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Police shoot, kill fleeing man

Santa Cruz County parolee led authorities on chase through busy Visalia streets.

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Dateline: VISALIA

Article Text:

A parolee wanted for shooting a California Highway Patrol officer in Watsonville led Visalia police on a wild chase through the city before he was shot and killed Wednesday.

The chase started about 10:15 a.m. in Farmersville and came to a climax about 25 minutes later on Giddings Street just north of Tulare Avenue.

Visalia police Sgt. Shawn Delaney said officers shot Donald Bochat Jr., 31, as he got out of a Kia Rio carjacked during the chase.

Assistant Chief Bob Williams said Bochat had an AK-47-type assault rifle when he emerged, prompting five Visalia officers -- some armed with automatic weapons -- to shoot.

Bochat was taken to Kaweah Delta Hospital, where he died several hours later, hospital officials said.

Bochat, who lived in Santa Cruz County but has family ties in the Visalia area, was the subject of a Central Coast manhunt after eluding investigators Saturday in Watsonville. He also was suspected of a series of commercial burglaries there.

He was under surveillance by Santa Cruz County sheriff's investigators and was wanted on a warrant when he tried to make a getaway from a Watsonville hotel Saturday.

As he fled, Delaney said, Bochat struck a woman and child -- who both suffered minor injuries -- before crashing.

At that point, Visalia-area CHP Capt. Brian Smith said, Bochat shot a CHP officer in the leg with a handgun. He ran away, carjacked a pickup and escaped.

An investigation by Santa Cruz County sheriff's detectives, the CHP, the state Department of Justice and state parole agents led them to the Visalia area, where Delaney said Bochat has lived off and on.

Wednesday's pursuit rolled through busy Visalia traffic areas -- downtown and Mooney Boulevard, Williams said. Investigators had staked out a home in Farmersville where Bochat was believed to be staying; the chase began when he left the home driving a rented car.

Williams said Visalia police took the lead in the chase once it entered the Visalia city limits on Lovers Lane. Winding through the city, Bochat at one point crashed near a Bank of America branch at Mooney Boulevard and Beech Street, abandoned his car and ran east into a nearby mobile home park while officers in a CHP airplane watched from above.

Carrying the rifle, Bochat carjacked the small, green Kia Rio in the mobile park and drove off, with police cars again in pursuit.

"A lot of it was not fast," Williams said of the chase. "Traffic kept it rather slow."

But it was wide-ranging. The chase roamed from near Houston and Dinuba avenues, to near Lovers Lane and Noble Avenue, westbound along the entire length of Main Street -- including going the wrong way on a one-way stretch through the heart of downtown Visalia -- and on to the southern reaches of the city at Mooney Boulevard and Caldwell Avenue.

Michele Sharp was headed west on Main Street when she glanced in her rearview mirror and saw the green car speed up behind her.

"Right from nowhere, he came up fast and passed all these cars," she said. "Then there was a line of police cars chasing him. It was terrifying."

Flabbergasted Visalians rushed out of downtown restaurants and stores to watch the action.

"It was movielike," said Steve Gerrard of Visalia.

Bill Hurlbut was standing at Court and Main streets, selling newspapers as he has done for the past 12 years.

"I had my hand up because I stop a lot of people going the wrong way," Hurlbut said. "He did hesitate for a second, but I think that was just to see if any [traffic] was coming."

Williams said it was when Bochat began heading from the southern part of the city back toward busy central Visalia that officers took steps to stop him.

Delaney said two Visalia officers shot at the Kia as it headed north on Giddings Street near Tulare Avenue, hitting it and forcing it off the road. It hit a parked pickup north of Tulare Avenue.

When Bochat emerged with the assault rifle, police fired. Williams said it appeared Bochat had gunshot wounds from midbody down.

Dozens of marked and unmarked police cars closed off parts of the neighborhood as people talked about what they saw.

Lucy Gomez lives in the Sierra View Ranch Apartments. Her front window, facing Giddings Street, overlooks the lawn where the fatal shots were fired.

"I was frozen," she said. "I couldn't move. I saw him get out through the passenger door; he was trying to run away, and then the cops started shooting. They shot him, and I just saw his body shaking back and forth."

"The guy in the green car ran into the truck and started getting out of the car," said Martin Kroepa, who watched the chase end from across the street. "He ran out and all these cops started shooting at him. I ducked and dived behind the car as soon as I heard the shots. It was crazy."

Chris Nunes watched the chase's violent conclusion from a friend's house down the street.

"It looked like he was shooting at the cops from out of his window," Nunes said. "Then his car ran over the curb there, and the cops all surrounded him and started blasting away."

Investigators said they don't yet know if Bochat fired at police or how many shots from officers struck him.

The officers who fired at Bochat have been placed on paid administrative leave -- standard procedure for the department while the case is investigated.

In addition to the assault rifle, police said they found a handgun in the Kia, and in the car abandoned at the bank, officers found a bulletproof vest and another handgun.

Bochat was no stranger to law enforcement in Tulare County. Court records show a string of court appearances dating back to 1992, including guilty pleas for felony auto theft and evading police, possessing items useful for escape, misdemeanor driving under the influence and, in September 2002, misdemeanor possession of burglary tools, for which he was sentenced to 150 days in jail.

In Santa Cruz County, published reports indicate that Bochat was sentenced in 1997 to 32 months for burglary, taking a vehicle without the owner's permission, receiving stolen property and evading a police officer.

Bochat was reportedly a suspect in at least two March burglaries in the Santa Cruz area, including one in which about \$7,500 in uniforms, handcuffs and other police gear was stolen from a uniform company in Soquel.

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Caption:

PHOTOS BY CHRISTIAN PARLEY -- THE FRESNO BEE

A high-speed chase Wednesday through downtown Visalia ends with gun smoke in the air and the suspect, at left, in the grass at gunpoint. At right, a bystander whose Chevy pickup was hit by the suspect's stolen car makes a phone call after taking cover.

The suspect allegedly carjacked this Kia Rio during the pursuit. Visalia officers shot at the Kia as it headed north on Giddings Street near Tulare Avenue, hitting it and forcing it off the road.

Donald Bochat Jr.

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