

Jury Clears Guard in Bar Shooting

By Dave Racher

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A city correctional officer's reputation for handling disruptive prisoners in a calm, cool manner helped convince a jury that the officer did not try to murder another man in a North Philadelphia taproom in 1984.

Lonnie Hamilton, 36, has been working at the House of Correction for the past five years and "Is spit on, daily," according to his attorney, A. Charles Peruto, Jr.

"He doesn't overreact to any of this," Peruto said, "Why would he overreact in a dispute in a bar?"

After listening to Peruto's argument and deliberating for an hour, the jury acquitted Hamilton of shooting and wounding Albert Thompson 36, in a bar at 5th and Venango Streets, on Jan 6, 1984.

Thompson testified he was shot in the stomach while coming to the aid of a man who had been arguing with Hamilton over a "go-go dancer." Thompson said Hamilton had aimed a gun at his head when he went toward him.

Hamilton said he acted in "self-defense," that he thought Thompson had a knife when he began coming toward him.

About 30 city correctional officers attended the trial before Common Pleas Judge Lynn M. Abraham. Peruto called eight officers as character witnesses for Hamilton.

"This man is constantly in fear of his life inside the prison system," said Peruto, "He has faced angry prisoners who have thrown urine in his face and on his clothing. And yet, he has not lost control of his actions."

Assistant District Attorney Paul Cook urged a conviction. Thompson was about 10 feet from Hamilton when the shot was fired, Cook said, adding that Hamilton "could not have been in fear of his life" at that distance and was "not justified" in firing.

Peruto contended that Thompson was "three or four feet" away from Hamilton when the shot was fired.