

Bedlam at Wong murder trial

Courtroom cleared as guilty verdict causes melee with security

BY JEFF MITCHELL
and KATHLEEN GRIFFIN
Staff Writers

A convicted killer shouted obscenities and struggled with police officers who tried to put handcuffs on him after he and three co-defendants were found guilty of the first-degree murder of Markham's Maria Wong Thursday.

Officers cleared the Newmarket courtroom of spectators and converged on the prisoner's box to subdue Christian Ortiz, who loudly protested his innocence after he and three co-conspirators were found guilty of the February, 1999 slaying after three days of jury deliberations.

All four men received life sentences. They will not be eligible for parole for 25 years.

Mrs. Wong, 44, was the victim of a contract killing, part of a plot to collect on \$600,000 in insurance policies to pay off her husband's \$130,000 in gambling debts — and a \$210,000 second mortgage taken out three months before the murder.

Mr. Ortiz and the other defendants — Norman Figueroa, Andre Jones and Shu Kwan (Johnny) Wong, the dead woman's husband showed little emotion when the verdicts were handed down.

But he grew agitated when the case was declared closed and police attempted to lead the men away.

Mr. Ortiz, believed to be the stabber, threw up his arms and twisted away from an officer who approached him in the glassed-in prisoners' box, attempting to put handcuffs on him.

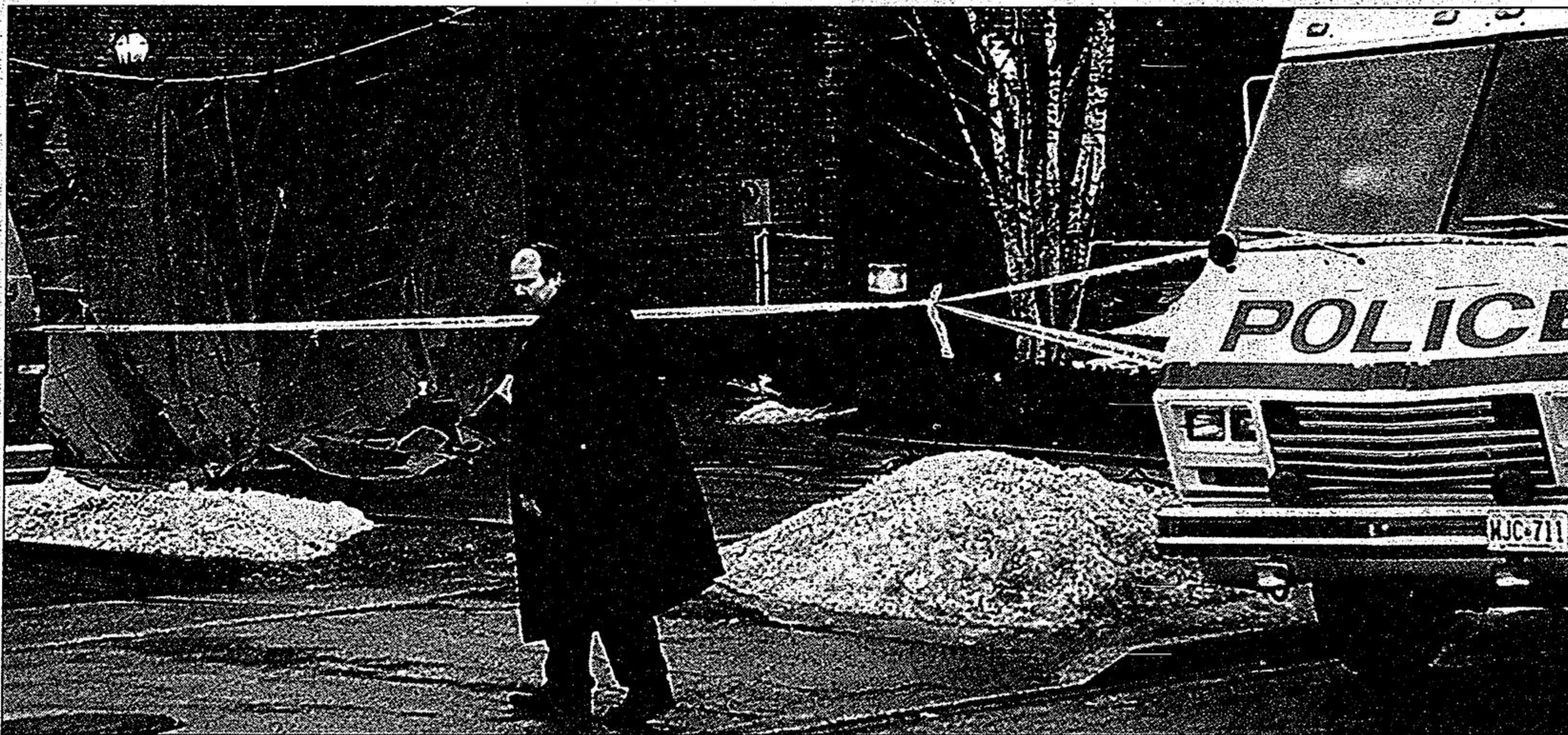
At least eight officers had been assigned to provide security in the fourth-floor courtroom where the verdict was delivered just before noon.

