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## Phoenix case is example of innocent confessing

**Dennis Wagner**

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At the heart of the debate over voice-stress analysis is the possibility that innocent people will confess to crimes they never committed.

Consider what happened in June 2003, when Maricopa County sheriff's detectives developed a lead on one of their biggest unsolved murder cases.

A woman told investigators that 51-year-old machinist Robert Louis Armstrong was the triggerman in a triple homicide that occurred on Easter 1998.

The informer purportedly passed a Computer Voice Stress Analyzer test.

Armstrong, with a history of brain damage and drug abuse, had no idea why he was picked up for questioning. He denied knowing victims Ronald Hutchinson, Dewey Peters and Crystal Allison, who were gunned down while enjoying beer and a bonfire along the Agua Fria River bottom.

He swore that he was visiting his mother in Oregon.

Detectives told Armstrong he got the date wrong. They had physical evidence and a witness. They showed Armstrong pictures of the bloodied victims. They suggested he must have blacked out, and offered scenarios to explain his involvement.

Armstrong wept and pleaded. He said he was a good person.

After several hours, detectives offered Armstrong a CVSA exam. He eagerly agreed.

"I'm not trying to beat it," he noted minutes later.

"You didn't," replied a detective, laughing. "It caught ya, OK?"

"(But) I was in Oregon," Armstrong protested.

"That was one of the questions you failed."

Armstrong cried out to God for forgiveness. Then, with details provided by deputies, he told of a drunken slaughter: "I just panicked and started shootin' everything," he said. "I'm sorry. I deserve to die."

Armstrong spent a year in jail, awaiting trial and a possible lethal injection.

Then his defense team discovered bus company records placing the defendant in Portland, Ore., at the time of the killings.

The state's lead witness, confronted with that evidence, recanted.

Armstrong was freed. He is suing the Sheriff's Office, which declined comment for this article.

Buddy Rake, Armstrong's attorney, said: "It's so easy to abuse the voice-stress analyzer.

"We know of other instances where they extracted confessions from people who were not guilty."

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