

Zachary Rolfe murder trial: what the case is about and what to expect when it begins

The police officer is charged with the murder of Kumanjayi Walker in a remote community north-west of Alice Springs



Zachary Rolfe, right, leaves the NT supreme court. He has pleaded not guilty to the murder of Kumanjayi Walker.

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On 9 November 2019, Kumanjayi Walker, a 19-year-old Aboriginal man, was shot dead at his family home in a remote community north-west of Alice Springs, where police officers had gone to arrest him.

Four days later, Constable Zachary Rolfe was charged with Walker's murder.

On Monday, Rolfe's criminal trial will start at the Northern Territory supreme court in Darwin. Here is the background to the case.

What do we know so far?

Prosecutors allege that Rolfe and another officer sought to arrest Walker at his home in Yuendumu in relation to an outstanding warrant. Prosecutors allege that Walker was shot in the house as Rolfe attempted to arrest him.

Rolfe also faces alternate charges of manslaughter or engaging in a violent act causing death. The police officer has pleaded not guilty, and was granted bail soon after the shooting.

Why has the case taken so long to come to trial?

The main delays have been caused by the pandemic, the complexity of the case, and legal arguments regarding the evidence or defences that can be used in the trial.

The first significant delay occurred in April 2020, when the case was postponed for 10 weeks, partly because essential reports had been delayed by Covid-19 lockdowns and partly because of the size of the brief of evidence.

There have been other delays caused by Covid, which have been particularly disruptive as people central to the case, including lawyers, are based outside the territory.

Among the legal arguments that have contributed to the delay has been wrangling over the location of the trial, and a contest over possible defences Rolfe could rely on. That argument meant his trial could not start in August 2021 as planned, and it eventually went to the high court.

What can we expect from the trial?

The trial is set down for three weeks.

It is expected to start on Monday with jury selection, and gradually progress through the prosecution opening its case, then defence openings, before witnesses are called. These witnesses are expected to include other police officers involved in the operation to arrest Walker. It is unclear if Rolfe will give evidence.

A live feed of proceedings will be shown at the supreme court in Alice Springs, which is closer to Yuendumu. The court is also seeking to provide an audio broadcast to media outlets nationally.

But the spectre of Covid remains: there will be some changes to how the jury can interact with one another, to avoid the prospect of an outbreak among them which could force the trial to be cancelled. Movement from some remote communities, either to the court or to monitor the case, could also be made more difficult by lockdowns in parts of the territory.