

Bridgewater College Shooting Suspect Facing Murder Charges, Held Without Bond

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BRIDGEWATER — A 27-year-old man has been charged with the killing of a Bridgewater College police officer and a safety officer in a shooting on campus Tuesday afternoon.

Alexander Wyatt Campbell, whose last known address is in Ashland, was taken into custody after a lockdown of the school following the shooting. His first appearance in the Harrisonburg/Rockingham General District Court is scheduled for today at 1 p.m., according to courthouse staff.

Campbell has been charged by VSP with two felony counts of capital murder, one felony count of first degree murder and a felony count of use of a firearm in the commission of a felony, according to the Virginia State Police.

The charges have been filed after consultation with Marsha Garst, Rockingham County commonwealth's attorney, and more charges may be forthcoming as the investigation proceeds, according to VSP.

BC student and HHS graduate Alex Hulleman, 21, was in Flory Hall and heard shots and moaning.

John Painter, former Grottoes police chief and Bridgewater campus officer, was killed along with safety officer J.J. Jefferson. Painter stepped down as chief of the Rockingham County town in 2019 after 18 years with the department.

Jefferson was a former Department of Public Safety sergeant at Shenandoah University in Winchester, a position he took on in 2013. He studied at the school between 2012 and 2018, according to a press release from the school.

"These officers were close friends, known to many of us as the 'dynamic duo,'" Bridgewater College President David Bushman said in an email to students later Tuesday afternoon.

Painter served as Jefferson's best man at his wedding this year, according to Bushman.

Campbell is being held at the Rockingham County Jail without bond, Corrine Geller, Virginia State Police spokesperson, said in a press conference at Nininger Hall at BC on Tuesday evening.

Law enforcement is still investigating the shooting and a potential motive. Geller asked anyone with information about the incident or videos and photos from the incident to share it with VSP by email through vsptcs@vsp.virginia.gov. The FBI and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives are also assisting in the investigation.

"It's still a very complex and very active investigation," Geller said.

Geller declined to say if Campbell was a student and also could not provide any information about whether Campbell was under the influence of drugs or alcohol during the incident. Based on available evidence, the shooting was isolated and Campbell is the lone suspect.

Campbell was previously a member of the school's track team, according to witnesses at the scene.

According to an online bio on the Eagles athletic website, which was taken down late Tuesday, Campbell last ran for BC in 2015, placing 13th at the Old Dominion Athletic Conference meet, and was a graduate of Patrick Henry High School.

Geller also said she could not provide any information about a criminal history of Campbell. Multiple firearms were recovered as evidence both on and off campus Tuesday, according to Geller.

Officers were called to the area around Memorial Hall and Flory Hall on the Bridgewater College campus just before 1:20 p.m. due to reports of a suspicious person carrying a duffel bag, according to Geller.

Other Bridgewater College staff first came upon Campbell and startled him around Memorial Hall, according to Geller. Geller said Campbell was not supposed to be in the area, but declined to elaborate on why.

Painter and Jefferson responded to the call, came upon Campbell and after a short interaction with the law enforcement officers, he fired at them, Geller said. They died from their injuries, according to Geller. In his role as a campus police officer, Painter was issued a firearm, but Jefferson was not.

Campbell fled the scene on foot across the North River adjacent to the college campus on Riverside Drive and was taken into custody by other law enforcement officers around 1:55 p.m. on a small island in the river, Geller said.

When Campbell was taken into custody, he had a non-life-threatening gunshot wound. VSP is still investigating whether his wound was self-inflicted or was caused by one of the campus officers, Geller said.

He was transported to Sentara RMH Medical Center and was treated before being transported to the county jail, she said. Geller declined to say where the gunshot wound was on Campbell's body.

Unless it's determined one of the campus officers shot Campbell, no law enforcement officers discharged their firearms in the incident, according to Geller.

Bridgewater College is a small, private Christian college of about 1,500 students located in the south Rockingham County town of Bridgewater.

According to VSP, there were no students in immediate danger during the incident, though students the Daily News-Record spoke with Tuesday following the incident discussed how stressful and distressing it was to them.

Students were mostly in classes at the time of the shooting, Bushman said during the evening press conference. Students told the Daily News-Record about calling their family members to say they loved them and goodbye as they barricaded themselves into their classrooms after they heard the gunshots.

