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## **Katrina's Hidden Race War**

By A.C. Thompson

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*CHANDRA MCCORMICK AND KEITH CALHOUN*

A vigilante shot Donnell Herrington twice shortly after Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans.

The way Donnell Herrington tells it, there was no warning. One second he was trudging through the heat. The next he was lying prostrate on the pavement, his life spilling out of a hole in his throat, his body racked with pain, his vision blurred and distorted.

It was September 1, 2005, some three days after Hurricane Katrina crashed into New Orleans, and somebody had just blasted Herrington, who is African-American, with a shotgun. "I just hit the ground. I didn't even know what happened," recalls Herrington, a burly 32-year-old with a soft drawl.

The sudden eruption of gunfire horrified Herrington's companions--his cousin Marcel Alexander, then 17, and friend Chris Collins, then 18, who are also black. "I looked at Donnell and he had this big old hole in his neck," Alexander recalls. "I tried to help him up, and they started shooting again." Herrington says he was staggering to his feet when a second shotgun blast struck him from behind; the spray of lead pellets also caught Collins and Alexander. The buckshot peppered Alexander's back, arm and buttocks.

Herrington shouted at the other men to run and turned to face his attackers: three armed white males. Herrington says he hadn't even seen the men or their weapons before the shooting began. As Alexander and Collins fled, Herrington ran in the opposite direction, his hand pressed to the bleeding wound on his throat. Behind him, he says, the gunmen yelled, "Get him! Get that nigger!"

The attack occurred in Algiers Point. The Point, as locals call it, is a neighborhood within a neighborhood, a small cluster of ornate, immaculately maintained 150-year-old houses within the larger Algiers district. A nationally recognized historic area, Algiers Point is largely white, while the rest of Algiers is predominantly black. It's a "white enclave" whose residents have "a kind of siege mentality," says Tulane University historian Lance Hill, noting that some white New Orleanians "think of themselves as an oppressed minority."

A wide street lined with towering trees, Opelousas Avenue marks the dividing line between Algiers Point and greater Algiers, and the difference in wealth between the two areas is immediately noticeable. "On one side of Opelousas it's 'hood, on the other side it's suburbs," says one local. "The two sides are totally opposite, like muddy and clean."

Algiers Point has always been somewhat isolated: it's perched on the west bank of the Mississippi River, linked to the core of the city only by a ferry line and twin gray steel bridges. When the hurricane descended on Louisiana, Algiers Point got off relatively easy. While wide swaths of New Orleans were deluged, the levees ringing Algiers Point withstood the Mississippi's surging currents, preventing flooding; most homes and businesses in the area survived intact. As word spread that the area was dry, desperate people began heading toward the west bank, some walking over bridges, others traveling

by boat. The National Guard soon designated the Algiers Point ferry landing an official evacuation site. Rescuers from the Coast Guard and other agencies brought flood victims to the ferry terminal, where soldiers loaded them onto buses headed for Texas.

Facing an influx of refugees, the residents of Algiers Point could have pulled together food, water and medical supplies for the flood victims. Instead, a group of white residents, convinced that crime would arrive with the human exodus, sought to seal off the area, blocking the roads in and out of the neighborhood by dragging lumber and downed trees into the streets. They stockpiled handguns, assault rifles, shotguns and at least one Uzi and began patrolling the streets in pickup trucks and SUVs. The newly formed militia, a loose band of about fifteen to thirty residents, most of them men, all of them white, was looking for thieves, outlaws or, as one member put it, anyone who simply "didn't belong."

The existence of this little army isn't a secret--in 2005 a few newspaper reporters wrote up the group's activities in glowing terms in articles that showed up on an array of [pro-gun blogs](#); one [Cox News story](#) called it "the ultimate neighborhood watch." Herrington, for his part, recounted his ordeal in Spike Lee's documentary *When the Levees Broke*. But until now no one has ever seriously scrutinized what happened in Algiers Point during those days, and nobody has asked the obvious questions. Were the gunmen, as they claim, just trying to fend off looters? Or does Herrington's experience point to a different, far uglier truth?

