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Roanoke police continue search for suspect in Franklin County homicide

By Matt Chittum and Alicia Petska

Roanoke police lifted a “shelter in place” order for the Grandin Road area Thursday but implored people to remain vigilant as the search continues for a man accused in a Franklin County slaying.

The city urged residents to be alert and report any suspicious activity. Cars and homes should be locked, officials said.

Roanoke schools, which closed Thursday because of the search, were to open on time Friday with the blessing of the police, school officials said.

Police believe Michael Alexander Brown, a U.S. Marine accused of desertion and charged in the Saturday shooting death of his mother’s boyfriend, is armed. The U.S. Marshals Service offered a $10,000 reward for information leading to his capture.

Brown was in the area near Patrick Henry High School because his grandmother lives there, police believe.

Since Sunday, Brown appears to have fled to as far as South Carolina.

“Family,” Roanoke Police Chief Tim Jones said when asked why Brown might have returned to the Roanoke Valley. “I think family is what brought him.”

Brown was seen tapping on the window of a house on Tillett Road, where his grandmother lives, Jones said Thursday. A neighbor called 911 at 12:48 a.m. Thursday, triggering a massive police manhunt across the neighborhood that drew in numerous officers from at least a half-dozen agencies.

By 5 a.m., police had discovered a recreational vehicle Brown was believed to have been driving parked at the nearby St. Elizabeth’s Episcopal Church. Police called on Brown to get out of the vehicle, then battered it with a ram attached to an armored vehicle, tearing the right side from the RV. Brown was not in the RV.

About the same time, police used social media and reverse 911 calls to alert residents in a half-mile radius to remain in their homes and lock their doors. The Roanoke school system sent a robocall to parents to alert them that schools were closed and employees should stay home.

Brown was likely on foot and in search of other transportation, Jones said at a 7 a.m. news conference.

Throughout the day, local, state and federal authorities crawled over the Raleigh Court and Grandin Court neighborhoods in search of Brown. Departments including the Franklin County Sheriff’s Office, Virginia State Police, the FBI, the U.S. Marshals Service and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives joined in the search.

A U.S. Customs and Border Protection helicopter was spotted flying repeatedly over the Grandin area Thursday afternoon.

Brown, 22, faces a federal count of unlawful flight to avoid prosecution in addition to Franklin County charges of second-degree murder and use of a firearm in the commission of a felony.

Brown is also facing a charge of felony larceny involving heavy construction equipment in Craven County, North Carolina, the site of Brown’s last known address , according to the sheriff’s office there. That charge was filed in recent weeks but before the events in Franklin County, officials said. No other information about the case was immediately available Thursday.

Brown is wanted in the fatal weekend shooting of Rodney Wilfred Brown, 54, of Hardy. Michael Brown is the son of Rodney Brown’s live-in girlfriend, Franklin County authorities have said.

Officials are unsure of a motive in the killing.

The shooting occurred at a home on Woodthrush Circle and was reported at noon Saturday by a relative of Rodney Brown, police have said.

Michael Brown is described as 6 feet tall, weighing 145 pounds with brown hair and blue eyes. Jones said he’s possibly wearing a black, waist-length coat.

He graduated in 2015 from Franklin County High School and is a U.S. Marine corporal and combat engineer with the 8th Engineer Support Battalion. He was last stationed at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina, according to the base. Such units typically support ground forces by engineering, building and maintaining facilities and other infrastructure.

He was deployed from March to October 2018 with a crisis response unit serving under the U.S. Africa Command. More details about his service weren’t available. It wasn’t clear if he was stationed in a conflict zone.

His initial date of enlistment wasn’t immediately available, but he received a Marine Corps Good Conduct Medal, which is described as being awarded for three years of honorable, faithful service. His current term of enlistment was slated to end in 2021.

He deserted his post in mid-October, authorities said, and had been seen in and around Franklin County over the past two weeks.

Brown’s service weapon was in the base’s armory and is accounted for there, officials said. No weapons are missing from the armory.

Brown’s flight took him on an odyssey across at least three states in multiple vehicles.

Police initially reported he was driving a white 1976 Cadillac, but soon said they believed he was at the wheel of 2008 black Lincoln Town Car.

On Sunday night, the U.S. Marshals Service learned that Brown might be driving an RV and pulled an enclosed trailer near Clarendon County, South Carolina, about four hours southwest of Camp Lejeune. They later found the trailer abandoned with the Lincoln inside.

Jones said Thursday that authorities believed as recently as the day before that Brown was still on the move. Then came the early morning 911 call and Thursday’s manhunt.

Roanoke defense attorney Deborah Caldwell-Bono said she has been hired by friends of Brown’s from Franklin County to represent him. She declined to specify their relationship to Brown but said they “have known him forever and believe in him and support him.”

