

<http://www.victimsofthestate.org/FL/Shea.html>

Joseph Shea

Dade County, Florida

Date of Crime: February 23, 1959

Joseph F. Shea was convicted of murder after confessing to committing one. The victim, Mary Meslener, 23, was a National Airlines clerk and was found on a canal bank three miles from Miami International Airport. She had been shot once in the head. More than two months after the murder, Shea, 20, an airman in the U.S. Air Force, waved a bloody shirt at his sergeant in West Palm Beach and vaguely insisted that he had done "something bad." Because Shea had been trying to fake a medical discharge, the sergeant was skeptical. However, the incident brought Shea to the attention of police.

After questioning Shea, Miami Detective Philip Thibedeau could find no connection between him and the murder. Even so, Detective Patrick Gallagher soon obtained the airman's oral confession. A polygraph expert, Warren Holmes, tested Shea and said that his tests indicated Shea was innocent. However, the airman made another confession and this time signed it. Though a crime lab supervisor testified that Shea's shirt was splattered with his own B-type blood and there was only one spot of Meslener's O-type, the confession persuaded a jury to find Shea guilty of first-degree murder.

Following the conviction, Detective Thibedeau, Polygrapher Holmes, and *Miami Herald* Reporter Gene Miller spent their spare time tracking down evidence that cast deep doubt on Shea's confession. Shea, a Roman Catholic, had apparently undergone agonies of guilt after fathering an illegitimate child in the Philippines: "I didn't want to live," he said. Detective Gallagher admitted he engaged in trickery and had received half of the \$1,000 reward posted by Meslener's husband. The Air Force logbook at West Palm Beach suggested that Shea was on duty 65 miles away until at least one hour before Meslener left the airport. Yet Shea claimed in his confession that he hitchhiked to Miami, visited several downtown bars, rode a bus to the airport, and then tried to steal a car. Meslener then allegedly caught him at which point Shea had to murder her.

A palm print found in the murder car belonged to neither Shea nor the victim nor her husband. The victim's wallet was discovered in a military installation with which Shea had no connection. Shea later claimed in prison that he had cut himself and bloodied his own shirt in the hope of qualifying for a medical discharge. However, he also complained, "This woman I killed keeps standing at the foot of my bed and screaming at me." With the help of the three investigators, Shea got a new trial and was acquitted in 1966. He was awarded \$45,000 in 1967 for 6 years of wrongful imprisonment. [1/07]

Reference: *Time Magazine*

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TIME

Friday, Mar. 11, 1966

The Law: The Boy Who Wanted to Die

On a winter morning in 1959, the body of Airline Clerk Mary Meslener, 23, was found on a canal bank three miles from Miami International Airport. She had been shot once in the head. More than two months after the murder, Airman Joseph Shea, 20, waved a bloody shirt at his sergeant in West Palm Beach and vaguely insisted that he had done "something bad." Because Shea had been trying to fake a medical discharge, the sergeant was skeptical; because the Meslener murder was still unsolved, though, Shea became a potential suspect.

After questioning. . . . *(To read more, you must subscribe to Time, or another paid service with access to Time's articles.)*