Over the course of an eighteen-month investigation, I tracked down figures on all sides of the gunfire, speaking with the shooters of Algiers Point, gunshot survivors and those who witnessed the bloodshed. I interviewed police officers, forensic pathologists, firefighters, historians, medical doctors and private citizens, and studied more than 800 autopsies and piles of state death records. What emerged was a disturbing picture of New Orleans in the days after the storm, when the city fractured along racial fault lines as its government collapsed.

Herrington, Collins and Alexander's experience fits into a broader pattern of violence in which, evidence indicates, at least eleven people were shot. In each case the targets were African-American men, while the shooters, it appears, were all white.

The new information should reframe our understanding of the catastrophe. Immediately after the storm, the media portrayed African-Americans as looters and thugs--Mayor Ray Nagin, for example, told Oprah Winfrey that "hundreds of gang members" were marauding through the Superdome. Now it's clear that some of the most serious crimes committed during that time were the work of gun-toting white males.

So far, their crimes have gone unpunished. No one was ever arrested for shooting Herrington, Alexander and Collins--in fact, there was never an investigation. I found this story repeated over and over during my days in New Orleans. As a reporter who has spent more than a decade covering crime, I was startled to meet so many people with so

much detailed information about potentially serious offenses, none of whom had ever been interviewed by police detectives.

Hill, who runs Tulane's Southern Institute for Education and Research and closely follows the city's racial dynamics, isn't surprised the Algiers Point gunmen have eluded arrest. Because of the widespread notion that blacks engaged in looting and thuggery as the disaster unfolded, Hill believes, many white New Orleanians approved of the vigilante activity that occurred in places like Algiers Point. "By and large, I think the white mentality is that these people are exempt--that even if they committed these crimes, they're really exempt from any kind of legal repercussion," Hill tells me. "It's sad to say, but I think that if any of these cases went to trial, and none of them have, I can't see a white person being convicted of any kind of crime against an African-American during that period."

You can trace the origins of the Algiers Point militia to the misfortune of Vinnie Povel. A 52-year-old building contractor and real estate entrepreneur with a graying buzz cut and mustache, Povel says he lost his Ford van in a carjacking the day after Katrina made landfall, when an African-American man attacked him with a hammer. "The kid whacked me," recalls Povel, who is white. "Hit me on the side of the head." Vowing to prevent further robberies, Povel and his neighbors began amassing an arsenal. "For a day and a half we were running around getting guns," he says. "We got about forty."

Things quickly got ugly. Povel remembers aiming a shotgun at a random African-American man walking by his home--even though he knew the man had no connection to the theft of his vehicle. "I don't want you passing by my house!" Povel says he shouted out.

Povel tells me he feared goons would kill his mother, who is in her 70s. "We thought we would be dead," he says. "We thought we were doomed." And so Povel and his comrades set about fortifying the area. One resident gave me video footage of the leafy barricades the men constructed to keep away outsiders. Others told me they created a low-tech alarm system, tying aluminum cans and glass bottles together and stringing them across the roads at ankle height. The bottles and cans would rattle noisily if somebody bumped into them, alerting the militia.

Povel and his armed neighbors point to the very real chaos that was engulfing the city and claim they had no other choice than to act as they did. They paint themselves as righteous defenders of property, a paramilitary formation protecting their neighborhood from opportunistic thieves. "I'm not a racist," Povel insists. "I'm a classist. I want to live around people who want the same things as me."

Nathan Roper, another vigilante, says he was unhappy that outsiders were disturbing his corner of New Orleans and that he was annoyed by the National Guard's decision to use the Algiers Point ferry landing as an evacuation zone. "I'm telling you, it was forty, fifty people at a time getting off these boats," says Roper, who is in his 50s and works for

ServiceMaster, a house-cleaning company. The storm victims were "hoodlums from the Lower Ninth Ward and that part of the city," he says. "I'm not a prejudiced individual, but you just know the outlaws who are up to no good. You can see it in their eyes."

