

From bloodied shirts and shuddering to HEADS on fire: Death Row witness reveals inmates' most chilling final moments

By: Chris Kitching - Mirror Online

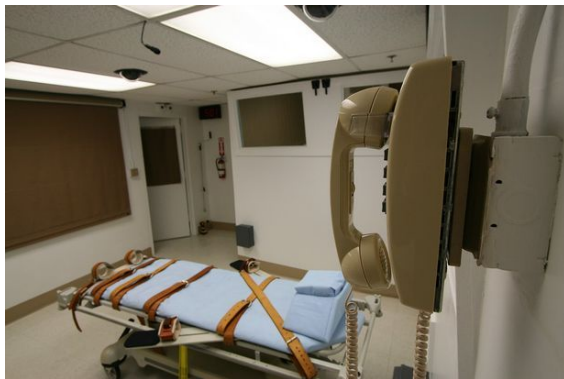
Ron Word has watched more than 60 Death Row inmates die for their brutal crimes - and their chilling final moments are likely to stay with him until he takes his last breath.

Twice, he looked on in horror as flames shot out of a prisoner's head - filling the chamber with smoke - when a hooded executioner switched on an electric chair called "Old Sparky".

Another time, blood suddenly appeared on a convicted murderer's white shirt, caking along the leather chest strap holding him to the chair, as electricity surged through his body.

Mr Word was there for another 'botched' execution, when two full doses of lethal drugs were needed to kill an inmate - who shuddered, blinked and mouthed words for 34 minutes before he finally died.

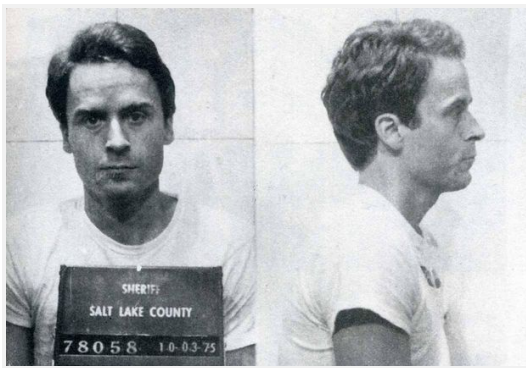
And then there was the case of US serial killer Ted Bundy, whose execution in 1989 drew a "circus" outside Florida State Prison and celebratory fireworks when it was announced that his life had been snuffed out.



Inside the execution chamber at the Florida State Prison near Starke (Image: Florida Department of Corrections/Doug Smith)



The electric chair at the prison was called "Old Sparky" (Image: Florida Department of Corrections)



Ted Bundy was one of the most notorious serial killers in recent history (Image: www.alamy.com)

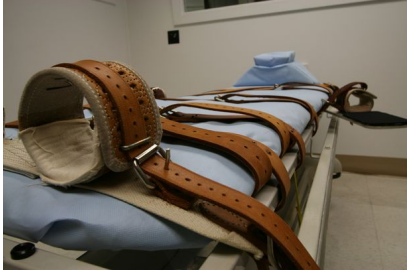
Mr Word witnessed all of these executions in his role as a journalist.

Now retired, the 67-year-old was tasked with serving as an official witness to state executions and reporting what he saw afterwards for the Associated Press in America.

He was exposed to the kind of grim scenes that continue to haunt witnesses years on and have fuelled calls for the centuries-old practice to be abolished, with opponents arguing it amounts to cruel and unusual punishment that violates their constitutional rights.

Out of the dozens that Mr Word watched over a quarter-century, it's the ones that didn't go according to plan that still stick out in his mind.

Six years after watching his first execution, he was assigned to cover the death of Jesse Tafero, who was convicted of murdering a police officer and another man, on May 4, 1990.



Lethal injection is now the primary method of execution in the US (Image: FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF LAW ENFORCEMENT)



The view from one of the witness rooms at Florida State Prison (Image: Florida Department of Corrections)



Flames shot out of Jesse Tafero's head in the electric chair (Image: Wiki)

Tafero, 43, was marched into the chamber and strapped into the electric chair as the journalist and other witnesses - including prison officials and lawyers - looked on.

But they were left horrified when the masked executioner pulled the switch.

Mr Word told Mirror Online: "Flames several feet high occurred from the top of his head during the electric chair execution.

"Smoke hovered at the top of the execution chamber and horrified looks were exchanged between prison guards and witnesses to the execution.

"The power was turned off and the flames subsided."