Two Officers Killed, Man Taken into Custody Near Bridgewater College

A Bridgewater College campus law enforcement officer and campus safety officer were shot and killed Tuesday and a man was taken into custody by law enforcement following a large police and emergency responder presence at the school.

Bridgewater College President David Bushman said campus police officer John Painter and safety officer J.J. Jefferson died from their injuries.

"These officers were close friends, known to many of us as the 'dynamic duo,'" Bushman wrote in an email to the college community.

Police say there were no other injuries.

The suspect, Alexander Wyatt Campbell, 27, with a last known address in Ashland, was taken into custody at around 1:55 p.m., officials said. According to state police, he is charged with two counts of capital murder, one count of murder in the first degree and one count of using a firearm in commission of felony. The charges have been filed after consultation with Marsha Garst, Rockingham County Commonwealth's Attorney. Campbell is being held at the Rockingham County Jail without bond.

Painter retired in 2019 from the Town of Grottoes Police Department after 18 years of service.

"Chief Painter leaves a legacy of true diligence, heart, honor and leadership within our community," Grottoes Mayor Jo Plaster said.

According to witnesses on the scene, Campbell was a former student at Bridgewater College and ran cross country for the Eagles. According to an online bio on the Eagles athletic website which was no longer available late Tuesday, Campbell last ran for BC in 2015, placing 13th at the Old Dominion Athletic Conference meet and was a graduate of Patrick Henry High School.

When arrested, Campbell was suffering from a non-life threatening gunshot wound and was transported to Sentara RMH Medical Center, where he was treated and released. State police is still working to determine if he was shot by the Bridgewater College Police Officer or suffered a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Multiple firearms associated with Campbell were recovered as evidence.

The Town of Bridgewater sent an announcement at 1:30 p.m. saying the college issued an alert for an active shooter on campus and for those on campus to shelter in place. The Bridgewater Community Center is closed to the public and the town requested citizens avoid the college, and the area, at the time.

Students Hide As 'Unthinkable' Situation Unfolds

By KELLEN STEPLER Daily News-Record Feb 1, 2022 Updated Feb 16, 2022

BRIDGEWATER — Bridgewater College freshman Tyler Crew was sitting in history class Tuesday afternoon, preparing to take a quiz.

Then, he heard gunshots.

The quaint, picturesque Rockingham County private college went into lockdown Tuesday afternoon when a gunman shot and killed campus police officer John Painter and campus security officer J.J. Jefferson. Police took the suspect, later identified as Alexander Wyatt Campbell, 27, whose last known address was in Ashland, into custody at 2 p.m.

Campbell is charged with two counts of capital murder, one count of murder in the first degree and one count of using a firearm in commission of a felony. He is being held in the Rockingham County Jail without bond.

Crew said he and his classmates got alerts on their phones from the college at around 1:30 p.m., warning them of an active shooter on campus. About the same time, Crew said, he heard gunshots; the class was scheduled to let out at 1:45 p.m.

“A few more minutes, and it would have been a different discussion completely,” he said.

Tucker Hrasky, a BC senior, received texts from his teammates on the baseball team, telling him to stay inside and lock his doors. He said he heard loud pops.

“[Bridgewater] has never had anything close to this,” Hrasky said. “It’s unthinkable.”

“People should reach out to their loved ones,” he said. “It’s a shame that people have to feel unsafe.”

BC student Andrew Meechan and his classmates were trying to figure out what the loud pops they heard were outside their classroom in Flory Hall before they realized it was gunshots. Meechan said he heard an officer moan and could see both Jefferson and Painter on the ground outside the classroom window.

“We just got on the ground and tried to stay as safe as we could,” Meechan said.

Alex Hulleman, a BC student and Harrisonburg High School grad, was also in Flory Hall when he heard shots and moaning.

“We looked out the window, and we saw that two officers were down,” Hulleman said. “It all happened kind of fast.”

BC student and HHS graduate Alex Hulleman, 21, was in Flory Hall and heard shots and moaning.

In a statement, Bridgewater Mayor Ted Flory said, “This evening, a community of peace grieves.”

“Bridgewater is shocked by today’s senseless violence at Bridgewater College,” Flory said in the statement. “We are heartbroken by the needless injuries and loss of life. And we are rightly angered at the evil which alighted upon us.”