The militia, according to Roper, was armed with "handguns, rifles [and] shotguns"; he personally carried "a .38 in my waistband" and a "little Uzi." "There was a few people who got shot around here," Roper, a slim man with a weathered face, tells me. "I know of at least three people who got shot. I know one was dead 'cause he was on the side of the road."

During the summer of 2005 Herrington was working as an armored-car driver for the Brink's company and living in a rented duplex about a mile from Algiers Point. Katrina thrashed the place, blowing out windows, pitching a hefty pine tree limb through the roof and dumping rain on Herrington's possessions. On the day of the shooting, Herrington, Alexander and Collins were all trying to escape the stricken city, and set out together on foot for the Algiers Point ferry terminal in the hopes of getting on an evacuation bus.

Those hopes were dashed by a barrage of shotgun pellets. After two shots erupted, Collins and Alexander took off running and ducked into a shed behind a house to hide from the gunmen, Alexander tells me. The armed men, he says, discovered them in the shed and jammed pistols in their faces, yelling, "We got you niggers! We got you niggers!" He continues, "They said they was gonna tie us up, put us in the back of the truck and burn us. They was gonna make us suffer.... I thought I was gonna die. I thought I was gonna leave earth."

Apparently thinking they'd caught some looters, the gunmen interrogated and verbally threatened Collins and Alexander for ten to fifteen minutes, Alexander says, before one of the armed men issued an ultimatum: if Alexander and Collins left Algiers Point and told their friends not to set foot in the area, they'd be allowed to live.

Meanwhile, Herrington was staring at death. "I was bleeding pretty bad from my neck area," he recalls. When two white men drove by in a black pickup truck, he begged them for help. "I said, Help me, help me--I'm shot," Herrington recalls. The response, he tells me, was immediate and hostile. One of the men told Herrington, "Get away from this truck, nigger. We're not gonna help you. We're liable to kill you ourselves." My God, thought Herrington, what's going on out here?

He managed to stumble back to a neighbor's house, collapsing on the front porch. The neighbors, an African-American couple, wrapped him in a sheet and sped him to the nearest hospital, the West Jefferson Medical Center, where, medical records show, he was [X-rayed](#) at 3:30 pm. According to the records, a doctor who reviewed the X-rays found "metallic buckshot" scattered throughout his chest, arms, back and abdomen, as well as "at least seven [pellets] in the right neck." Within minutes, Herrington was wheeled into an operating room for emergency surgery.

"It was a close-range buckshot wound from a shotgun," says Charles Thomas, one of the doctors who operated on Herrington. "If he hadn't gotten to the hospital, he wouldn't have lived. He had a hole in his internal jugular vein, and we were able to find it and fix it."

After three days in the hospital, which lacked running water, air conditioning and functional toilets, Herrington was shuttled to a medical facility in Baton Rouge. When he returned to New Orleans months later, he paid a visit to the Fourth District police station, whose officers patrol the west bank, and learned there was no police report documenting the attack. Herrington, who now has a wide scar stretching the length of his neck, says the officers he spoke with failed to take a report or check out his story, a fact that still bothers him. "If the shoe was on the other foot, if a black guy was willing to go out shooting white guys, the police would be up there real quick," he says. "I feel these guys should definitely be held accountable. These guys had absolutely no right to do what they did."

Herrington, Alexander and Collins are the only victims, so far, to tell their stories. But they certainly weren't the only ones attacked in or around Algiers Point. In interviews, vigilantes and residents--citing the exact locations and types of weapons used--detail a string of violent incidents in which at least eight other people were shot, bringing the total number of shooting victims to at least eleven, some of whom may have died.