As Mr. Ortiz struggled, several officers rushed forward to restrain him while shouting at family members, reporters and other spectators to clear the courtroom.

Still fighting, Mr. Ortiz shouted as he was pulled from the room: "Some other motherf--- does the crime and I get life!"

As he was led away, the man spoke over his shoulder to a middle-aged aunt who had sat, weeping, throughout the morning's brief proceedings. "Always remember I love you," he called to her.

The scene in the courtroom Thursday morning was a climactic ending to a two-and-a-half-month



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEN

The garage at the home of Maria Wong, in Markham's Raymerville subdivision, was covered with tarpaulin after her body was found Feb. 11, 1999. Four men — including Mrs. Wong's husband — were convicted of her contract killing in Newmarket court Thursday.

trial, whose six-woman, six-man jury heard Mrs. Wong pleaded for her life before being slaughtered on the floor of her own garage on Feb. 11, 1999.

In late December or early January, Mr. Wong approached Andre Jones, a bouncer at the Champions off-track betting parlour in Markham, with his plan to hire a killer for \$30,000.

Mr. Jones had no stomach for murder, but contacted a friend, James Pierce, who agreed to help.

Mr. Jones kept \$10,000 and handed over \$20,000 to Mr. Pierce, who contacted a friend that put him in touch with Mr. Ortiz, Mr. Figueroa and another man, who has not gone to trial and, under a court order, cannot be named.

The planning began. The knife was purchased, the Raymerville Drive home scouted out, the getaway car rented and all the players in place. Despite that, the act itself was fraught with mistakes and stupidity.

The killers needed a ride to Markham; they didn't have their own car.

Mr. Pierce, orchestrator of the plot and chauffeur, rented a car — in his own name.

He and the others staked out the Unionville Library and the Wong



MARIA WONG: Mandatory life sentence handed to men convicted of her murder.

neighbourhood four or five times before the slaying, taking Hwy. 407 every time — the only highway that photographs licence plates leaving a permanent record.

They were instructed to make it look like a robbery. They did steal \$60 in blood-soaked money from Mrs. Wong's purse, but her Honda CRV ended up just blocks away in the McDonald's plaza rather than in a Jane-Finch chop shop as planned.

The evening of Feb. 11, 1999 they followed Mrs. Wong from the library to her home.

Mr. Ortiz and Mr. Figueroa, becoming increasingly anxious, told Mr. Pierce if the job wasn't done that night, they weren't going to return to Markham. But someone had to get her out of the house.

That's when the cell phone calls began in earnest between the conspirators — a total of 87 that day. They were the biggest mistake the killers made and were ultimately their undoing.

Records show while Mrs. Wong was inside her home, Mr. Pierce called Mr. Jones who then contacted Mr. Wong.

He in turn called the house moments later. While no one can say exactly what was said, Mrs. Wong did leave the house again, picking up Chinese take out.

She was ambushed as she exited her car inside the garage, throat slashed three times, one cut so deep she was almost decapitated. She also suffered defensive wounds on her hands and arms.

Using old-fashioned police leg work, Det. Les Young combed through records of more than 30,000 calls before connecting the four accused.

This jived with witness reports of seeing two "swarthy" looking men with cell phones around the Wong home that night — Mr. Ortiz and

Mr. Figueroa.

But direct evidence against Wong was thin. Police hoped they had a motive and they had the cell phone connection, but little else.

Enter Lisa Bateman, prostitute and Mr. Pierce's then-girlfriend. She admitted to police she was in the car the night of the murder and that Mr. Pierce had agreed to do a job for a "Chinaman."

The former call girl relayed Mr. Ortiz's description of the slaying and the way in which Mrs. Wong begged for her life, telling her assailant he could take whatever he wanted.

"James (Pierce) kept asking if (Ortiz) was sure she was dead, how did he know she was dead. Chris said she was making croaking noises," Ms. Bateman told the trial. "He said he stabbed her three or four times to make sure she was dead."

The woman also testified that Mr. Ortiz shouted "Die, bitch, die," as he killed Mrs. Wong.

The Crown theorized the suspects agreed to carry out the murder for \$9,000 but in the end collected only \$2,000. Mr. Pierce made a deal, receiving a 16-year sentence after pleading guilty to conspiring to commit murder and agreeing to testify against the others.

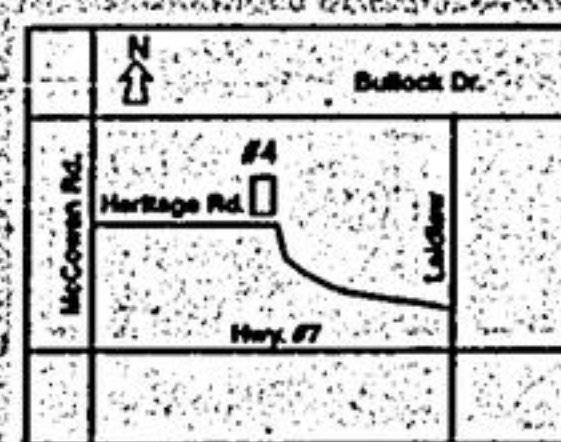
Mr. Justice John McIsaac called the crime an "inhumane act."

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