Flory continued: “But even in our grief, we turn our heads and we see the goodness of humanity: police officers running toward the danger, rescue personnel rushing in, and neighbors keeping each other safe. In this goodness, we find the strength to go forward and to offer our love to victims’ families and to the entire Bridgewater College Community. In this moment, let us all remember how connected we are in this tiny town.”

While the community of peace grieves, Flory said, “a community of strength perseveres, and a community of love, loves.”

“There will be much more pain in the coming days, but I urge my fellow citizens to confront it with these three pillars of peace, strength and love.”

The Rockingham County Board of Supervisors said Tuesday night it extends “prayerful and heartfelt condolences to the Bridgewater College community.” The statement also said its heart is with the officers’ families.

“At this time that questions seem to outnumber answers and grief-filled devastation overwhelms, we pray for your strength in body and soul and for peace in your hearts,” the Board of Supervisors said.

“As a community of grace and love — we stand in steadfast solidarity with Bridgewater College today, tomorrow and beyond.”

Rockingham County Supervisor Bill Kyger, a longtime Bridgewater resident, said his thoughts, prayers and wishes go out to the community in light of the tragedy.

“As an alum of Bridgewater College, it’s a tragedy and it’s unright,” an emotional Kyger said Tuesday night. “It hits close to home.”

Sallie Wolfe-Garrison, chair of the Board of Supervisors, said everyone associated with the college remains “close in our hearts.”

She encouraged people to be respectful of how others process the tragedy, and offered condolences and prayers.

Bridgewater Retirement Community, located near the college, said in a statement it is “shocked and saddened by the situation.”

“Our hearts go out to the entire campus community and everyone affected,” BRC’s statement read. “You are our close neighbors, and loyal friends who have supported us in myriad ways through the years. In this difficult hour, we want you to know we stand ready to support the college and our greater community in the days and weeks ahead.”

Gov. Glenn Youngkin ordered flags to be flown at half-staff today “to honor [the officers] memory and courageous efforts.”

“The First Lady and I ask Virginians to keep their family, friends and the Bridgewater community in your thoughts and prayers during this difficult time,” Youngkin said in the statement.

Every Rockingham County town expressed condolences and support for those affected by the tragedy. The Town of Dayton wrote on Facebook its “hearts go out to all affected by the shooting at Bridgewater College today.”

“We are fortunate to have excellent law enforcement working together,” the statement said. “But, our hearts are broken.”

Bridgewater College campus police officer Painter retired in 2019 from the Town of Grottoes Police Department after 18 years of service.

“Chief Painter leaves a legacy of true diligence, heart, honor and leadership within our community,” Grottoes Mayor Jo Plaster said in a statement. “Chief Painter was gentle, a kind spirit and it has been a true privilege knowing him and having him serve our town.”

Plaster also expressed condolences to the family and friends of campus security officer Jefferson, who was a former Department of Public Safety sergeant at Shenandoah University.

“Our prayers are with their families, friends and our law enforcement community, during this tragic time,” Plaster said. “Together we are a unit. Together we shall honor the sacrifices of our men and

women on the front lines and stand with them. Chief Painter, we sadly will miss you and honor you in legacy for years to come.”

Bridgewater College President David Bushman wrote in an email to students, faculty and staff Painter and Jefferson were close friends, known to many as the “dynamic duo.”

The Town of Timberville said Tuesday night it sends condolences, and stands with the families, friends and colleagues of officers Painter and Jefferson.

“These two honorable men gave their lives today, in the line of duty, protecting the students and community of Bridgewater College,” the statement read.

In a statement, the Town of Mount Crawford wrote, “Our deepest condolences to the families of fallen Officers John Painter and J.J. Jefferson as well as the Bridgewater community.”

The Elkton Police Department wrote on Tuesday night: “There are no words to describe the pain, anger and even confusion that comes with losing a member of our Blue Line family.”

“Our prayers are with the families of the officers who gave the ultimate sacrifice today to protect the ones they swore to protect. The weight of the badge is heavy. Today, we lost two Heroes.”

The Town of Elkton said it is “sending our deepest condolences to the Bridgewater Community and all of those affected by today’s tragic event. Thankful for our law enforcement officers near and far.”

And the Town of Broadway said it sends thoughts and prayers to the Bridgewater College family, community and all those affected.

“We have the utmost appreciation for our law enforcement officers who serve and protect the communities we love,” Broadway’s statement read.