Other evidence bolsters this tally. Thomas, the surgeon who treated Herrington, staffed one of the few functioning trauma centers in the area, located just outside the New Orleans city line, not far from Algiers Point, for a full month after the hurricane hit. "We saw a bunch of gunshot wounds," he tells me. "There were a lot of gunshot wounds that went unreported during that time." Though Thomas couldn't get into the specifics of the shooting incidents because of medical privacy laws, he says, "We saw a couple of other shotgun wounds, some handgun shootings and somebody who was shot with a high-velocity missile [an assault-rifle round]." The surgeon remembers handling "five or six nonfatal gunshot wounds" as well as three lethal gunshot cases.

In addition, state death records show that at least four people died in and around Algiers Point, a suspicious number, given that most Katrina fatalities were the result of drowning, and that the community never flooded. Neighborhood residents, black and white, remember seeing corpses lying out in the open that appeared to have been shot.

While the militia patrolled the streets of Algiers Point, the New Orleans Police Department, which had done little to brace for the storm, was crippled. "There was no leadership, no equipment, no nothing," recalls one high-ranking police official. "We did no more to prepare for a hurricane than we would have for a thunderstorm." Without functioning radios or dispatch systems, officers had no way of knowing what was happening a block away, let alone on the other side of the city. NOPD higher-ups had no way to give direction to unit commanders and other subordinates. As the chain of command disintegrated, the force dissolved into a collection of isolated, quasi-autonomous bands.

Around Algiers Point people say they rarely saw cops during the week after Katrina tore through Louisiana, and in this law enforcement vacuum the militia's unique brand of justice flourished. Most disturbing, one of the vigilantes, Roper, claims on videotape recorded just weeks after the storm that the shootings took place with the knowledge and consent of the police. When we talk he makes the same assertion: "The police said, If they're breaking in your property do what you gotta do and leave them [the bodies] on the side of the road."

As we drive through Algiers Point in a battered white van, Roper tells me he witnessed a fatal shooting. Roper says he was talking on his cellphone to his son in Lafayette one evening when he spied an African-American man trying to get into Daigle's Grocery, a corner market on the eastern edge of the neighborhood, which was shuttered because of the hurricane. Another militia member shot the man from a few feet away, killing him. "He was done," Roper recalls.

During our conversations, Roper never acknowledges firing his weapon, but in 2005 a Danish documentary crew videotaped him talking about his activities. In this footage Roper says, when pressed, that he did indeed shoot somebody.

Fellow militia member Wayne Janak, 60, a carpenter and contractor, is more forthcoming with me. "Three people got shot in just one day!" he tells me, laughing. We're sitting in his home, a boxy beige-and-pink structure on a corner about five blocks from Daigle's Grocery. "Three of them got hit right here in this intersection with a riot gun," he says, motioning toward the streets outside his home. Janak tells me he assumed the shooting victims, who were African-American, were looters because they were carrying sneakers and baseball caps with them. He guessed that the property had been stolen from a nearby shopping mall. According to Janak, a neighbor "unloaded a riot gun"--a shotgun--"on them. We chased them down."

Janak, who was carrying a pistol, says he grabbed one of the suspected looters and considered killing him, but decided to be merciful. "I rolled him over in the grass and saw that he'd been hit in the back with the riot gun," he tells me. "I thought that was good enough. I said, 'Go back to your neighborhood so people will know Algiers Point is not a place you go for a vacation. We're not doing tours right now.'"

He's equally blunt in *Welcome to New Orleans*, an hourlong documentary produced by the Danish video team, who captured Janak, beer in hand, gloating about hunting humans. Surrounded by a crowd of sunburned white Algiers Point locals at a barbeque held not long after the hurricane, he smiles and tells the camera, "It was great! It was like pheasant season in South Dakota. If it moved, you shot it." A native of Chicago, Janak also boasts of becoming a true Southerner, saying, "I am no longer a Yankee. I earned my wings." A white woman standing next to him adds, "He understands the N-word now." In this neighborhood, she continues, "we take care of our own."

