

# St. Tammany Sheriff Randy Smith: Deputies accused of beating veteran followed protocol

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Army veteran Chris Cambre, who says he was beaten by St. Tammany Parish Sheriff's deputies during a welfare check in January, is shown the following day with a facial laceration.

Photo provided by Chris Cambre



Sara Pagones



St. Tammany Parish Sheriff Randy Smith is defending the five deputies who are accused of beating a military veteran in January, saying that they followed protocol during the incident, including the agency's policy on use of force.

Chris Cambre, a 48-year-old Pearl River resident, said he was severely beaten, Tased and handcuffed by the deputies on the night of Jan. 21, when law enforcement officials came to check on him at his trailer.

Cambre, who is a veteran of the Iraq War, suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and had posted on social media that he was struggling, prompting someone to call the police.

A report written by a Pearl River police officer who was on the scene corroborates Cambre's claim that he had behaved calmly and had showed the deputies that he was not armed when they arrived with their weapons drawn.

The officer and Cambre both say that he did not resist the deputies prior to the beating.

"They were screaming at me to stop resisting, but there was no resistance," Cambre said. "I was laying, pretty much face-down, in the mud. My palms were facing skyward. I'll never forget."

He was not arrested but was taken to a hospital, where he was released the following day.

The sheriff said in an email to The Advocate and WWL-TV: "This incident was investigated by our Internal Affairs Division as soon as it was brought to our attention.

"After all the facts in this case were reviewed, including witness statements, the complaint was not sustained," Smith said. "Our deputies followed protocol including the STPSO use of force policy and their training practices when dealing with a non-compliant individual. In order to have full transparency, this case has been turned over to the FBI Civil Rights Division for their review."

However, Cambre's complaint was turned over to the FBI this week, not by the Sheriff's Office, but by 22nd Judicial District Attorney Warren Montgomery following what he called a "preliminary investigation" by his office.

"It says a lot that prosecutors thought it was significant enough to refer to another agency for consideration," said Rafael Goyeneche, president of the Metropolitan Crime Commission.

Smith declined to be interviewed for this story. But in a statement posted on the agency's Facebook page, he said his deputies were dispatched to assist the Pearl River Police Department with a possible "suicide by cop" incident, or one in which an individual tries to provoke officers into killing him.

Smith said that a doctor had ordered Cambre to be taken into protective custody and that he had a history of suicidal threats during encounters with first responders.

"He was also known to be in possession of firearms and had prior military training," the post said.

Smith also said his agency was called in by the chief of St. Tammany Fire Protection District 11, who was concerned that the lone Pearl River police officer on the scene would not be able to ensure her own safety or that of his emergency personnel.

The sheriff's post differs from the Pearl River officer's account of the interaction between Cambre and the Sheriff's Office deputies.

Smith said that after the deputies arrived, there was a brief struggle during which the man was subdued with a Taser, taken into custody and then released to fire district personnel and Pearl River police for transportation to a local hospital "in accordance with the doctor's orders."

The police officer said in her report that Cambre did not offer resistance but had seemed fearful when deputies arrived with their weapons drawn. He showed them he was not armed, she wrote, and they put away their weapons.

She said she told the deputies that she was checking on Cambre's welfare, but she said the deputies did not talk to Cambre or try to get a "sense of his demeanor." She said one yelled obscenities at him and ordered him to kneel while another Tased him, after which all five "jumped on Mr. Cambre while one deputy continuously struck Mr. Cambre with a baton."

Pearl River Police Chief JJ Jennings said Friday that his department was not aware of any doctor's order concerning Cambre and had gone to his trailer only to check on him, not to enforce a protective custody order. Cambre said he is not aware of any physician's order about him.

Smith said in the Facebook post that after Cambre complained, his agency began an Internal Affairs Division investigation, interviewing deputies and reconciling their reports "with interviews of multiple witnesses who were at the scene." He said investigators decided the deputies' actions were "in compliance with both agency policy and their training."

Peter Scharf, a professor at the LSU School of Public Health and the Institute for Public Health and Justice who has worked with Smith in the past, said the legal standard for use of force is whether there is a reasonable belief on the part of the officer, given the totality of the circumstances, that force is necessary.

Residents and police officers often have a different perception of what constitutes reasonableness, Scharf said. But the law allows for a range of error. "The standard is not perfection but reasonableness," he said.

Scharf said that law enforcement agencies across the state and the country need more training on the legal standards, citing a number of incidents, including the death of Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge.

John Wells, a Navy veteran and lawyer who specializes in veterans' issues and heads the nonprofit Military-Veterans Advocacy Inc., said that law enforcement agencies need to have a better understanding of how to deal with people suffering from post-traumatic stress.

He said such people startle more easily, fear for their own safety and have trust issues. And while police tend to approach potential threats with a show of strength, he said, individuals suffering from PTSD require a calmer touch.

When Smith was running for sheriff, one of his campaign promises was to create a crisis intervention unit to deal with people having mental health crises. He later pointed to that as an accomplishment in his first year in office, noting that four deputies had been trained and certified in San Antonio, which he said has the model agency for crisis intervention.

Smith did not respond to a question about whether the deputies who handled the Cambre incident were part of that unit.

"They roughed me up pretty good," Cambre said. "I had bruises from the top of my leg down to my knee. The bottom of my rib cage was all bruised up. The side of my face ... was bruised and lacerated."

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