It turned out "Old Sparky" had malfunctioned - with three jolts needed to execute the condemned man.

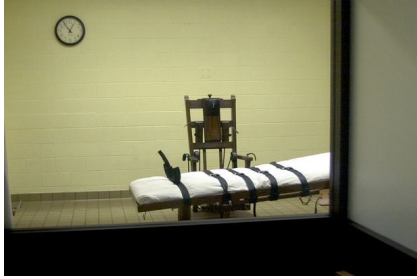


Mr Word watched more than 60 executions at Florida State Prison (Image: Florida Department of Corrections)



Convicted killer Pedro Medina was also put to death in "Old Sparky"

Firing squads, hanging and electric chair still in use



There are 31 US states which still allow the death penalty and lethal injection is the primary method for each one.

However some states have authorised one or more alternative methods in circumstances where others are deemed unconstitutional or are unavailable or impractical, according to the **Death Penalty Information Center**.

Some states allow the death row prisoner to choose an alternative if they don't want to be injected with a lethal cocktail of drugs.

Nine states still allow electrocution - Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Kentucky, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia.

The gas chamber is an alternative in six states - Arizona, California, Mississippi, Missouri, Oklahoma and Wyoming.

Hanging is still an option in Delaware, New Hampshire and Washington.

Three states - Mississippi, Oklahoma and Utah - still permit execution by firing squad, with the last such case happening in Utah in 2010. This method has been used three times since 1976.

A similar scene played out seven years later, when Mr Word was present for the execution of Cuban refugee Pedro Medina, 39, who denied murdering his neighbour, a primary school teacher, right up until his death.

On March 25, 1997, Medina uttered his last words - "I am still innocent" - moments before flames shot from the top of his head due to another malfunction.

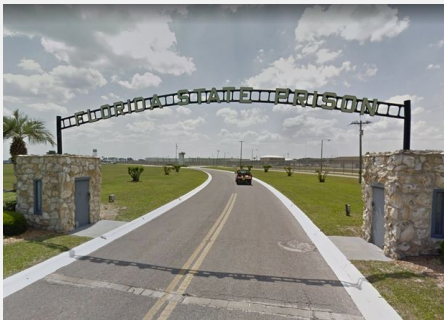
The journalist said: "In both cases, officials had substituted an artificial sponge in the headpiece. When power was applied, the sponges caught fire.

"They determined that it was necessary to use natural sponges."

Mr Word, a father-of-three and grandfather, started his journalism career at a small newspaper in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, in 1972, eventually joining the Associated Press's Oklahoma City bureau.



Execution witnesses include prison officials, lawyers, journalists and victims' families (Image: Florida Department of Corrections)



The entrance to the state prison in northern Florida (Image: Google)



Ernest Dobbert's execution was the first one that Mr Word witnessed

Covering executions at Florida State Prison, near Starke, became one of his regular duties when, in 1984, he was promoted to the bureau in Jacksonville.

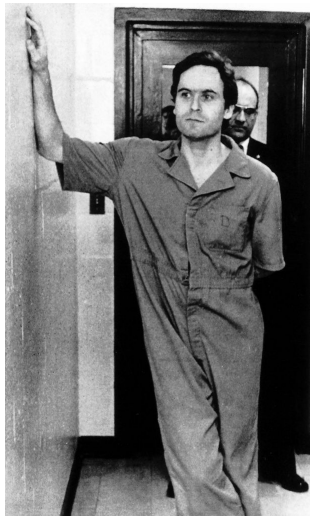
Within months Mr Word was witnessing his first execution, when Ernest Dobbert, 46, was put to death in the electric chair on September 7, 1984.

Dobbert had been convicted of murdering two of his young children.

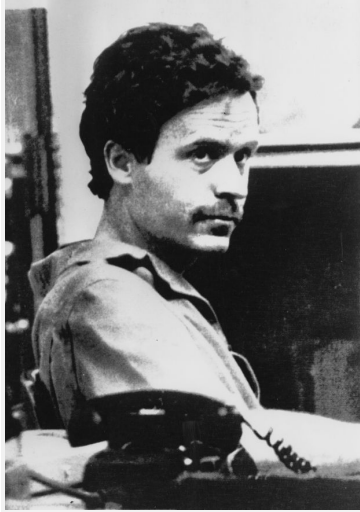
After watching Dobbert die, Mr Word prepared his story on an old Radio Shack TRS-80 computer at a local motel.