Janak, who says he'd been armed with two .38s and a shotgun, brags about keeping the bloody shirt worn by a shooting victim as a trophy. When "looters" showed up in the

neighborhood, "they left full of buckshot," he brags, adding, "You know what? Algiers Point is not a pussy community."

Within that community the gunmen enjoyed wide support. In an outtake from the documentary, a group of white Algiers Point residents gathers to celebrate the arrival of military troops sent to police the area. Addressing the crowd, one local praises the vigilantes for holding the neighborhood together until the Army Humvees trundled into town, noting that some of the militia figures are present at the party. "You all know who you are," the man says. "And I'm proud of every one of you all." Cheering and applause erupts from the assembled locals.

Some of the gunmen prowling Algiers Point were out to wage a race war, says one woman whose uncle and two cousins joined the cause. A former New Orleanian, this source spoke to me anonymously because she fears her relatives could be prosecuted for their crimes. "My uncle was very excited that it was a free-for-all--white against black--that he could participate in," says the woman. "For him, the opportunity to hunt black people was a joy."

"They didn't want any of the 'ghetto niggers' coming over" from the east side of the river, she says, adding that her relatives viewed African-Americans who wandered into Algiers Point as "fair game." One of her cousins, a young man in his 20s, sent an e-mail to her and several other family members describing his adventures with the militia. He had attached a photo in which he posed next to an African-American man who'd been fatally shot. The tone of the e-mail, she says, was "gleeful"--her cousin was happy that "they were shooting niggers."

An Algiers Point homeowner who wasn't involved in the shootings describes another attack. "All I can tell you is what I saw," says the white resident, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of reprisals. He witnessed a barrage of gunfire--from a shotgun, an AK-47 and a handgun--directed by militiamen at two African-American men standing on Pelican Street, not too far from Janak's place. The gunfire hit one of them. "I saw blood squirting out of his back," he says. "I'm an EMT. My instinct should've been to rush to him. But I didn't. And if I had, those guys"--the militiamen--"might have opened up on me, too."

The witness shows me a home video he recorded shortly after the storm. On the tape, three white Algiers Point men discuss the incident. One says it might be a bad idea to talk candidly about the crime. Another dismisses the notion, claiming, "No jury would convict."

According to Pervel, one of the shootings occurred just a few feet from his house. "Three young black men were walking down this street and they started moving the barricade," he tells me. The men, he says, wanted to continue walking along the street, but Pervel's neighbor, who was armed, commanded them to keep the barricade in place and leave. A



standoff ensued until the neighbor shot one of the men, who then, according to Pervel, "ran a block and died" at the intersection of Alix and Vallette Streets.

Even Pervel is surprised the shootings have generated so little scrutiny. "Aside from you, no one's come around asking questions about this," he says. "I'm surprised. If that was my son, I'd want to know who shot him."

By Pervel's count, four people died violently in Algiers Point in the aftermath of the storm, including a bloody corpse left on Opelousas Avenue. That nameless body came up again and again in interviews, a grisly recurring motif. Who was he? How did he die? Nobody knew--or nobody would tell me.

After hearing all these gruesome stories, I wonder if any of the militia figures I've interviewed were involved in the shooting of Herrington and company. In particular, Pervel's and Janak's anecdotes intrigue me, since both men discussed shooting incidents that sounded a lot like the crime that nearly killed Herrington and wounded Alexander and Collins. Both Pervel and Janak recounted incidents in which vigilantes confronted three black men.

Hoping to solve the mystery, I show Herrington and Alexander video of Pervel, Janak and Roper, all of whom are in their 50s or 60s. No match. The shooters, Herrington and Alexander tell me, were younger men, in their 30s or 40s, sporting prominent tattoos. I have not been able to track them down.

