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Manassas standoff ends, gunman dead

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Article Text:

MANASSAS—Twenty-three hours after it began, an armed standoff between police and a 50-year-old fugitive ended with officers finding him dead in his room at the Homestyle Inn. The long standoff – punctuated by tear gas grenades and shots fired from the hotel room at 9913 Cockrell Road – ended about 4:20 p.m. with Virginia State Police SWAT team members entering the room after sending in surveillance cameras. Those cameras captured images of John C. Carlson motionless and facedown in his room, police said.

Manassas police Sgt. Tim Neumann said it appears Carlson died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

It all began about 5:30 p.m. Wednesday, after an argument between Carlson and his wife. Police said Carlson brandished a gun in the parking lot, bringing police to the scene. When he saw officers arrive, he ran inside the hotel, where he's lived with his wife off and on for the past year.

When police knocked on Carlson's door, he told them to go away. When officers persisted, he fired off the handgun, shattering a window, Neumann said.

That act began a barricade involving police SWAT teams, specialized robots and multiple canisters of tear gas.

After the first shots were fired Wednesday, at least 40 people had to be evacuated from the hotel. They were provided shelter by the Red Cross, said Neumann.

Haunting call

Soon after the standoff began, Carlson told police he wanted to speak with his family and drink a cold beer.

When Carlson's 20-year-old son learned what had happened, he rushed from his work in Haymarket to the hotel.

He said he briefly talked to his father over the phone when he got to the scene about 8:30 p.m. Carlson, who turned 50 Thursday, seemed depressed about getting older and was making threats of suicide in the face of going back to jail. He was wanted on a fugitive from justice warrant in Chesapeake, where he was charged with being a habitual drunken driving offender, according to police and court records.

"He said, 'I'll let them kill me before they take me back to there,'" his son said.

During their conversation, Carlson and his son got cut off.

When his father tried to call him back, he said police officers told him not to take the call.

Authorities seemed worried that having a conversation with his father could make an already unstable situation worse, he said.

So he let the phone ring.

"All the man wanted to do is speak to his family and drink a beer, just one, to calm him down.

And they wouldn't even let us talk to him," he said.

Tense 23 hours

Since Carlson was firing shots, and tear gas was flying, police shut down all major roads surrounding the hotel as the standoff dragged on.

Early Thursday, city officials informed residents about the ongoing situation with a reverse 911 alert.

"The system can provide a map of the area and list street closures for those who may have not seen or heard about the situation on the news," Neumann said.

A car wash and several offices line Cockrell Road, and for some it was an unwelcomed day off from work.

"I just don't know how they expect us to get to work and go about our day if we can't get into the area," said a woman who called News & Messenger's newsroom.

Manassas authorities said it was not worth risking an officer's life if no one is being held hostage.

"Why send one of our officers into a situation where we know a man does not have a hostage, is not trying to hurt anyone but himself, does not want to live and doesn't value life. That would be putting one of our people at risk for no reason. It's really just a waiting game at this point, and hopefully he'll come out of there," said Neumann.

During the early hours of the barricade, police communicated with the Carlson by telephone in hopes of coaxing him out.

About 11 p.m., it became clear that plan wasn't working.

Through the night, police lobbed tear gas grenades at and into the hotel room.

How Carlson withstood the volleys of tear gas is something of a mystery. His son, listening to the police radio as he sat in a cruiser Wednesday night, said his father seemed to have wrapped a wet towel around his head and placed towels underneath the door cracks to minimize the effects of the gas.

Several times, police say, Carlson fired back, shooting rounds from a semi-automatic handgun from inside the hotel room.

The last tear gas canister entered the room at 6:30 a.m., and that is the last time police heard gunshots.

After a day of no sound or motion from the room, SWAT teams finally made entry and discovered Carlson's body.

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Kiser writes for the News & Messenger in Manassas.

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