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alized following shootings

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Record Staff Writer

One man is dead and Greene County Sheriff Will Morris is hospitalized with multiple gunshot wounds after an apparent domestic incident turned violent Monday morning.

Edward Morris, 52, was found dead Monday afternoon in his Route 629 home after a state police tactical team entered the house about 3:30 p.m.

Sheriff Morris is in fair condition at the University of Virginia Hospital after Edward Morris apparently shot him with a shotgun, striking him with two pellets, once in the face or neck and once in the back or chest area.

After the Sheriff was wounded, Deputy Dean Fisch, who was accompanying the Sheriff at the time, returned fire into the house, fatally wounding Morris in the neck with one of the shots.

Fisch has been put on administrative leave with pay pending the completed investigation report from the Virginia State Police.

Chief Deputy Phil Thacker, who will run the department during the Sheriff's recovery, said the administrative leave is routine police procedure.

The incident and Fisch's handling of it are being investigated by the Virginia State Police.

"I felt the need to have a neutral department do the investigation of it," Thacker said. "I know everything will be done and there will be no comebacks on the Greene County Sheriff's Department."

The official determination whether Fisch acted properly, however, will be made by Commonwealth's Attorney Dan Bouton, Thacker said.

"When the first shot came out of the door, the deputy would have been perfectly justified in shooting through the front door," Thacker said.

This incident marks the first time since Sheriff Morris took office in 1983 that any member of the department has fired a shot in the line of duty, Thacker said.

"Naturally, none of us want anything like this (injury or death in the line of duty) to happen, but you have to protect your own," Thacker said in a statement to reporters Tuesday.

Morris has made a consistent point of sending two officers on domestic calls because of the extreme risks involved.

"Any time we go on a domestic situation, we know the violence and hostility is there...It's a violent situation anytime you get into a domestic," Thacker

said.

The incident apparently began Sunday with some sort of domestic dispute between Edward Morris and his wife Arbutus.

Thacker said deputies from the department responded to a call from Arbutus Morris Sunday evening. The deputies found her at a neighbors house and had no contact with Edward Morris at the time, Thacker said.

Edward Morris is no direct relation to Will Morris, although both are natives of Greene County.

When Mrs. Morris attempted to return to her home to retrieve her car the next morning, she requested Sheriff's Department assistance.

When Mrs. Morris arrived at the house about 11 a.m., accompanied by Fisch and Sheriff Morris, Edward Morris allegedly opened fire with a 12-gauge shotgun.

Contrary to initial press reports and rumors, Fisch and the Sheriff were not bearing any sort of warrants or court papers to serve on Morris.

"They were not going there to arrest Mr. Morris," Thacker said. "To the best of my knowledge, they had no plans to even talk to Mr. Morris."

The first shot, fired through the front door, struck two private vehicles parked in the front of the house.

Both the Sheriff and Fisch drew their weapons and sought cover, Thacker said.

The Sheriff attempted to talk Morris out of the house peacefully, said Thacker, but the man fired a second shot, this time through a closed bedroom window.

Two pellets from the second shot struck the Sheriff, Thacker said.

Fisch then returned fire, shooting off three nine-millimeter rounds into the house, Thacker said.

Sheriff Morris was able to reach the radio in his own car to summon help.

Back-up units from the Sheriff's Department arrived minutes later, finding the Sheriff alive and conscious, behind cover on the ground in front of the house.

Thacker said Deputy Donny Conley drove another police vehicle up to Morris, allowing the Sheriff and Mrs. Morris to crawl into the back seat.

After he was removed from the immediate vicinity of the house, Morris was transported to the University of Virginia Hospital by the Greene County

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Rescue Squad.

Fisch remained on the ground, under cover from possible fire from the house, until a Virginia State Police armored car arrived on the scene and retrieved him about an hour later.

Thacker said he was unable to achieve any sort of contact with the apparent gunman inside the house.

Shortly after noon, State Police tactical teams arrived on the scene and began preparations for a possible assault on the house.