New Orleans, of course, is awash in tales of the horrible things that transpired in the wake of the hurricane--and many of these wild stories have turned out to be fictions. In researching the Algiers Point attacks, I relied on the accounts of people who witnessed shooting incidents or were directly involved, either as gunmen or shooting victims.

Seeking to corroborate their stories, I sought out documentary evidence, including police files and autopsy reports. The NOPD, I was told, kept very few records during that period. Orleans Parish coroner Frank Minyard was a different story. The coroner, a flamboyant trumpet-playing doctor who has held the office for more than thirty years, had file cabinets bulging with the autopsies of hundreds of Katrina victims--he just wouldn't let me see them, in defiance of Louisiana public records laws.

After wrangling with the coroner for more than six months, I decided to sue--with a lawyer hired by the Investigative Fund at The Nation Institute--to get access to the autopsies. (We weren't the first to take the coroner to court. CNN and the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* had successfully sued Minyard, seeking particular Katrina-related autopsies.) This past May, Orleans Parish district court judge Kern Reese ruled in our favor, ordering Minyard to allow me to review every autopsy done in the year after the storm. But I soon learned that reconstructing history from the coroner's mess of files was next to impossible, because the paper trail is incomplete. "We carried the records around in our cars, in the trunks of our cars, for four months and, I mean, that--that was the

coroner's office," Minyard said in a sworn deposition obtained during the course of our suit. "I'm sure some of the records got lost or misplaced." [Read the depositions of [Minyard](#) and his [chief investigator](#) here.] Even the autopsy files we got were missing key facts, like where the bodies were found, who recovered them, when they were recovered and so forth.

Many of the manila file folders the coroner eventually turned over were empty, and Minyard said he'd simply chosen not to autopsy some twenty-five to fifty corpses. The coroner also told us he didn't know exactly how many people were shot to death in the days immediately after the storm--"I can't even tell you how many gunshot victims we had"--but figured the number would not "be more than ten."

Under oath Minyard proceeded to say something stunning. The NOPD, he testified, was only investigating three gunshot cases, all of them high-profile--the Danziger Bridge incident, in which police killed two civilians, and the shooting of Danny Brumfield, who was slain by a cop in front of the Convention Center. Minyard's statement buttressed information I'd gotten from NOPD sources who said the force has done little to prosecute people for assaults or murders committed in the wake of the storm.

I contacted the police department repeatedly over many months, providing the NOPD with specific questions about each incident discussed in this story. The department, through spokesman Robert Young, declined to comment on whether officers had investigated any of these crimes and would not discuss any other issues raised by this article.

Sifting through more than 800 autopsy reports and reams of state health department data, I quickly identified five New Orleanians who had died under suspicious circumstances: one, severely burned, was found in a charred abandoned auto (see "Body of Evidence," page 19); three were shot; and another died of "blunt force trauma to the head." However, it's impossible to tell from the shoddy records whether any of these people died in or around Algiers Point, or even if their bodies were found there.

No one has been arrested in connection with these suspicious deaths. When it comes to the lack of action on the cases, one well-placed NOPD source told me there was plenty of blame to go around. "We had a totally dysfunctional DA's office," he said. "The court system wasn't much better. Everything was in disarray. A lot of stuff didn't get prosecuted. There were a lot of things that were getting squashed. The UCR [uniform crime reports] don't show anything."

In response to detailed queries made over a period of months, New Orleans District Attorney spokesman Dalton Savvoir declined to say whether prosecutors looked into any of the attacks I uncovered. The office has been through a string of leadership changes since Katrina--Leon Cannizaro is the current DA--and is struggling to deal with crimes that happened yesterday, let alone three years ago, Savvoir told me.

James Traylor, a forensic pathologist with the Louisiana State University Health Center, worked alongside Minyard at the morgue and suspects that homicide victims fell through the cracks. "I know I did cases that were homicides," Traylor says. "They were not suicides." NOPD detectives, the doctor continues, never spoke to him about two cases he labeled homicides, leading him to believe police conducted no investigation into those deaths. "There should be a multi-agency task force--police, sheriffs, coroners--that can put their heads together and figure out what happened to people," Traylor says.

