



Hate fuels rampage, police say

A man is accused of using racial slurs while shooting at a black man and under arrest, as well as firing at a house.

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TARPON SPRINGS - A 24-year old man who police say cast a spray of bullets and racial violence across city streets Monday evening was in custody before daybreak.

Officials say they got the first sign of Robert J. Mueller's criminal rampage at 8:45 p.m., when 911 operators fielded a call from a 47-year-old man on Lime Street who had just been shot.

The shooter had long since vanished by the time police arrived at the 500 block of Lime Street. But before getting whisked off to Bayfront Medical Center in St. Petersburg, John L. Murray told officers that the bullet in the back of his shoulder was fired by a man driving a late-model Honda with some rear body damage.

Murray said he and his friend - both of whom are African-American - had a short exchange with the woman in the passenger seat and were walking away from the car when the driver - who is white - took out his gun.

Witnesses told police the driver fired two shots, shouted a racial slur and hit the gas pedal.

Two hours later, another 911 call arrived. Reports of more gunfire from a late-model Honda with rear body damage.

This time, the target was a house on North Walton Street. Police said neither the woman nor the child inside at the time were injured, but declined to disclose identifying details because of the ongoing investigation.

The woman's husband told police he believed the shooter was a man with whom he had been having an ongoing financial dispute. He directed police to a house on East Center Street, where Mueller had been staying on and off.

Upon entering the house, police said they found Mueller, as well as Tom Muessig, 49, the resident of the house, who Mueller had severely beaten sometime that evening. Hidden in the rear, beneath an air conditioner, officers said they found a Smith & Wesson .357 Magnum.

Mueller was arrested and booked in Pinellas County Jail about 7:45 a.m. Tuesday, with bail set at \$230,000.

He is charged with battery, shooting at an occupied dwelling and attempted murder, which police are officially considering a "hate crime," an aggravating factor. Mueller used racial slurs at the shooting, and police said, toward an officer after his arrest.

A police spokesman listed Mueller's "interaction with blacks in the Pinellas County Jail during a recent incarceration" as a third factor, but said further details were not available Tuesday.

Mueller was arrested three times in 2006, but records show he was convicted only once. For failing to appear in court on third-degree burglary charges, Mueller was sentenced to 120 days in jail.