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Suspect shoots officers in head

Blocked-off area traps students

SCOTT DODD, MELISSA MANWARE & DÁNICA COTO

A day of danger and frustration in Charlotte's University City area started and ended with gunfire, leaving a rape suspect wounded and two police officers shot in the head.

One officer is recovering after brain surgery. The other owes his life to a Kevlar helmet.

The seven-hour standoff on W.T. Harris Boulevard snarled traffic throughout a busy section of the city and stranded hundreds of students at school long after classes ended.

It paralyzed a neighborhood as police crouched in backyards and behind squad cars, aiming guns at the two-story house where accused shooter Christopher Ellerbe kept them at bay.

Officer Kayvan Hazrati, 37, a longtime Charlotte-Mecklenburg patrolman who is engaged to be married, was shot in the forehead Wednesday morning while serving a rape warrant at the house on Norcroft Drive.

The bullet bored about three inches into his brain, but it could have been worse, doctors said.

Hazrati and nine other officers -- part of a recently formed task force that apprehends violent criminals -- were looking for Ellerbe, of Sumter County, S.C., who is accused of raping his girlfriend's 18-year-old daughter Tuesday morning.

Ellerbe was hiding out at the home of his brother, Ricky Ellerbe. When police knocked on the door shortly after 11 a.m. Wednesday, the other people in the home came out.

But Christopher Ellerbe stayed inside, police say, and fired several shots, apparently out of a side window. One hit Hazrati in the left side of the forehead, around the hairline.

Hazrati's fellow officers ran into the line of fire to pull him to safety, then put him in the back of a patrol car and raced him to Carolinas Medical Center-University, police say.

After stabilizing him, doctors sent Hazrati in an ambulance to CMC's main hospital, with police cars as an escort.

Seven hours later, he'd be joined at the hospital by the man who police say shot him, now with gunshot wounds of his own.

Serving the warrant

Wednesday's standoff started with an accusation of rape.

Police in Sumter charged Ellerbe with criminal sexual conduct Tuesday, saying he assaulted his girlfriend's daughter after the mother went to work, then threatened to kill her if she told anyone.

The daughter didn't listen, reporting the rape and going to the hospital, according to a police report.

Police looked for Ellerbe, 32, with dogs and a helicopter Tuesday but couldn't find him.

Ellerbe has a criminal record that includes armed robbery. He was sentenced in 1990 to 15 to 25 years in prison. Wednesday's standoff started with an accusation of rape.

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Ellerbe has a criminal record that includes armed robbery. He was sentenced in 1990 to 15 to 25 years in prison, police say. It's unclear how long he served.

The officers who tried to take him into custody Wednesday morning included seven from Charlotte-Mecklenburg police, a Mecklenburg County sheriff's deputy and two federal agents.

They're part of a new unit formed in January under the Street Crimes Task Force, said Capt. Kerr Putney, who oversees the group. Their standard procedure is to approach a suspect's home wearing bulletproof vests, Putney said. When they believe a suspect is armed, they can bring in a SWAT team.

In this case, Putney said, the officers had no reason to believe Ellerbe posed a significant threat, so they followed standard procedure, knocking on the door and calling out the occupants.

A scary injury

The bullet that pierced Hazrati's skull pushed fragments of bone into his brain -- but the impact slowed it down enough to reduce the damage, doctors say.

"If you had to be shot in the head, that's the place to be hit" because of the thickness of the skull, said Dr. Chris Tomaszewski, the emergency room doctor who treated Hazrati.

Doctors weren't sure at first whether they'd take the bullet out. Removing it could do more harm than good, they said.

But during an hour and a half in surgery, neurosurgeon Dr. Hunter Dyer decided the bullet could safely go. "The way he looks now is very encouraging," Dyer said after the operation.

Hazrati will likely be in the hospital for about a week. He was injured in the left frontal lobe, which is responsible for speech and personality.

He was doing well Wednesday evening, moving his feet, lifting his legs and sticking out his tongue. He was able to write and communicate by other means, but had trouble talking.

Doctors aren't sure if the condition is permanent, but said Hazrati may require rehabilitation or future operations.

"It's still real early," Dyer said.

Hazrati's parents live in Myrtle Beach, and officers from there drove his father halfway, where Charlotte officers picked him up. But his mother was in Ohio, visiting relatives.

When Duke Energy's security chief, Mike Frankovich, heard about the problem from off-duty officers who work for Duke, he arranged to have an Ohio company fly her in on a corporate jet.

The long wait

In Charlotte's University City area, the standoff dragged on throughout the afternoon.

Police said one of Ellerbe's brothers also chose to stay inside the house, while officers crouched in a patch of woods in the backyard. Authorities couldn't confirm whether the brother who stayed was the home's owner, Ricky Ellerbe.

People down the street watched on TV as police and news helicopters hovered above. "They came to our door and told us to stay inside," said Donald Green, who lives nearby.

Closing Harris Boulevard meant a traffic nightmare. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools couldn't send about 1,000 students home, because buses couldn't enter the restricted area.

Police talked to the Ellerbes by phone throughout the day, convincing the brother to leave the house about 4:30 p.m. Christopher wouldn't, though, saying he didn't want to go back to jail and talking about suicide.

About 6:30 p.m., police fired pepper gas canisters into the house and forced Christopher Ellerbe onto the back porch. He was wearing a bathrobe and hiding one hand behind his back.

"When he finally showed it, he still had the gun in his hands," police spokesman Keith Bridges said.

Officers told him to drop the weapon, Bridges said, but he charged and fired a shot.

For the second time in eight hours, he hit an officer in the head. This time, the bullet bounced off a helmet, leaving Officer William Parks unhurt.

SWAT Officer Greg Hester returned fire, hitting Ellerbe several times in the lower body and bringing him down, Bridges said.

Ellerbe was conscious when an ambulance took him to Carolinas Medical Center, Bridges said. The injuries didn't appear life-threatening.

Police charged him Wednesday night with attempted murder.

Staff Writers Kytja Weir and Michelle Wayman contributed.