



Ohio Attorney General's Office
Bureau of Criminal Investigation
Investigative Report



2024-2255

Officer Involved Critical Incident – 818 Cherryberry Dr.,
Columbus, OH 43228 (L)

Investigative Activity: Interview with Officer
Involves: Officer Robert Vass (W)
Date of Activity: 08/26/2024
Activity Location: – 2609 McKinley Ave., Columbus, OH 43204
Author: SA James Poole

Narrative:

On Monday, August 26, 2024 at 1245 hours, Ohio Bureau of Criminal Investigation (BCI) Special Agents James Poole (SA Poole) and Aja Chung (SA Chung) interviewed Officer Robert Vass (Ofc. Vass), of the Columbus Division of Police (CPD) at 2609 McKinley Avenue, Columbus, Ohio. Ofc. Vass was identified as a member of the CPD Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) Red team that responded to a barricade situation that occurred on Thursday, August 1st, 2024. The barricade situation stemmed from a domestic dispute involving Benjamin Wheeler (Wheeler), who died from his injuries. Also present during the interview was Ofc. Vass' union attorney, Nicole Wannemacher. The purpose of the interview was to obtain all relevant information of the incident known or observed by [REDACTED]

Prior to the start of the interview, SA Poole advised Ofc. Vass that BCI was conducting a criminal investigation separate from any internal investigation that CPD may be conducting. Ofc. Vass was told that this interview was voluntary, and he could stop answering questions at any time. Ofc. Vass verbally agreed to continue with the interview.

This interview was audio recorded, and a copy of the recording was saved electronically within the case file. Please refer to the recording for specific quotes. The following is a summation of the interview.

Ofc. Vass advised that he has worked for CPD for 32 years, his shift is from 1800 hours to 0200 hours with Friday and Saturday leave days. Ofc. Vass' badge number is 1780 and he is a member of the CPD SWAT Red Team (call sign 546). On the night of August 1st, 2024, Ofc. Vass confirmed he was on-duty and drove CPD SWAT vehicle ARV-1/BearCat 1 to the scene. Ofc. Vass explained because he was on-duty, his role was to bring the equipment to the scene and the team members (green team) that were called to the scene were to provide containment and entry. Ofc. Vass advised the dash camera was functioning/recording during the incident. Ofc. Vass stated he was wearing a body worn camera and it was powered on

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Approved By SAS James A. Mulford on
09/30/2024

during the incident. Vass did not wear his helmet during the incident. He was carrying his Glock 17 and his taser.

Ofc. Vass then told BCI agents what he witnessed on August 1st, 2024. Ofc. Vass explained there was a barricade situation after CPD patrol units attempted to arrest a subject (Wheeler).

Ofc. Vass confirmed his role was to maintain control of the BearCat until the conclusion of the barricade situation unless there are extenuating circumstances. Ofc. Vass said he positioned the SWAT vehicle on the front door side. By positioning the BearCat by the front door, it would also assist the team with negotiations/announcements and to provide cover for the responding green team members.

Ofc. Vass indicated he installed the ram on the front of ARV-1. Once there were enough SWAT personnel on scene (entry and arrest team), he started announcements on the Long-Range Audio Device (L-RAD). Ofc. Vass confirmed he had no contact with Wheeler other than seeing Wheeler shutting a window. Ofc. Vass explained his announcements include the subject's name, advises the subject is under arrest, tells anyone inside to come to the front door with nothing in their hands and to follow the instructions of the officers outside. He also announces that nobody wants to hurt them or be hurt and to come to the front door. Ofc. Vass went on saying the announcements may vary from incident to incident, but he keeps repeating the aforementioned commands until the subject comply with the orders.

Ofc. Vass advised once the negotiator arrived, they took over announcements. During that time, he maintained his position in the driver's seat and continued to watch for movement inside the house.

Ofc. Vass indicated a plan to breach the front door was made by using the ram on the front of the BearCat. Ofc. Vass drove the BearCat with the ram into the front causing it to break open. Once the door was breached, Ofc. Vass saw Wheeler trying to shut the door. Ofc. Vass advised he tactfully pushed the door and other contents Wheeler had placed against the front door out of the way. Ofc. Vass explained he did that so the entry team would have a clear pathway into the house.

Ofc. Vass stated shortly after the breach of the front door, a drone was deployed, Wheeler began throwing objects (frying pan, a candle and a piece of wood) at the BearCat. Ofc. Vass stated Wheeler threw a knife at the BearCat windshield which caused it to crack. Ofc. Vass added that Wheeler never appeared to be calm, made aggressive movements, and at times, Wheeler would scream.

Ofc. Vass said gas was deployed into the house and there was roughly 15 minutes where Ofc. Vass had no visual of anything inside the house due to the gas in the air.

Ofc. Vass explained a few team members approached the front door to arrest Wheeler at the doorway. Ofc. Vass could see Wheeler retreat further back into the residence, specifically into the kitchen. Ofc. Vass could see directly into the kitchen but explained how the wall blocked his view on the right side of the kitchen.

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Ofc. Vass went on saying announcements continued as another plan was formed and that he maintained his position in the driver's seat of the BearCat.

Ofc. Vass said when the team approached and made entry, he lost sight of Wheeler but could hear tasers and possible gunshots being fired. Ofc. Vass said he saw [REDACTED] "go down". Ofc. Vass was unaware if [REDACTED] tripped/fell from an object or if he was shot or stabbed. Ofc. Vass saw that [REDACTED] did not move after falling. This is when Ofc. Vass made the decision to exit the BearCat and retrieve [REDACTED]

Ofc. Vass handed [REDACTED] over to the medics at the rear of the BearCat and then returned to his position in the driver's seat. Ofc. Vass confirmed he stayed in that position until it was confirmed the incident was "over".

SA Poole asked Ofc. Vass if he or other team members acted in a criminal nature. Ofc. Vass stated, "No, sir."

SA Poole asked Ofc. Vass if he or other team members violated any CPD policy or procedure. Ofc. Vass stated, "No."

The interview concluded at approximately 1306 hours.

Attachments:

Attachment # 01: Robert Vass Interview