

Area standoff with lawmen turns tragic

Article Text:

By MIKE McNEILL Banner-News MAGNOLIA – A man apparently killed himself early Monday morning during a 12-hour standoff with Columbia County lawmen.

Bradley J. Lenarz, who turned 23 on Wednesday, was found by tactical officers about 5 a.m. Monday, dead of an apparent self-inflicted gunshot wound.

It was a sad end to an overnight showdown that began Sunday afternoon at the home of Lenarz's grandparents, Gentry and Dee Gunnels, 830 U.S. 82 east of Magnolia. Lenarz stayed at the home.

The Magnolia Fire Department was called to a reported car fire at the residence about 5 p.m. Sunday. The fire that destroyed the Chevrolet Camaro owned by Lenarz's unidentified girlfriend was allegedly set by Lenarz, said Columbia County Sheriff Calvin Knighton.

Knighton said that Lenarz was thought to have walked away from the house, but the grandparents found him inside his bedroom and armed with a 9 mm handgun. Knighton said Lenarz told the Gunnels to leave the house, which they did.

"He shot himself," Knighton said about 5:15 a.m. as officers used a powerful fan inside the house to dissipate the effects of a half-dozen tear-gas canisters, a smoke bomb and a flash-bang device lawmen used during three separate attempts to dislodge Lenarz from the house. "We were talking to him up until somewhere around midnight. It would had to have been some time after that time," Knighton said. Attempts to talk Lenarz out of the house began shortly after the standoff started. Lawmen telephoned the house and used a bullhorn to communicate with Lenarz throughout the evening, as police tried several tactics to make him uncomfortable and get him to leave the residence. Family members spoke to Lenarz by telephone or bullhorn, and Knighton said that Lenarz also talked with a psychologist by telephone.

Electricity and water service to the house were cut off shortly after the siege began. As Sunday wore into Monday, police shined spotlights into the house, then cutting them off and repositioning the lights. The bark of Duco, the Columbia County Sheriff's Office K-9 unit, was amplified through the exterior speaker of a patrol unit. Even a laser beam from a gunsight could be seen.

The situation became decidedly more tense about 2:25 a.m. when the first attempt was made to remove Lenarz by force. A deputy ran across the roof and lobbed two tear gas canisters down the chimney, while two more canisters were fired See STANDOFF, Page 3A through the kitchen window. Two deputies made an unsuccessful attempt to hurl more canisters into the northwest bedroom of the house, where they believed Lenarz had barricaded himself.

Knighton said storm windows on the room were pounded with a shovel and a rifle butt, with no success. After the first assault, Knighton said lawmen thought Lenarz may have still been alive. Officers thought they heard noises from within the home. Power was restored to the house in hopes that the air conditioning system would circulate tear gas into the barricaded room.

An even more aggressive assault came about 4:15 a.m. Lawmen breached the bedroom window with a "hooligan" tool – a large crowbar that shattered the glass – followed by a "flash-bang" device used to disorient people in close quarters. The flash-bang device went off with a jagged streak of light and a loud explosion just outside the bedroom window. Several deputies ran across the roof, depositing a smoke bomb and tear gas in the chimney. Finally, heavily-armed officers crept quietly through the dark at the front of the house and tried to get a look inside the bedroom window. They retreated after they could not immediately determine whether Lenarz was still alive or even still in the northwest bedroom. Officers made one last approach just after 5 a.m. and found Lenarz dead.

Knighton said the 9 mm handgun and two other firearms were in the bedroom with Lenarz "It's over. None of our people got hurt. They had a real long night. We have a good force. There were only two of these guys who were supposed to be working tonight," Knighton said. Columbia County lawmen were assisted with manpower needs Sunday by the Magnolia and El Dorado police departments. "They put their life on the line not knowing what was going to happen," Knighton said. "I couldn't ask for a better crew and the county couldn't have a better bunch of guys."

One lawman did receive a minor cut while throwing a tear-gas canister through a window. According to Magnolia Police Department records, Lenarz had a series of minor run-ins with the law, most recently a speeding citation on April 23.

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