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N.J. cops were justified when they killed man during UPS hostage standoff, attorney general says

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Seven New Jersey officers were justified when they shot and killed a man last year during a hostage standoff at a UPS warehouse, the state attorney general's office announced Wednesday.

William J. Owens, a 39-year-old former employee from Sicklerville, had taken two women hostage in January 2019, police said, including one with whom he previously had a relationship. A Gloucester County SWAT Team opened fire after Owens chased one of the women outside the Logan Township facility, shooting at her at least once.

The officers believed "their actions were immediately necessary to protect the hostage and others from death or serious bodily harm," according to the attorney general's news release. Because the "undisputed facts indicate the use of force was justified," the incident did not need to be reviewed by a grand jury, officials said.

The law has since changed, and grand juries must now review every fatal shooting.

Investigators gave new details about the more than three-hour standoff.

Around 8:30 a.m. on Jan. 14, 2019, Owens arrived at the UPS Mail Innovations facility on Birch Creek Road and confronted the woman he knew. He followed her inside, grabbed her and fired a 9mm handgun into the air, announcing to the room he was taking her hostage.

He then "pistol-whipped a male security guard" and told the woman he was going to kill her, officials said.

Employees fled when he fired twice more. He pointed his gun at others, took a second woman hostage and said "he would kill everybody there and didn't care," according to the release.

While police outside tried to talk him down over the phone, Owens and the two women paced inside. He "brutally kicked and pistol-whipped" the first woman, hit the second and pointed his gun at both, forcing them to endure "continuous abuse and torment," officials said.

He threatened to kill the women again after police entered the building. Owens told officers they would have to kill him, according to the press release, and he threatened to kill cops.

A few minutes before noon, the women escaped.

The first woman ran bleeding through an employee entrance into a parking lot. Owens fired at her as she ran toward cops, and he still had his “gun extended” when SWAT officers pulled the triggers on their five .223 rifles and two 9mm sub-machine guns.

Owens autopsy showed “29 wounds,” officials said. No medical treatment was offered, “because it was clear that Owens was deceased.” Nobody else was shot.

Investigators found a gun near Owens and spent bullet casings inside his gun, his car and the warehouse. While the shooting was not caught on camera, “limited video footage of Owens moving about the interior of the UPS facility was captured by security cameras.”

Investigators from the Attorney General’s Office of Public Integrity and Accountability interviewed “numerous witness” and reviewed “available video footage of events leading to the shooting,” among other evidence, according to the release.

The office declined to name the officers, “because threats were made against the officers involved,” and “releasing their identities could jeopardize their safety.”

When NJ Advance Media previously filed a public records request for the video, the news organization was told releasing what footage did exist would be a security risk.

In July, former officer and police reform advocate Richard Rivera sued the attorney general’s office for the video and officer names, arguing that keeping both secret violates the state’s open records law, according to court records. An attorney general spokesman declined to comment on the lawsuit.

NJ Advance Media staff writer Rebecca Everett contributed to this report.