

takes the stand

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THE MOUNTAIN DEMOCRAT

PLACERVILLE — While on the witness stand this week, manslaughter defendant Rodney I. [redacted] described to jurors the incident that led to Ed Ortega's death as being filled with sheer terror.

"My adrenaline was off the charts," [redacted] said. "I thought he was going to kill me."

While being questioned by his attorney William Routsis and later cross-examined by prosecutor Worth Dikeman, [redacted] described the July 31, 2002, events leading up to the death of Ortega, who had been employed at [redacted] Silver Fork Road ranch as a masonry worker. [redacted] has been charged with felony manslaughter stemming from his alleged killing of Ortega with a sledgehammer.

[redacted] testified that around dusk on that last day of July, he made a decision to fire Ortega, whose work, according to [redacted] and others at the ranch, was turning sloppy due to Ortega's drinking problem.

"My intention was to be diplomatic," [redacted] said. "But he didn't like it too well when I told him."

[redacted] said Ortega asked him what he was going to do if he refused to leave the ranch. [redacted] replied he would call the police.

Ortega stepped near a pine tree and held an ignited lighter into the needles while saying, "I know you love this ranch and I'm going to burn it down," [redacted] testi-

fied.

[redacted] said he then hit Ortega's hand to knock down the lighter and Ortega responded by striking him in the stomach.

"It completely took me off guard," [redacted] said. "I felt queasy and walked off telling him I was really going to call the cops."

Ortega then pulled a utility knife out of his back pocket and stepped toward him with the blade displayed. [redacted] said he then grabbed the orange sledgehammer out of his truck and held it up to keep distance between the two men.

"I kept saying, 'Put it down, Ed. Let's sit down and talk about this,'" [redacted] said. "But he kept pursuing me."

[redacted] said Ortega, with half a smile and half a snarl, swung the knife his way, close enough that he felt the force of air on his face.

"I got behind some trees and he kept coming at me with the knife trying to stab me, faking me out from side to side," [redacted] said. "I then hit him with the handle end of the sledgehammer, giving him a big cut on his forehead that blood came rushing down from."

[redacted] said after that the confrontation escalated.

"When the blood came down his face he became absolutely enraged and insane," [redacted] said.

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[redacted] who was not injured by the knife, said he proceeded to strike Ortega

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Defendant

with the mallet several times up until the point that Ortega fell to the ground and was "out cold." [redacted] said he was out of breath from the confrontation and was continuously hyperventilating. He then said he realized that Ortega was no longer breathing.

"At that point I made the worst decision I ever made in my life," [redacted] said. He then described lifting Ortega's body into a wheelbarrow and putting it into the bed of the mason worker's truck before driving it a few miles away and launching the truck and body off an embankment on Mormon Emigrant Trail.

"I just wanted it all to go away," [redacted] said.

After disposing of the truck, [redacted] said he had a sleepless night at the ranch and got up at first light to try to cover up the incident by washing blood off the mallet and sledgehammer. He then proceeded to South Lake Tahoe, where he once ran an auto

mechanic shop, where he told his girlfriend and a lawyer about the incident before making a statement to investigators two days later.

Prosecutor Worth Dikeman questioned [redacted] for nearly three hours. Dikeman's roundabout and often repetitive questions fired at [redacted] were described by one courtroom observer as an effort to make the ranch owner and former Tahoe auto shop owner lose his cool.

[redacted] did seem tired and frustrated but remained calm during the lengthy interview. He also referenced the 50-plus reports his defense team obtained alleging Ortega's violent past.

When he took the stand on day two to continue cross-examination, Dikeman's first question was: "Mr. [redacted] after leaving the witness stand yesterday afternoon, did you or did you not say to your attorney, 'How did I do, coach?'"

Closing arguments are slated for today.