

## **BC Student Recalls Moments Leading Up To Officers' Slaying**

**By KELLEN STEPLER Daily News-Record Oct 26, 2022 Updated Oct 26, 2022**

On the afternoon of Feb. 1, Ryan Cunningham, a student at Bridgewater College at the time, saw something he thought wasn't quite right.

Cunningham testified in Harrisonburg-Rockingham General District Court on Wednesday that from where he was standing outside the campus' Memorial Hall, he saw Alexander Wyatt Campbell on the school's grounds, carrying a large duffel bag, which got his attention.

"He seemed like he was struggling," Cunningham said.

Keeping an eye on Campbell, Cunningham later saw Bridgewater College safety officer Vashon "J.J." Jefferson and police officer John Painter approach Campbell and ask him to stop and speak with them. Cunningham said he heard the officers ask for Campbell's ID, but didn't hear the rest of the exchange.

Campbell then pulled out a "small handgun," and Cunningham heard five shots total — a single shot, then two more and two more.

Cunningham said he saw Painter fall to the ground and Jefferson lying on the ground, and he ran to the college's Heritage Hall "screaming frantically to get people inside."

Painter, 55, of Grottoes, and Jefferson, 48, of Bridgewater, died at the scene. They were friends known on campus as the "dynamic duo."

Cunningham's testimony Wednesday came during a preliminary hearing for Campbell, 28, who faces three counts of aggravated murder, one count of first-degree murder and one count of using a firearm in commission of a felony. In a full courtroom on Wednesday, Judge John Hart scheduled the case to be heard by a grand jury on Nov. 21.

Both Commonwealth's Attorney Marsha Garst and Campbell's court-appointed defense lawyer, Gene Hart, declined comment after the hearing.

Campbell is being held in the Rockingham County Jail and appeared in person at the preliminary hearing, during which he said nothing.

Police were originally dispatched to Bridgewater College just before 1:20 p.m. on Feb. 1 due to reports of a suspicious person carrying a duffel bag.

Jefferson and Painter's bodies were found between Flory and Memorial halls, near the Bowman Community Plaza on Bridgewater College's campus, Virginia State Police special agent Heather Marshall testified.

Marshall noted two "very visible" gunshot wounds to Painter's face. She testified that an autopsy revealed Painter suffered three gunshot wounds, one to his right cheek, one to his left cheek and a third into his chest.

The right cheek wound was shot from "very close" range, Marshall testified.

Jefferson suffered two gunshot wounds, Marshall said. One went through his right arm into his chest, and the other was to his mid-back.

“These are kill shots, judge,” Garst said.

Harrisonburg Police Department detective Brooke Wetherell said she, along with police from surrounding communities, responded to the scene and began to approach an island on the North River in Bridgewater, where Campbell had gone after fleeing campus on foot.

As police approached the island, Wetherell heard a gunshot, she said, and believed officers were being shot at. Police took cover momentarily and gave several verbal commands to the suspect.

Eventually, Campbell complied, Wetherell said. As other officers secured the scene where his duffel bag was, Wetherell placed Campbell under arrest. She noted Campbell had blood on his forearms, and she testified that he told her he had been shot by an officer he had shot.

She recalled Campbell telling her he wanted to know the officers’ names, “so I can apologize to their families.” Wetherell said Campbell appeared to be coherent.

Previous statements from police said Campbell was taken into custody without incident at 1:55 p.m. on Feb. 1.

When asked by Hart, Wetherell said she was not wearing a body-worn camera because she is not “patrol.” She did not recall Campbell telling her he was “hearing voices.”

Rockingham County sheriff’s Cpl. Shawn Morris testified he was wearing a body camera, and took Campbell to Sentara RMH Medical Center. When asked if other suspects were involved, Campbell said, “It was just me and two officers,” Morris testified.

He appeared to speak clearly, Morris said.

Through an investigation, police recovered firearms connected to Campbell — two registered to him and one a “family heirloom,” Garst said. Marshall said investigators did an additional search in the basement of Memorial Hall, where they found items such as food, laundry detergent, ammunition and other materials belonging to Campbell.

The door handle to the room was removed, Marshall said, and there was an electronic doorstop.

Police had said Campbell’s last known address was in Ashland.

Investigators also located a calendar, or “daily journal,” that showed what appeared to be an exercise schedule for running, walking paths, where to shower and where to eat, Marshall said. Campbell’s vehicle was located on Dry River Road, she said.

Campbell was a student at Bridgewater College from 2013 to 2017 and competed on the school’s cross country team.

State police later dispatched a dive team into the North River and located a firearm registered to Painter, Marshall said.

