# OFFICE OF THE COMMONWEALTH'S ATTORNEY



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May 31, 2024

#### VIA EMAIL

Charles A. Penn Chief of Police, Arlington County 1425 N. Courthouse Rd. Arlington, VA 22201 cpenn@arlingtonva.us

#### RE: DECLINATION REPORT FOR 844 N. BURLINGTON ST. EXPLOSION

#### Dear Chief Penn:

I write to address the December 4, 2023, explosion of 844 and 846 N. Burlington St. After careful review of materials provided by the Critical Incident Response Team (CIRT) and independent investigation by my office, I have made the decision to decline prosecution because I find that there is no basis in law or fact that supports criminal charges.

You will find a complete analysis below.

Sincerely,

Parisa Dehghani-Tafti

Commonwealth's Attorney

#### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

On December 4, 2023, at 8:24 p.m., the house at 844 N. Burlington St. in Arlington County, Virginia exploded, destroying the adjoining property with it. The incident began at 4:44 p.m., when an officer of the Arlington County Police Department (ACPD) heard shots being fired as he was drafting a report in his cruiser nearby at Fire Station 2. The officer followed the sound of the shots and learned they were coming from a private residence: 844 N. Burlington St. While looking for the source of the shots, the officer encountered neighbors who gave him some background on the sole resident of 844 N. Burlington St. The neighbors reported that the resident was reclusive, possibly had weapons, and had recently received large amounts of charcoal, lighter fluid, and bleach and cleaning supplies. Other ACPD officers responding to the scene then observed someone reaching out of a second-story window on the back side of the house and firing flares with a pistol-style flare gun. The backyard of 844 N. Burlington St. opens up to a public soccer field. Several of the fired flare rounds landed in traffic on N. George Mason Drive, a major thoroughfare on the other side of the field.

ACPD decided to pursue an arrest and continue investigating. They learned 844 N. Burlington St. is a two-story duplex with a basement. It adjoins 846 N. Burlington St. Arriving at 844 N. Burlington St., ACPD officers knocked on the front door of 844, identified themselves as police officers, and asked James Yoo, the homeowner, to stop firing the flares. No one answered the door, and the flares continued. ACPD then entered the back porch of the adjoining property, identified themselves again and asked Mr. Yoo to stop firing flares. ACPD telephoned and texted him, called family members, and finally left voicemail messages for known family members who could be located. ACPD evacuated 846 and 848 N. Burlington St. They obtained a search warrant for 844 N. Burlington St. and turned off the house's access to natural gas.

Once the search warrant was in hand at 844 N. Burlington St., ACPD loudly announced themselves to Mr. Yoo via a Public Announcement (PA) system, warned him that they intended to breach the front door, and ordered him to come out of the residence with his hands empty and up. Mr. Yoo did not come out, and ACPD breached the front door using a BearCat with a ramming pole. Mr. Yoo again did not come out, but instead fired two sets of 17 gunshots from inside the house. ACPD heard a voice from the house demanding they get out and appeared to have heard something about "surrender" from inside the house. Mr. Yoo still did not come out of the residence. ACPD fired 16 rounds of projectiles filled with chemical agents toward and into the residence, while continuously commanding Mr. Yoo to exit through the front door and surrender.

At 8:24 p.m., approximately three hours and forty minutes after officers first arrived at 844 N. Burlington St., an explosion began in the basement and demolished the residence, as well as most of the adjoining property of 846 N. Burlington St. Several other residences sustained some degree of damage. The next day, Mr. Yoo was found deceased under the rubble. An autopsy performed by the Office of the Medical Examiner determined the cause of death to be thermal injuries and blunt force trauma; there was no indication that there was a self-inflicted or other wound.

Pursuant to a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) executed in 2021, 11 Northern Virginia law enforcement agencies form the CIRT to investigate deadly use of force and incustody deaths, so that the agency involved in the incident is not placed in the position of investigating itself. Although the law enforcement agency involved in the incident serves as liaison, the CIRT leads the investigations. Here, the CIRT and ATF investigators determined Mr. Yoo possessed two shotguns, a 9mm pistol, two flare guns, two empty grenades, extended magazines, and large quantities of ammunition and flares. ATF and ACFD determined that it appeared Mr. Yoo poured gasoline in the basement. They concluded that fresh air was introduced into the house from ACPD's breach of the front door. This action changed the ratio of gasoline vapor to air and most likely created the conditions that allowed an unknown ignition source to lead to the explosion. ATF and ACFD also concluded that the blast seat for the explosion was located near Mr. Yoo's body, though they were unable to isolate the exact source of the ignition. ACPD officers did not discharge their firearms at any point during the incident. ATF confirmed that the Ferret rounds fired into the house were not flammable. No other possible source of ignition from the ACPD was identified.