He remembers looking through the window and seeing a huge cross lit up on top of the water tower in Starke.

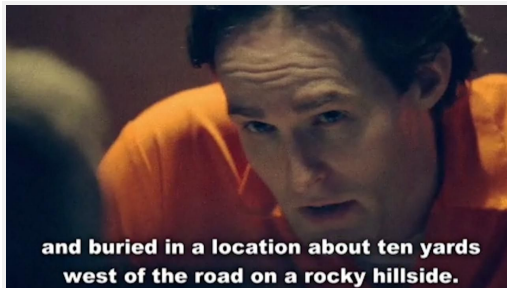
Mr Word, who still lives in the Jacksonville area, covered his last execution in 2009, when the Associated Press closed its bureau there and he was made redundant.



Bundy in custody after his arrest in July 1978



Bundy (pictured in 1978) was executed by electric chair in 1989 (Image: Getty)



The most famous prisoner put to death in front of him was Bundy, the notorious serial killer, rapist and necrophiliac whose reign of terror inspired books, films and a strange cult following.

Before he was executed over three killings, Bundy admitted to murdering more than 30 young women in the 1970s, although it is suspected that he had many more victims.

He, too, met his end when he was strapped into "Old Sparky".

Nothing remarkable happened when the executioner flipped the switch just after 7am on January 24, 1989.

But there were wild celebrations outside the prison, with cheers, song and dance, as hundreds had gathered for the news.

Mr Word, who is now working on a novel, said: "The most striking thing about Ted Bundy's execution was the circus atmosphere outside the prison. Crowds gathered before dawn to be outside the prison.

"A sandwich shop and bar down the road displayed on its marquee: 'Tuesday is Fry Day'. When we signalled to the throng that the execution was completed, fireworks went off."



It took much longer than usual for Angel Diaz to die from lethal injection (Image: Police handout)



An inmate's cell on death row at Florida State Prison (Image: Florida Department of Corrections)

Who gets a seat in the witness room?



In the US, most death chambers have at least one witness room where prison staff, lawyers, law enforcement officers and journalists watch the execution through a glass window.

Rules vary by state, but those who can also watch an inmate take their last breaths can include the families and friends of the victim and prisoner, a clergy member or appointed volunteers.

Journalists are given seats in the name of accountability.

In recent years they have reported botched lethal injections with problems including prolonged deaths or staff being unable to find a suitable vein for a needle.

In Florida, up to 10 journalists are selected to watch along with another 10 "official" witnesses, said former Associated Press reporter Ron Word.

Mr Word, who witnessed more than 60 executions, said journalists are picked up in a van across the motorway from Florida State Prison, briefed by corrections staff and then taken to the death chamber.

Executions in Florida used to take place at 7am, but are now scheduled for 7pm.

Policies vary by state, but counselling is made available to witnesses following an execution.

Charles Davis, dean of the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Georgia, said it's crucial for reporters to observe executions to make sure a state's death penalty protocol is working as it should and is being followed.

He said: "Otherwise, it's the state's word against that of a dead guy."

He added: "In a system with capital punishment it's very important that there be media witnesses as the eyes of the public.

"It's important that the media is on hand to chronicle the event."

Mr Davis didn't witness any executions during his journalism career, adding: "I was fortunate enough to miss that duty."

Less than two decades later, the botched execution of Angel Diaz - who received two full doses of a lethal cocktail of drugs - on December 13, 2006, prompted then-governor Jeb Bush, the brother of US President George W Bush, to halt temporarily halt all other executions.

Mr Word watched for over half an hour before Diaz took his final breath, even writing in his report afterwards that it seemed like the 55-year-old would never die.

Diaz, who was convicted of killing a strip club manager, continued to move, blink and mouth words throughout the process, even looking towards the 25 witnesses.

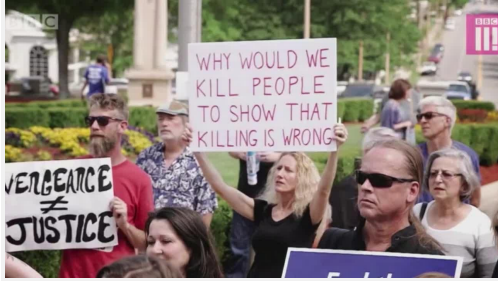
His body reportedly shuddered several times and appeared to move for about 24 minutes after the first injection.

Mr Word said: "It took more than a half-hour for Diaz to die, a process that usually takes 10 minutes. He appeared to be conscious for much of the procedure.