The shooting on Feb. 1 shocked the quiet, small town of Bridgewater, with local officials saying, “a community of peace grieves.” In the following days, the community rallied around the college community and the officers’ families to provide support.

### **Bridgewater College Shooting Suspect Facing Murder Charges, Held Without Bond**

**By IAN MUNRO Daily News-Record Feb 1, 2022 Updated Mar 25, 2022**

**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](mailto: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.

### **Painter Remembered As Mentor, Kind, Generous By Community He Served**

**By KELLEN STEPLER Daily News-Record Feb 2, 2022 Updated Feb 18, 2022**

**GROTTOES** — John Painter was all the things a community would want in a leadership position, those who knew him say.

“John was a dedicated man,” said Grottoes Mayor Jo Plaster, where Painter was a town police officer and later police chief before working as a campus police officer at Bridgewater College.

Painter, 55, and BC safety officer J.J. Jefferson, 48, were killed Tuesday afternoon in a shooting on the college’s campus. The suspect in their deaths, Alex Wyatt Campbell, 27, was captured after a manhunt and has been charged with murder and other charges.

Painter looked out for people and made sure things were always going fine, Plaster said. She commended how personable, approachable and community-oriented he was — just an “all-around good person,” Plaster said.

“He was a very kind spirit,” Plaster said. “He gained trust with people he knew.”

Plaster also described him as a mentor, someone people would want their kids to know.

“The loss is still setting in,” she said. “He was a true pillar in the community.”

Current Grottoes Police Chief Jason Sullivan was hired by Painter as a town police officer in 2016. Sullivan said they immediately “hit it off.”

“He would do anything for anybody,” he said. “He would give you the shirt off his back.”

The community loved Painter, Sullivan said, and Painter loved it back. Painter was a “people’s person,” and stayed humble to his roots.

“After yesterday, there is not a bigger hero than John and J.J.,” Sullivan said Wednesday. “Who knows how many lives they saved yesterday.”

Sullivan said Painter shaped the way he leads Grottoes’ police force and was always available to speak to anyone.

“You could not ask for a better role model,” Sullivan said. “He was a public servant and took that title very seriously.”

Former Grottoes Police Chief Charlie Lawhorne said he hired Painter in 2001. Lawhorne said Painter had the demeanor, self-determination and potential to be successful in law enforcement.

“I knew he’d be a good police officer and good for Grottoes,” Lawhorne said.

Lawhorne said Painter was dedicated to serving the community. He recalled a time when Painter was working a midnight shift, and there was an incident in Grottoes. Neither the victim nor the offenders lived in Grottoes, but Painter went above and beyond to work a 36-hour shift and the offenders were arrested.

“John cared about the community,” Lawhorne said. “He was so well liked by the people.”

Wes Baugher, an investigator at the Rockingham County Sheriff’s Office, knew Painter when he lived in Elkton while Painter was a police officer for that town. They worked together for 17 years in Grottoes after Baugher started his career in law enforcement.

“He was a very honest man,” Baugher said. “I enjoyed his sense of humor, love of life and having fun all the time.”

Baughner also noted Painter's compassion for animals — Painter "went out of his way to make sure animals were OK," Baughner said.

Baughner recalled a time when a squirrel would come up to the back door of the police department when they were both working in Grottoes. Painter would throw peanuts at the door to gain the squirrel's trust, and in two weeks, the officers were able to feed the squirrel peanuts by hand.

Painter had an "incredible compassion" for animals, he said.

While under Painter's leadership, Baughner said they had an "incredible working and personal relationship," and Painter "led tremendously by example."

"He was not only a hero professionally, he was a hero personally," Baughner said. "Everyone knew him, and it was a pleasure for people to know him."

Bridgewater College junior Josh Goodwin, who knew Painter, said he was active on campus. Goodwin attended an event at BC Wednesday morning where members of the community sang "Bridgewater Fair," the school's alma mater, to "honor the brave men that really saved a lot of individual lives."

He remembered Painter as a "very nice gentleman," someone who would always be there to talk and be nice to everyone.

BC President David Bushman said the school is in preliminary discussions about potential remembrance ceremonies and permanent memorials and memorial funds.

"J.J. and John were keeping this community safe," Bushman said.

The genuine nature in which people have come together for each other is felt by those suffering from loss, he said.

"I want to show our gratitude for the support that we've received, and I want to make sure the community knows it is making a difference," Bushman said. "It is making [a] difference."

The tragedy that struck the school, which is like a family, has been shared by the larger community where Painter and Jefferson also left indelible marks, according to Bushman.

"This was tragic, but we will honor that memory," he said. "Yesterday was about getting through yesterday, and today is about getting through the next couple of days, and the next couple of days are about getting through the next couple weeks."