

Dash-cams capture parts of failed negotiations - Trentonian, The (Trenton, NJ) - April 11, 2018

April 11, 2018 | Trentonian, The (Trenton, NJ) | Isaac Avilucea

TRENTON - Panera Bread gunman Scott Mielentz knew he would be killed during an hourslong standoff with police last month when he barricaded himself inside the restaurant wielding what turned out to be a BB pistol.

"I'm gonna die," a distressed Mielentz is heard yelling at officers.

Stretches of the tense five-hour-long standoff were captured by Princeton Police officers' dash-camera audio released by the state Attorney General to The Trentonian through a public records request.

Princeton cops are equipped with external microphones hooked up to dash cams that allowed officers to capture Mielentz's dramatic interactions with cops and negotiators who tried to get him to surrender before state police troopers William Kerstetter and Joseph Trogani fatally shot him in the head and torso with M4 rifles around 2:54 p.m. inside the Nassau Street restaurant across from Princeton University.

A negotiator is heard asking Mielentz if he believed in a higher power, quoting scripture to try to calm him down and even plying him with cigarettes.

"We must pass through enormous suffering before we find hope," the negotiator said at one point, emphasizing he was there to "help you get the help that you need."

"I don't doubt for a second you've been through a lot," the negotiator said. "I can tell by the tone of your voice. ... I'm committed to helping you 110 percent. I care about you."

The audio provided an incomplete account of the negotiations during the standoff since parts of conversations with Mielentz cut out or are drowned out by radio chatter. The videos released to The Trentonian ended around 11:24 a.m., leaving more than two hours of negotiations unaccounted for including the moments before Mielentz was killed.

In the audio obtained and reviewed by The Trentonian, Mielentz, a former IT worker who was battling mental health problems that caused him to fall deeply into debt, is faintly heard complaining to officers about being unemployed and losing his house and wife.

Officers implored Mielentz to drop his weapon and take it away from his head but they couldn't get him to peacefully surrender, authorities said.

Surveillance footage from inside the restaurant released earlier this week showed Mielentz raising and pointing what appeared to be black handgun at state troopers staked out inside the

restaurant. More footage from different angles inside the restaurant obtained by The Trentonian showed cops hugging and shaking hands inside the restaurant after the shooting.

After fatally shooting Mielentz, cops discovered the gun was a BB pistol, officials said. They also discovered Mielentz's backpack as a bomb-sniffing dog was brought in to clear the restaurant.

The dash-cam audio from Princeton Police officers Jennifer Gering and Sgt. Thomas Lagomarsino captured the first hour or so of the standoff that started around 10:30 a.m. when one of the first 911 calls came in.

Police came into contact with Mielentz around 10:31 a.m.

Dash-cam video captured the inside and outside of the patrol car as Gering, who first encountered Mielentz, raced to the restaurant. She is heard telling colleagues she could see Mielentz from her position outside the restaurant.

"Where is he?" Gering says before shouting, "Gun, gun, gun. He's got a gun. He just pointed it at me."

Gering didn't open fire despite saying Mielentz pointed the gun in her direction.

As officers closed in and set up a perimeter to contain the Panera gunman inside the restaurant, many cops repeatedly shouted for Mielentz to drop his weapon.

Cops communicated about Mielentz's movements, as the gunman paced back and forth inside the store, apparently ducking behind the counter and then reappearing.

Mielentz pointed the gun toward his head during the standoff. At one point, he shouted at officers, "I'm gonna die."

"You're not gonna die," one of the officers responded. "We all want to go home today, sir. We can help you, sir. We don't want to hurt you. Let us help you. We know you're going through a hard time."

Authorities called for a negotiator and state police SWAT team around 10:35 a.m.

The negotiator arrived with officers from the state police's Technical Emergency and Missions Specialists (TEAMS), and the negotiator was first heard on the dash-cam audio at 10:47 a.m.

The AG's office wouldn't name the negotiator heard on the tape, claiming he was one of many who tried to get Mielentz to give himself up.

The negotiator told Mielentz he was "willing to go the distance" to ensure he came away unharmed.

He tried reasoning with Mielentz, who identified himself as an Army veteran, by telling him he was in the presence of two combat vets, including a Purple Heart recipient.

Mielentz at one point appeared to tell the negotiator he wouldn't hurt him. The gunman complained of being out of work.

Court records showed he filed for Chapter 7 bankruptcy claiming more than \$122,000 in debt. The feds went after him for disability fraud, claiming he was working while getting benefits.

Mielentz, who had described himself as a Vietnam vet suffering from hallucinations and flashbacks, told the negotiator he was in pain and wanted medication.

Apparently seated for parts of the standoff, Mielentz unnerved cops when he suddenly stood up.

"We were making progress," the negotiator said, trying to get him to sit back down. "Now we took a step back. Have another smoke and let's talk some more."

Editor's Note: Video was edited by The Trentonian before posting to YouTube to just include pertinent clips.

Copyright 2018, Trentonian, The (Trenton, NJ) - a Journal Register Company Property, All Rights Reserved.