

## Biker gang leader guilty of murder in casino shooout

Written by Administrator

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RENO, Nev. (AP) — A biker gang leader was convicted Wednesday of murdering a Hells Angels during a 2011 shootout at a Nevada casino that prosecutors said was part of an orchestrated assassination plot to take out a high-ranking official of the rival group.

The Washoe District Court jury deliberated for only five hours before returning guilty verdicts on all seven felony counts, including first- and second-degree murder, for Ernesto Gonzalez, ex-president of the Vagos motorcycle gang's chapter in Nicaragua.

The panel rejected claims he was acting in self-defense when he fatally shot Hells Angels San Jose boss Jeffrey "Jethro" Pettigrew during the September 2011 melee on a busy Sparks casino floor that sent gamblers diving for cover behind slot machines and blackjack tables.

The defendant's lawyer, David Houston, said he was "exceptionally surprised" the jury acted so quickly and vowed an appeal.

"I can't see it. I'm flabbergasted. I cannot understand this verdict," Houston told reporters on the courthouse steps in Reno.

Jurors were to return to court Thursday to begin hearing more evidence in the penalty phase of the trial that will determine whether Gonzalez gets the maximum of life in prison without parole. Gonzalez, 55, was also convicted of conspiring to commit murder, challenging to fight resulting in death, illegally carrying a concealed weapon and discharging a firearm inside a structure.

Chief Deputy District Attorney Karl Hall declined immediate comment after the verdicts were read.

Pinning all his hopes on an acquittal, Gonzalez told the judge earlier Wednesday that he wanted to take off the table the possibility of a lesser manslaughter conviction.

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"It's either going to be one way or another, rather than meeting in the middle," Houston told Washoe District Judge Connie Steinheimer. He said they were "specifically not asking for a manslaughter charge."

Steinheimer described it as a "strategic decision" and asked Gonzalez if he agreed.

"Definitely, I do, yes," Gonzalez told the judge.

Prosecutors maintain Gonzalez shot Pettigrew, 51, five times in the back in a "hit" approved by international leaders of the Vagos during their national convention at John Ascuaga's Nugget hotel-casino just east of Reno. He's seen on dark casino surveillance video coming around the corner of a fish-tank bar and shooting Pettigrew five times in the back as Pettigrew and another Hells Angel kicked a Vagos on the ground between slot machines.

Witnesses from both gangs — including one long-time Vagos-turned-federal informant who testified under a pseudonym — said Pettigrew was an "icon" who was considered the "Godfather" of the Hells Angels in San Jose and the fifth-ranking member nationally.

Gonzalez he shot Pettigrew as a last resort because Pettigrew and another were kicking another Vagos on the floor and he feared they would kill him.

Hall told the jury Gonzalez couldn't argue self-defense because he was part of the gang that instigated the fight that led to Pettigrew's death.

"They started the fight and he finished the fight," Hall said.

Houston is a prominent defense lawyer in Reno whose past clients have included Hulk Hogan, *Girls Gone Wild* video empire founder Joe Francis and Liberace's ex-lover, Scott Thorson. He told reporters after the verdicts were read he had felt comfortable the jury's quick work meant they'd found him

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innocent.

"I'm still somewhat flummoxed that we could have resulted in a guilty verdict without so much as reviewing what I thought was a great deal of evidence" including hours of surveillance videotape from more than a dozen different camera angels, he said. "There simply wasn't the time."

Prosecutors apparently were successful in using a "very broad brush" to argue "the Vagos did this, the Vagos did that," Houston said. "I think it might have been lost in the translation that this was a case of the state vs. Ernesto Gonzalez. It had nothing to do with the Vagos."

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