Caldwell-Bono said she has not been in touch with Brown personally, nor with members of his family, and said the people who hired her did not tell her when they had last spoken to Brown.

She encouraged Brown to get in touch with her.

“I just want him to know he does have support out there and does have somebody to help him,” Caldwell-Bono said. “We’re just trying to get a peaceful resolution here.”

Jones reiterated throughout the day Thursday that Brown does not have to continue to run.

“He may at this point in time feel like he has run out of alternatives, but there are alternatives,” Jones said. Brown can reach out to any law enforcement in the area, “and we can bring him in safely, peacefully, and no one will be hurt.”

Authorities weren’t waiting for Brown, though. Their dragnet stretched across most of two neighborhoods. Normally busy morning street traffic was nonexistent as police vehicles overwhelmingly outnumbered other vehicles .

Police cars were stationed at intersections and cruised streets in patrol cars, on motorcycles and on foot. Along residential Tillett Road, officers stopped drivers, searched car trunks and showed a picture of Brown.

At St. Elizabeth’s, police and news media collected around the half-demolished RV.

Church staffers had seen the RV on Wednesday morning, according to Bobby Ballance, the church’s junior warden. It did not appear to be occupied, and church officials decided to leave it be.

“It seemed benign,” Ballance said. “It was odd, to say the least.”

On Tillett Road, Karen Gierchak said most of the morning remained relatively quiet on the street. Neighbors offered muffins and coffee to the officers guarding the neighborhood.

A cautious calm seemed to settle on the neighborhood until around noon, when a helicopter began making low sweeps overhead, flying so close that the pilot’s face could be seen from the ground. “I could tell you that he had blue eyes,” Gierchak said. “That’s how close it was.”

A heavy police vehicle, which Geirchak described as like a bulldozer, began rumbling through the woods behind the neighborhood, then parked outside a house down the street. Additional law enforcement took up posts nearby.

Neighbors were advised by police to get into their basements, Gierchak said. At St. Elizabeth’s, a group of reporters and photographers were rushed into the church by Virginia State Police. Ballance said he was told by police that Brown had reportedly been sighted in nearby woods.

A search turned up nothing, and the reporters were allowed to leave after about 30 minutes.

Gierchak was calm. “With such a large police presence, I feel safe,” she said.

Jim McLeese said the same as he stood at the corner of Grandin Road and Guilford Avenue on Thursday morning.

But he added that his houseguest from Japan was more rattled.

“I said, ‘Welcome to America,’” McLeese said. “I just hope they find him quickly.”

*Laurence Hammack, Neil Harvey, Dan Casey and Don Petersen contributed information to this story.*

**TIMELINE:**

Oct. 18: Michael Alexander Brown deserts his post at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina, where he is a combat engineer for the Marine Corps, according to the Franklin County Sheriff's Office.

Oct. 24: Brown does not appear for duty. He is marked absent without authorization the following day, according to officials at Camp Lejeune.

Nov. 9: A family member calls police after finding Rodney Brown, 54, shot and killed in his home on Woodthrush Circle in Hardy. The Franklin County Sheriff’s Office responds and determines that Michael Brown, the son of Rodney Brown’s live-in girlfriend, is the prime suspect and that he is driving a white 1976 Cadillac. Later that day, after Brown is spotted at a store in Franklin County, the sheriff's office says Brown is now driving a 2008 black Lincoln Town Car.

Nov. 11: The Franklin County Sheriff’s Office obtains an arrest warrant for second-degree murder and use of a firearm in the commission of a felony against Brown.

Nov. 12: The U.S. Marshals Service receives information that Brown might be operating an RV and pulling an enclosed trailer in the area of Clarendon County, South Carolina. Agents find a trailer, with the Lincoln inside, abandoned on the side of a road in Clarendon County.

Nov. 14: At about 4 a.m., Roanoke police receive a 911 call regarding a suspicious person wearing a black jacket tapping on windows on Tillett Road, a few blocks west of Patrick Henry High School. Police determine that the person is Brown and later find an RV parked in the lot at the nearby St. Elizabeth’s Episcopal Church. Roanoke police ram open the side of the RV, but Brown is not inside, leading to an ongoing manhunt across southwest Roanoke. A federal charge of unlawful flight to avoid prosecution is added to the counts against Brown.

*Published correction ran on Nov. 17 - Correction - The discovery of an abandoned trailer containing a 2008 Lincoln Town Car linked to Michael Alexander Brown occurred Tuesday night, Nov. 12. The date was incorrect in an article published Nov. 15. Also, the 911 call that triggered the Nov. 14 search for Brown in the Raleigh Court neighborhood occcurred at about 1 a.m. A timeline of events published with the Nov. 15 article gave an incorrect time.*