One of the suspicious cases I discovered was that of Willie Lawrence, a 47-year-old African-American male who suffered a "gunshot wound" that caused a "cranio-facial injury" and deposited two chunks of metal in his brain, according to the autopsy report. Minyard never determined whether Lawrence was murdered or committed suicide, choosing to leave the death unclassified. However, the dead man's brother, Herbert Lawrence, who lives in Compton, California, believes his sibling was murdered. Herbert tells me he got a phone call from one of Willie's neighbors shortly after he died. The caller said Willie, whose body, according to state records, was found on the east bank of the Mississippi, was killed by a civilian gunman. "The police didn't do anything," Herbert says, pointing out that NOPD officers didn't create a written report or interview any relatives.

Malik Rahim is one of a handful of African-Americans who live in Algiers Point, and as far as he's concerned, "We are tolerated. We are not accepted." In the days after the storm struck, Rahim says, the vigilantes "would pass by and call us all kind of names, say how they were gonna burn down my house." They thought "all blacks was looting."

As he walked the near-deserted streets in that period, Rahim, 61, a former Black Panther with a mane of dreadlocks, came across several dead bodies of African-American men. Inspecting the bodies, he discovered what he took to be evidence of gunfire. "One guy had about his entire head shot off," says Rahim, who was spurred by the storm to launch Common Ground Relief, a grassroots aid organization. "It's pretty hard to think a person drowned when half their head's been blown off," he says. He thinks some of the gunmen saw Katrina as a "golden opportunity to rid the community of African-Americans."

Sitting at his kitchen table, while a noisy AC unit does its best to neutralize the stifling Louisiana heat, Rahim describes the dead and lists the locations where he found the bodies. He also shows me video footage taken days after the storm. On the tape, Rahim points to the grossly distended corpse of an African-American man lying on the ground.

Rahim introduces me to his neighbor, Reggie Bell, 39, the African-American man Pervel confronted at gunpoint as he walked by Pervel's house. At the time, Bell, a cook, lived just a few blocks down the street from Pervel. In Bell's recollection, Pervel, standing with another gun-toting man, demanded to know what Bell was doing in Algiers Point. "I live here," Bell replied. "I can show you mail."

That answer didn't appease the gunmen, he says. According to Bell, Pervel told him, "Well, we don't want you around here. You loot, we shoot."

Roughly twenty-four hours later, as Bell sat on his front porch grilling food, another batch of armed white men accosted him, intending to drive him from his home at gunpoint, he says. "Whatcha still doing around here?" they asked, according to Bell. "We don't want you around here. You gotta go."

Bell tells me he was gripped by fear, panicked that he was about to experience ethnic cleansing, Louisiana-style. The armed men eventually left, but Bell remained nervous over the coming days. "I believe it was skin color," he says, that prompted the militia to try to force him out. "That was some really wrong stuff." Bell's then-girlfriend, who was present during the second incident, confirms his story. (In a later interview, Pervel admits he confronted Bell with a shotgun but portrays the incident as a minor misunderstanding, saying he's since apologized to Bell.)

On my final visit to Algiers Point, I stand on Patterson Street, my notebook out, interviewing a pair of residents in the dimming evening light. An older white man, on his way home from a bar, strides up and asks what I'm doing. I reply with a vague explanation, saying I'm working on an article about the "untold stories of Hurricane Katrina."

Without a pause, he says, "Oh. You mean the shootings. Yeah, there were a bunch of shootings."

When I share with Donnell Herrington what the militia men and Algiers Point locals have told me over the course of my investigation, he grows silent. His eyes focus on a point far away. After a moment, he says quietly, "That's pretty disturbing to hear that--I'm not going to lie to you--to hear that these guys are cocky. They feel like they got away with it."