

Blotter

Suspect in school hostage standoff angry about treatment of GIs, authorities say

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PINE PLAINS — Upset by the treatment of U.S. military personnel, a 42-year-old man sneaked a disassembled shotgun into Stissing Mountain Middle School just after classes began Tuesday, put it together in a bathroom, then held the principal hostage for more than two hours before surrendering without firing a shot, police said.

No one was injured during the standoff.

At 7:45 a.m., minutes after the bell signaled the start of classes, Christopher Craft Sr. of Pine Plains loaded a single round into the shotgun, walked into the school's main office and confronted Principal Robert Hess, police said. Students were herded into the cafeteria's kitchen or huddled under desks.

Craft, the father of an Army veteran, ordered Hess at gunpoint into an inner office, where he restrained him and threatened to kill him to try to compel school officials and police to talk to media about his message "concerning the wrongful treatment of United States Military personnel," according to court documents.

Craft, who attended the school as a child, and Hess, who has worked in the Pine Plains district for 30 years, knew each other, authorities said. But they didn't say whether that might have been a factor in Hess being singled out on Tuesday.

SEVENTH-GRADER Zack Pruner, 12, said he was in an adjacent office when Craft confronted Hess.

"I was sitting in my chair scared stiff and ran under a desk," Zack said. "The guy sounded pretty angry, a little confused and frustrated, and (an assistant principal) tried to calm him down. Then Mr. Hess came in and he started negotiating with him."

Zack said he and several other students remained in the office for about an hour before getting the attention of a police helicopter.

An "armored vehicle from the SWAT team came up, and I got the attention of the captain, I guess," Zack said. "I put up a sign that said 'One guy with a gun and four people inside including me.' The SWAT guys held up a sign that said jump out the windows," which the students then did.

Zack said he "took the money out of my pockets because I was afraid of making jingling sounds and giv(ing) away my presence."

CRAFT surrendered peacefully at 9:52 a.m. and was taken from the school in handcuffs. Authorities said they negotiated constantly with Craft but did not say what finally persuaded him to surrender.

Police then began going room to room in the combination middle-high school building to clear out about 730 students in grades six through 12, who were taken to a nearby bus garage to assemble. They returned to the school and were dismissed shortly after 2 p.m., about the time they normally are released.

PARENTS WERE told to gather in a parking lot at a restaurant a couple of blocks from the school. Hundreds of people, including parents and

other townspeople, were milling around an intersection near the school.

The population of Pine Plains, which is in northeastern Dutchess County, is about 2,400.

Parent Julie Campanella had two children in the school during the lockdown and was waiting with a group of about 500 people in the middle of state Route 199, about a quarter-mile behind a police line.

"I sent my (ninth-grade) son a text message that I was out here waiting for him, but I knew he was safe," he said. "I had heard even before I left my home that nobody was harmed. I had ... two messages from the school directly to my cell phone informing me that the children were all safe."

Campanella's son Dominick, who graduated earlier this year, said it was difficult to hear that his sixth-grade sister Elisabetta and ninth-grade brother Marco were in the building.

"I had just got out of bed and we just rushed up here," he said. "There have been so many bomb threats over the years that I guarantee you that the kids in there thought it was another fake."

CRAFT, WEARING black jeans and a black T-shirt with an image of a pirate ship on the back at his arraignment, told a judge he was depressed and needed psychiatric care.

"Jail is not the place I need to be," Craft told Pine Plains Town Justice Louis Imperato. The judge didn't respond to the suspect's request and sent him to the Dutchess County Jail without bail.

Several people interviewed at the school said Craft's elder son, also named Christopher, had enlisted in the Army. The Department of Defense confirmed late Tuesday that the son was a motor transportation operator in the Army from December 2006 through June 2009.

The elder Craft was charged with felony kidnapping and also faces charges of criminal possession of a weapon and criminal trespass. Dutchess County Assistant District Attorney Edward Whitesell said the weapons charge will be a felony because Craft "has prior criminal convictions."

Authorities did not provide details of previous criminal allegations against Craft. In 2000, Craft was shot in the shoulder during a dispute over stolen property.

Craft did not enter a plea at his arraignment on Tuesday. A public defender will be assigned to him before his next court appearance, scheduled for Dec. 2.

CRAFT HAS two sons who attended the middle school, but neither is currently enrolled.

"He did not have any of his own children at the school at this time," Whitesell said. "His children had graduated and were out of this school."

CLASSES BEGAN around 7:30 a.m. and Craft walked in a few minutes later, checking in with a receptionist as required, according to Pine Plains Superintendent of Schools Linda Kaumeyer. Craft asked to use the bathroom, where he put the shotgun together, loaded it with one round and headed into the main office, police said.

Zack, the seventh-grader, said one of his friends "was actually in the bathroom when he (Craft) was assembling the shotgun, and he was scared stiff and didn't know what to do."

The incident put the school's lockdown procedure in motion.

HESS WAS the psychologist at the school before becoming principal, said Gregg Pulver, the town supervisor in Pine Plains, indicating the professional experience may have been useful during the standoff.

"He has a great way of handling people, thank God," Pulver said.

WHITESELL SAID authorities were investigating comments by several students that a fight involving a nephew of Craft's had occurred earlier Tuesday, possibly prompting the suspect to show up at the school.

Student Alicia Mata said in a telephone interview from the garage where the students were taken that the fight was between Craft's nephew and another student.

"That is what his nephew here is saying," she said.

Mata said she was in a group of about 30 students directed at first to the cafeteria kitchen, where they remained for about an hour until directed to run out a back door through woods and to the garage.

KAUMEYER said the students handled the incident well.

"Certainly there were some faces of anxiety, but I think once they were with their teachers and once they were told the situation was under control, they acted according to the training that they've gone through," Kaumeyer said.

The school was scheduled to be closed today for Veterans Day, but Kaumeyer said she would consider opening it to provide counseling.

DUTCHESS County Legislator Gary Cooper, a Pine Plains resident with two children in the school, said Craft has a history of hostility problems that could have made the situation worse.

"It could have been a disaster here today, and the thing that is the most upsetting is that you have someone who has been in constant conflict with the law for years, and then something like this ends up happening," Cooper said. "We were lucky today, but the problem, as far as I'm concerned, is the way we handle these people who are constantly in trouble with the law."

STATE Assemblyman Marc Molinaro said a community like Pine Plains, which is unaccustomed to violence, will have to come to grips with what happened on Tuesday.

"It will be necessary to have an ongoing lengthy conversation as a community so that individuals can express their concerns, talk through this," said Molinaro, who lives in nearby Red Hook. He also said it is important to discuss "how we can prevent this from occurring again ... so the citizens feel comfortable."

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