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How a trooper's alleged racist remark ignited the State Police overtime scandal

By [Matt Rocheleau](#) Globe Staff, August 17, 2019, 7:01 p.m.



A "throwaway line" during a traffic stop played a role in discovering the State Police overtime fraud scandal. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF/FILE/GLOBE STAFF

The woman was driving through the Ted Williams Tunnel on her way to Logan Airport on a weeknight three years ago when a Massachusetts State Police trooper popped out of nowhere in front of her car, arms flailing, gesturing to pull over.

“Do you not speak English?” the trooper yelled after she rolled down the window.

An Asian-American with a medical degree from Harvard, the woman spoke four languages fluently.

“Sir? What should I do?” the woman recounted in a complaint she later filed.

Again and again, the white trooper yelled, “Don’t you speak English?” she wrote, adding that several times he put his hands on his hips against his gun holster.

Eventually, a second trooper at the scene handed her a ticket for driving 10 miles per hour over the speed limit.

But the encounter with the first officer that night in October 2016 stayed with her. The woman, who asked to be identified by only her first name, Debbie, to maintain her privacy, eventually filed a complaint with the State Police for one simple reason: She thought the trooper was unprofessional, threatening, and acted like a racist jerk.

That one complaint would help expose a massive, years-long scam within the State Police, in which dozens of troopers allegedly wrote phony tickets, falsified time sheets with phantom overtime shifts, and fleeced the public. The scandal is the largest to hit the troubled agency, implicating 46 troopers. Eight troopers have pleaded guilty to embezzlement charges, two others face charges, and an entire troop was disbanded.

A ‘throwaway line’

Tellingly, her complaint included one simple detail, a “throwaway line” that even Debbie didn’t think much of at the time, that would prove instrumental in the investigations that followed: The citation she received was for the following day, not the night she was pulled over.

With several investigations underway, prosecutors have said the origins of the case started with a curious ticket given to a motorist, and have not disclosed further details. But a Globe review of public records and court documents points to Debbie.

She recalled that in her conversation with a State Police investigator he focused on the date of her ticket, Oct. 20, not the day before, when she was pulled over.

“They weren’t really interested in hearing about my complaint, but they were very interested in things like the time” on the ticket, she said. The time on the citation was also off by about 40 minutes, Debbie recalled.

At one point, Debbie said, the State Police investigator “brought up that they were looking into some personnel issues.”

She thought little of it at the time and never heard from the State Police again.

Looking back on her experience now, Debbie said, she “should’ve probably figured out something was going on” based on the line of questioning. Instead, she filed it away as just a bad experience. She also didn’t closely follow the unfolding scandal, nor did she make a connection between it and her complaint until contacted by the Globe earlier in August.

“It’s crazy to me it led to something so huge unexpectedly,” Debbie said.

The federal and state investigations have revealed troopers were writing bogus traffic citations to meet [unconstitutional ticket quotas](#), falsified other paperwork, and [destroyed](#) documents. The convictions showed how

troopers and supervisors stole money and coordinated a coverup of their tracks — signs, prosecutors say, of systemic [cultural problems and lax oversight](#) at the state's largest law enforcement agency.

For her part, Debbie simply wanted the trooper whom she thought was racist and hostile to be held accountable, possibly receive a reprimand, and maybe increased awareness or training.

“I don't necessarily want to get anyone in trouble,” she told the Globe. “I don't have a high bar [for police conduct]. I understand they're doing their jobs. They just have to not be socially offensive.”

A State Police spokesman, David Procopio, identified the two troopers involved in Debbie's incident as Michael Casamassima and Eric Chin. An internal investigation found that Casamassima was the one who confronted Debbie, while Chin issued the ticket. She herself was never notified of those findings.

Filing a complaint

Several other matters stuck out about that night to Debbie. She doesn't like to drive in tunnels, and recalls going so slowly that other cars were zipping past her. And, during her encounter with the first trooper, she noticed that two other drivers were pulled over, each of whom looked “equally confused” as she. Both were white, and she didn't see them being yelled at.

She was too afraid to ask the trooper his name because of his “threatening demeanor,” she said. The citation did include a badge number, but she wasn't sure which of the two troopers it belonged to. She said she filed a public records request to identify the hostile trooper's name. The documents she received didn't shed much light.

So in January 2017, she sent a complaint through an [online portal](#) to the State Police about the unknown trooper's behavior.