"Corrections official blamed the long process on liver disease, but the autopsy showed the IV line delivering the deadly chemicals had been pushed through his veins into his arms.



Allen Davis, 54, was executed over the killings of a pregnant woman and her two daughters
(Image: Police handout)



"The medical examiner noted chemical burns and said there was no evidence of liver disease."

Mr Word was also present when Florida executed its last death row prisoner by electric chair on July 8, 1999. It, too, didn't go according to plan.

Triple murderer Allen Davis, 54, was sentenced to death over the killings of a pregnant woman and her two young daughters.

Blood unexpectedly started appearing on his white shirt as about 2,000 volts of electricity coursed through his body.

The stain had reportedly grown to about 8ins across by the time the execution was finished, and Davis had also suffered burns to his head, leg and groin area.

He was still alive after the power to "Old Sparky" was turned off, according to witnesses, who reported seeing his chest rise and fall multiple times before he was pronounced dead.

Blood had poured from his nose, running down a leather strap across his mouth and onto his shirt.



Florida is one of 31 states that still allow the death penalty (Image: Florida Department of Corrections)

Mr Word said: "Blood started appearing on the Davis' white shirt, caking along the leather straps holding his chest."

He claimed: "While it was gruesome, prison officials said it was caused by a nose bleed."

In the aftermath, as critics condemned the electric chair and the death penalty itself as barbaric, Florida's top court released graphic photos of Allen's execution.

Amid an uproar, Florida retired "Old Sparky" and moved to executions by lethal injection, now the standard method in the 31 states where the death penalty hasn't been abolished.

The electric chair was once the primary method, but it fell out of favour over the years and was outlawed by some states, including Georgia and Nebraska, which deemed it "cruel and unusual punishment".

Mr Word, who spent countless hours researching and preparing for each execution he witnessed, has seen both methods first-hand, and said each one has its own horrors.

He added: "I do not know which method is more horrific than the other. An issue I have with lethal injection is the experimenting with chemicals to determine what works best. In both cases, the inmate dies."



Prisoners spend many years on death row before being executed or given a stay of execution
(Image: Florida Department of Corrections)

Britain's "Bloody Code"



It has been more than 50 years since the last prisoners were put to death in the UK.

Peter Allen, 21, and Gwynne Evans, 24, were hanged at separate prisons - Walton and Strangeways - on August 13, 1964 for robbing and murdering laundry worker John West.

Their deaths came a year and three months before the death penalty for murder in Great Britain was suspended for five years - and replaced with a mandatory life sentence - under the Murder (Abolition of Death Penalty) Act 1965. The act became permanent four years later.

The death penalty for murder in Northern Ireland was abolished in 1973.

The so-called "Bloody Code" remained for crimes including espionage and treason until it was fully abolished in 1998.

Britain is now barred from restoring the death penalty as long as it is a member of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Capital punishment had been used for centuries in the countries that became the UK. Death sentences were doled out for crimes including murder, rape, theft, adultery, arson and witchcraft.

Ancient methods were grotesque and especially cruel - ranging from beheadings and live burials to people being burned at the stake or thrown to wild animals.

As times changed, so did attitudes, with capital punishment undergoing many reforms to eliminate certain methods and crimes, and eventually raise the minimum age to 18.

Public executions ended in the UK in 1968.

Journalists are meant to be objective, and Mr Word said he has never discussed his position or feelings about the death penalty.

He still thinks about the executions that he witnessed - usually when someone brings up the subject - but fortunately for him, he does not suffer flashbacks or post-traumatic stress disorder.

He said he never felt the need to contact the Associated Press's mental health programme after watching an execution, even the gruesome or problematic ones.

But it didn't get any easier over time, as the number he had witnessed began to mount.

Mr Word said: "It is never easy to cover an execution. After the first few, you have a confidence what needs to be done and spot it if there are any differences from the ones you've seen before."

Veteran lawyer still haunted by sight of 'dead man walking'

David Raybin, a criminal defence lawyer in Nashville, Tennessee, witnessed what could end up being that state's last execution by electric chair, or at least the last for some time.

Mr Raybin, 68, was appointed by the court to represent Gulf War veteran Daryl Holton, 45, **when he was put to death** in September 2007 - the first time the electric chair had been used in Tennessee in almost 50 years.

Holton methodically killed his three sons - Stephen, 12, Brent, 10 and Eric, aged six - and their half-sister Kayla, aged four, in November 1997 following a lengthy custody battle with his ex-wife.