Thacker said the tactical teams of the Fairfax and Culpeper State Police Districts happened to be engaged in joint training exercises nearby, so they were available to assist the local tactical team in the operation.

Several times throughout the afternoon, family members were brought forward in the armored car to talk through a loudspeaker to Morris, but there was to be no response to any attempt.

The armored car was on loan from the Culpeper headquarters, since the car for Greene's district is based in Appomattox, several hours drive away.

Scores of officers from law enforcement agencies all over the area responded to the incident, including members of departments in Albemarle, Madison, Rappahannock, as well as regular State Police officers from all over central Virginia.

Two Greene County Rescue Squad units stood by near the scene and a Ruckersville Volunteer Fire Company Truck was on alert.

Two local grocery stores, Payton's Market and the Greene County IGA, provided food and drinks for the small army of officers in and around the area.

After several hours of quiet at the scene, the tactical team moved on the house, covered by the sound of a hovering State Police helicopter.

The officers fired more than 30 rounds of tear-gas pellets into the building before advancing.

After entering the house, the officers found Morris dead in the living room, Thacker said.

It appears, Thacker said, that Morris was struck by a bullet that came through the bedroom window and was able to make his way into the living room before he died.

Thacker said he did not know the precise time of death, but he estimated, based on the wound, that Morris did not live more than five minutes after the original incident.

After the assault on the house, the family members of the slain man accused the State Police of using the helicopter to mask the sounds of gunfire directed against Morris.

The State Police, however, deny firing any potentially lethal weapons in the operation, a contention borne out by the results of the State Medical Examiner's report.

Just before the police entered the house, observers at the scene clearly heard two blasts that were noticeably louder and sharper than the reports from the tear gas shots.

Thacker explained that these two shots were not conventional rounds, but were special nonlethal

rounds known as percussion rounds, intended to stun the occupant of the house with a strong blast wave.

Family members also accused the police of not allowing them to negotiate a peaceful end to the crisis.

Morris' sister, Gertie Williams, said that Morris, had he been alive, would not have shot her or other members of the family had they been allowed to approach the house.

Thacker said, however, that the State Police had feared a hostage situation if the family had been allowed to approach the house unprotected.

"We did not know what state of mind Mr. Morris was in," Thacker said. "We don't know if he would have shot the family members as well."

Family members said Morris was a gun collector and he had 28 large guns and five handguns in the house.

In addition to the gun found with the body inside the house, police found two loaded shotguns in the bedroom and two loaded shotguns in the living room, Thacker said.

On Tuesday, Thacker said he had not had a chance to investigate Morris to determine if he had any criminal history, but the slain man's sister-in-law said Morris had no history of violent or unpredictable behavior.

She said, however, that Morris had suffered a heart attack several months ago and had been on medication, plus his brother had died recently.

On several occasions Thacker expressed his appreciation to other area departments for their assistance. He said the State Police and members of several local law enforcement agencies have volunteered to make up for any manpower shortages resulting from the incident.

"We're pulling together (in the department)," Thacker said. "Everybody is willing to carry more than their load at this point."

Thacker said it is fortunate that the Greene County Sheriff's Department has been allowed to switch from .38 caliber revolvers to the new 9mm pistols. He said the older revolvers may not have been adequate in this situation.

Thacker said Morris is suffering a broken jaw as a result of one of the shots, and that it is uncertain how long he will be out of action.

According to Wednesday's edition of the Charlottesville **Daily Progress**, the Sheriff's chief surgeon, W. Copley McLean, a piece of shot, after hitting the Sheriff's face, broke the left jawbone and became imbedded in his neck, fracturing one vertebra.

McLean said Sheriff Morris could have been paralyzed from the neck down if the shot had landed a few millimeters in either direction.

Sheriff Morris will have his jaw wired shut for five to six weeks, said McLean, and he may be able to return to work in six to eight weeks.

"It's a trying situation for Sheriff Morris and the community," Commonwealth's Attorney Dan Bouton said, "He was doing his duty."

"He (Morris) is obviously a man of great physical courage," he said.