“It was personally ridiculous and terrifying to realize that I was just another pathetic foreigner in the officer's eyes,” Debbie wrote in the complaint. “But on the other hand, my background should not matter. Every citizen should expect respect and professionalism of their police, regardless of English proficiency and background.”

Two days later, she received the first of two calls from a State Police investigator, according to an e-mail she wrote to an attorney she had consulted, and shared with the Globe. The investigator “seemed particularly bothered by my reporting racial discrimination,” Debbie wrote to the attorney. “He stated repeatedly that he did not feel that what I reported sounded racist to him and that he found my labeling it as such ‘inflammatory.’”

“‘I tell my son sometimes jokingly, “Don't you speak English?” as a figure of speech,’” Debbie said the investigator told her. “I politely replied that the context, tone, attitude, and repetition together made the remarks inappropriate and create a perception of racial intolerance.”

In one of her phone calls with the State Police, the investigator zeroed in on the time and date recorded on her ticket. She hasn't received any further calls from state or federal investigators. Prosecutors declined to comment for this story, citing pending investigations.

A wrong date



Former trooper Eric Chin pleaded guilty in federal court to an embezzlement charge. Above: Chin left federal court in March. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF/FILE/GLOBE STAFF

Meanwhile, Debbie still had an outstanding traffic ticket for \$105.

She went to court to contest it in January 2017. The clerk magistrate noted the errors in the date and time on the citation and dismissed the ticket. The trooper who appeared in the courtroom that day wasn't either of the men from her traffic stop, Debbie said.

The badge number on Debbie's ticket belonged to Chin.

In court records filed in July, state prosecutors noted that Chin had written eight tickets on the day Debbie was pulled over and post-dated them to make it appear he worked the following day. Other records indicate he worked only a small portion of his shift on the following day.

Troopers charged in the overtime scheme used various methods to conceal their absences from shifts, according to court documents, including changing dates on copies of citations they submitted or writing entirely bogus tickets and failing to file copies to process the violation.

One day after Debbie filed her complaint, records show, State Police launched an internal affairs investigation against Chin and Casamassima for alleged "verbal abuse."

The investigation closed in late February 2017, with the department upholding the charge against Casamassima. He retired from the department soon after.

"As evidenced by that outcome, the Department has clear standards of conduct governing interaction with members of the public and holds accountable any members who fail to meet those standards," Procopio said.

Casamassima has not been charged or otherwise linked to the overtime fraud scandal. Procopio, the State Police spokesman, said Casamassima had not worked any of the overtime shifts that came under scrutiny by the agency.

Casamassima had been the subject of five prior internal affairs investigations, records show, two of which concerned “verbal abuse” allegations. In each of those five cases, Casamassima wasn't found responsible. A message left Friday with Casamassima's son was not returned and other attempts to reach him were not successful.

Chin was working an overtime speed enforcement shift at the time Debbie said she received her ticket, according to Procopio.

Chin was cleared of any improper conduct in his interaction with the driver. But the post-dating of the citation led to a separate, subsequent investigation of Chin, which led to a larger investigation of overtime abuse, Procopio said.

The fraud-related charges were sustained in late April 2017, roughly around the time when [WCVB-TV reported](#) Chin was suspended for suspicion of committing overtime abuse.

At the time, Chin was among the highest paid troopers in the agency, collecting more than \$302,000 in 2016 — including \$131,650 in overtime.

The findings prompted additional investigations into Chin's colleagues at Troop E, and the case widened from there, eventually ensnaring about one-third of the unit. Troop E, which primarily patrolled the turnpike, was disbanded in spring 2018, with several troopers eventually brought up on charges.

In December 2018, Chin [pleaded guilty in federal court](#) to an embezzlement charge. He was [sentenced](#) in March to a year of supervised release and ordered to pay more than \$7,000 in restitution. The department fired him, and he

forfeited his pension benefits.

In 2018, Chin [filed a complaint](#) with the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination, saying he was unfairly disciplined because he is Asian. The complaint alleged that when Chin was suspended, the department allowed at least six lieutenants and one trooper who were accused of similar overtime violations, all of whom are white, to be reassigned rather than suspended.

Chin's attorney Douglas Louison said the discrimination complaint was withdrawn several months ago. Louison declined to comment further and said Chin did not want to comment either.

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