name was not immediately released.

According to Gay's brother, William, Gay hated the name and the taunting. He was also upset that at least two of his three sons changed their last names.

"Maybe they didn't want the persecution over that name, too," said William Gay, 51. "I think that kind of hurt him, too, them changing their names."

William Gay also said his brother didn't like that his fifth ex-wife, Laura Ramsey, had experimented with a lesbian relationship before they were married. But Ramsey, who lives in Citrus Springs, Fla., said she was up front with her former husband and he didn't seem bothered.

"I tried an alternative lifestyle. It was not my cup of tea," she said. "He knew it before he married me and it was not a problem."

Ramsey said she never got the sense that Gay was homophobic and noted that he would talk to her gay friends at parties. But she did recall her former husband making a point of commenting when the word "gay" was used on television to describe homosexuals.

"He would say, 'They're using my name,'" Ramsey said. "He never said it meant anything to him personally."

A man who answered the phone at the house of Gay's mother and identified himself only as Gay's stepfather said he recalled a time when Gay got dressed up and said he was going to the White House to ask the president why the word gay was associated with homosexuals. He never made the trip.

In any case, much more than a name troubled Gay. In a little more than a year, he and Ramsey had divorced, he scorched his legs in a brush-burning accident and a fire destroyed.

Gay also told family members he was not able to get medicine he needed for the post-traumatic stress disorder that plagued him since he returned from Vietnam War. His family knew he had men-

tal problems and expected something to go wrong, perhaps a suicide.

"I can't help but to think about all those innocent people. If he'd just done away with himself it would've been better," William Gay said in a telephone interview from his home in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, where Ronald Gay grew up.

Their father, Cecil Gay, died in 1966 when Gay was in boot camp. Their mother remarried and lives in the Canadian province of Saskatchewan. Gay served one tour of duty in Vietnam and returned in 1969.

"He had a lot of flashbacks," William Gay said. "He was a gunner protecting convoys. One day a truck blew up and his buddies were on it. He was in charge of picking up body parts. He always said it was just his job and he had to do it, but I know it bothered him."

Gay also had been treated at several veterans hospitals for post-traumatic stress disorder, William Gay said.

"If only someone would have gotten to him before. The signs were there," William Gay said.

On Friday, Gay checked into a downtown motel. He met Kay Lawrence and Pete Glover, who rented a room next door.

"He introduced himself as Ronald Edward Gay, but said, 'I'm not gay like my name sounds,'" Lawrence said.

Gay drank whiskey all day and chatted with his new friends. That night, he gave Glover the key to his room and told him if he wasn't back by morning, Glover could have everything in his room. He told the couple he was going out to get "a Big Mac and watch some fireworks." He also instructed them to watch the 8 a.m. news if he didn't return.

"He looked and me and winked and grinned," Lawrence said.

According to police, a man went to a tavern Friday night and asked directions to the nearest gay bar. An employee of the tavern pointed the way. Then the man showed a gun and told the employee he wanted to shoot gays. The employee called police.

By the time officers began looking for the gunman, a bearded man wearing a black trench coat had entered the Backstreet Cafe, ordered a beer, then calmly stood up and fired at least eight shots from a 9 mm handgun. Minutes later, Gay was arrested and charged with murder.

William Gay said his brother visited the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington last spring, which brought back a lot of bad memories. He blames the treatment of veterans for the shooting at the bar.

"They try to come back and fit into society, but they can't because they've seen so much," he said. "If they don't get proper treatment and the government doesn't look after them properly, you'll have more of this."

Associated Press writer Pat Leisner in Tampa, Fla., contributed to this report.



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