The victims were lined up on the promise of a Christmas surprise and shot with a semi-automatic rifle at the garage where Holton worked in Shelbyville.



Daryl Holton, 45, killed his three sons and their half-sister (Image: Tennessee Department of Corrections)



Victims Kayla, four, Eric, six, Brent, 10, and Stephen, 12 (Image: clarkprosecutor.org)

The child killer had claimed at his trial that he was mentally incompetent, but he was convicted by a jury and sentenced to death.

Holton dropped appeals and refused to fight his sentence, opting for electrocution rather than lethal injection at the maximum security Riverbend prison in Nashville.

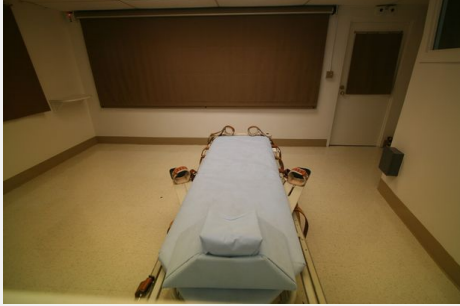
When prison staff asked if he had any last words, Holton replied "Yeah, I do", and said nothing else. His last meal was regular prison fare - riblets on a bun, vegetables, baked beans, cake and iced tea.

More than a decade after watching Holton die, Mr Raybin said he was more haunted by his client's final minutes alive than the electrocution itself.

He said: "What haunts me is how pitiful the process was - being led to the electrocution chamber and being strapped in.



Lawyer David Raybin is haunted after watching an execution by electric chair (Image: David Raybin)



The view that death row prisoners have before they take their final breath (Image: Florida Department of Corrections)

British grandmother on death row



A British grandmother has been on death row at a Texas prison for 15 years.

Linda Carty, who maintains her innocence, recently had her appeal against execution rejected by Texas' highest court.

She was sentenced to death in 2002 after she was convicted of murdering her neighbour Joana Rodriguez and kidnapping her victim's four-day-old son in 2001.

Carty, 59, was previously granted the chance for her case to be reviewed after lawyers claimed to have unearthed new evidence.

She had claimed prosecutors coerced witnesses into giving false evidence at her trial.

Last year a district court judge in Texas dismissed her appeal that they engaged in misconduct or hid information which may have changed the outcome of the trial. The decision was upheld by Texas' Court of Criminal Appeals last month.

The US Supreme Court refused to hear her case in 2010.

Carty, who has previously appealed to the UK government for help, was accused of hiring three men to kidnap her victim and her newborn baby. Prosecutors claimed she had planned to pass off the child as her own.

She was born on the Caribbean island of St Kitts when it was under British rule, and had lived in Houston for nearly 20 years.

According to the **Death Penalty Information Center**, there are more than 50 women on death row in the US, accounting for about two per cent of the death row population (2,900 prisoners).

More than 40 women have been executed in the US in the past 100 years, including 16 since 1976.

The last to occur was in September 2015.

"It does bother me having seen that and being so close to someone and speaking to them knowing in a few moments they were going to die. It is very disturbing to know that somebody is going to die like that."

He added: "The moment he's electrocuted is just a big bang. He's all covered up. When the bang goes you know that he's dead.

"It's the lead-up to it that's so bizarre."

In Tennessee, lethal injection is the standard method of execution, but the electric chair is an option for those who committed their crimes before 1999.

Last month, lawyers representing 33 death row inmates in Tennessee filed a lawsuit arguing the state cannot use a controversial three-drug mix because it would violate constitutional bans on cruel and unusual punishment.



Mr Raybin doesn't know why Holton chose to die by electrocution instead of a lethal cocktail of drugs. He said he remains convinced that the electric chair violates a death row inmate's constitutional rights.

The lawyer said: "I certainly believe that electrocution is cruel and unusual punishment because of all the things that lead up to it - putting hoods on people and putting water on their heads.

"It is just barbaric. I just think that the mode of electrocution violates the Constitution."

He added: "I am sad that the man chose to be electrocuted. I think he probably had been mentally disturbed for years while being locked up."

It was the only execution Mr Raybin has witnessed in his 42-year career, spent mostly as a defence attorney.

He's seen the contentious practice from both sides.

In the 1970s, he was working as a prosecutor when he helped draft Tennessee's death penalty law after it was ruled unconstitutional by the **US Supreme Court**.