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PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

Date: June 24, 2020
Re: Darren Lee
Parole Denied

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Modesto, California - Stanislaus County District Attorney Birgit Fladager announced today that Darren Lee, age 57, of Modesto was found unsuitable for parole at a June 19, 2020 hearing of the State Board of Parole Hearings held by video-conference at San Quentin Prison. Special Prosecutor Amy Elliott Neumann appeared at the hearing and argued for continued confinement based on Lee's lack of programming in self-help, lack of insight into his crimes and his unsuitability for parole. The Board of Parole Hearings agreed and denied parole for three years.

On June 25, 1979, Darren Lee (age 16 at the time) and his three crime partners brutally murdered Phillip and Kathryn Ranzo in their own home. Lee and his crime partners planned a home invasion robbery, which began with knocking on the door of the Ranzo home and pretending to be out of gas and asking to use the telephone. Since their telephone was out of order, Phillip Ranzo offered to give them a can of gas. Lee and his crime partners followed Mr. Ranzo into the garage where Lee then held Mr. Ranzo at gunpoint. Lee and his crime partners hogtied Mr. Ranzo on the floor of his garage. Once tied up, Mr. Ranzo was beaten over the head with a baseball bat.

Darren Lee then entered the Ranzo home, where Kathryn Ranzo was watching TV in the living room. Mrs. Ranzo was ordered at gunpoint to go upstairs. Lee's crime partners took Mrs. Ranzo to an upstairs bedroom and proceeded to rape and murder her. Mrs. Ranzo was struck in the head multiple times with an axe, tortured with cuts to her eyes and face, and suffered a fatal stab wound to the throat. Lee and his crime partners ransacked the Ranzo home, stealing cash and jewelry. Before leaving the home, one of Lee's crime partners went back into the garage and stabbed Mr. Ranzo multiple times in the face and neck, inflicting fatal injuries. The Ranzos' brutal murders orphaned their only child, Mark. Ten-year-old Mark was not home the night of the murders, having spent the night at his grandparent's house.

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Twenty-three hours before the Ranzo murders, Darren Lee and two of his three Ranzo crime partners robbed and assaulted a caretaker of a home in Newman. Lee selected the home and planned the crime. Lee and his crime partners told the caretaker, Leonard Luna, that they had run out of gas. Once inside the house, they hogtied Mr. Luna and beat him in the head with a revolver which cut his scalp. They then proceeded to ransack the home, stealing multiple guns and weapons, which Lee and his crime partners used while at the Ranzo home.

Attorney Amy Elliott Neumann argued to the Board that continued confinement was necessary to keep the public safe. Speaking for the victims' family, retired deputy district attorney Beth DeJong read a statement from Phillip Ranzo's sister, Sandy Howell, and a statement from Leonard Luna. In Ms. Howell's statement, she expressed fear over Lee's potential release and believes that she and her family are in danger if Lee is ever released. Ms. De Jong asked the Board to deny parole. Mark Ranzo also attended the hearing to ensure that Lee was not released on parole.

Lee was convicted of two counts of murder in the first degree and one count of robbery while armed with a firearm. The case was moved to Sacramento County in 1980 based on a change of venue motion. Originally, Lee was sentenced to life without parole. His sentence was later reduced by an appellate court which deemed the sentence "cruel and unusual punishment" for a minor. Lee is currently serving two consecutive sentences of 25 years-to-life. He has served 40 years in prison.

In 2015, Lee was found unsuitable for parole and given a five-year denial. He will be scheduled for his next hearing in 2023, however, pursuant to SB 260, Youthful Offender Legislation, Lee was advised at the end of this hearing that he has the right to advance his hearing if he believes he has made progress towards release.

In addition to seeking parole and in response to a 2019 change to California's felony murder law, Lee filed a petition to be resentenced and have his murder conviction vacated. Lee contends in part that because he was not the actual killer of the Ranzos, he is entitled to resentencing on the robbery and burglary convictions alone. The Stanislaus County District Attorney vigorously opposes his petition on the basis that he was a major participant in the murders of the Ranzos. The petition will be heard in Sacramento County Superior Court where the original trial took place.

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