Upon receipt of the CIRT's reports, the Office of the Commonwealth's Attorney conducted an independent review of the evidence gathered in the investigation, including review of the Body-Worn Cameras (BWC), interviews of police officers on the scene, police reports, photographs, Autopsy Report, lab analyses, and the Origin and Cause Report from the ATF and Arlington County Fire Marshal. The Office of the Commonwealth's Attorney conducted three independent interviews and retained an outside, non-law enforcement expert to review the evidence concerning the cause and origin of the explosion.

The purpose of this report is to analyze whether criminal charges should be filed against ACPD officers for the death of Mr. Yoo. This report concludes no criminal charges are warranted. Specifically, this report finds, under applicable statute and case law, given the information they had at the time, officers on the scene at 844 N. Burlington St. acted reasonably in light of what they believed was a significant threat posed by Mr. Yoo. The report also finds that officers on scene had probable cause to use force because the

Magistrate had issued a search warrant, and a reasonable observer would consider that Mr. Yoo posed a significant danger to the general public.

This report does not analyze or comment upon questions regarding ACPD policies or best practices. Those issues are best left to the Independent Policing Auditor and the Community Oversight Board, which will undertake a review of the incident. Nor does this report address questions of civil liability, which are best left to the courts.

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- 9. ACPD Secure Teams Chat Transcript (not reviewed by CIRT)

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10. ACPD Secure What's App Chat Transcription (not reviewed by CIRT)

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#### GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS AND TERMS

306: Full custody arrest

**ACFD:** Arlington County Fire Department **ACPD:** Arlington County Police Department

ATF: United States Department of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives

**BearCat:** Wheeled, armored vehicle used by military and police to protect against small arms, improvised explosive device (IED) threats, explosives, and high-caliber assault rifles, among other things; the primary police use is to transport tactical officers to and from hostile situations and assist with recovery and protection of civilians during terrorist threats **Blast Seat:** point of explosion

**BWC**: Body-worn camera, worn by the majority of ACPD officers on their chest. BWC can be turned on and off manually but ACPD policy requires BWC to be activated and recording during emergency and investigative work. BWC can be live-streamed as well as recorded

**CIRT:** Critical Incident Response Team

**CNU**: Crisis Negotiation Unit, resolves high-risk criminal events, conducts research on history, collects intelligence, engages in negotiation, and is part of the Emergency Response Team

DHS: Department of Human Services for Arlington County

**ECO**: Emergency Custody Order, issued by a magistrate authorizing a person to be taken into custody and transported for forensic evaluation to determine and assess the need for hospitalization and treatment due to mental illness, inability to care for themselves, or cause serious harm to themselves or others, pursuant to Virginia Code § 37.2-808.

**ERT**: Emergency Response Team, sworn personnel with advanced training and skills in emergency-response type situations, deployed as a team. Oversees SWAT and CNU.

FBI: Federal Bureau of Investigation

**Ferret Gas:** Non-pyrotechnic chemical (power or liquid) short range projectiles designed to penetrate barriers such as windows, drywall, or doors and release gas payload and dispense a tear agent

LCFR: Loudoun County Combined Fire and Rescue System

MOU: Memorandum of Understanding

**NFPA 921:** National Fire Protection Association Guide for Fire and Explosion Investigations

**PA** System: public address system with amplifier, microphone, loudspeakers, and related equipment designed to increase the volume of the human voice

**SWAT**: Special Weapons And Tactics, part of ACPD's tactical response

TOC: Tactical Operations Center Personnel, part of the Emergency Response team.

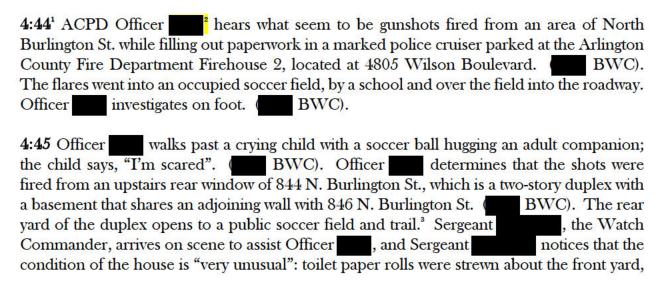
Comprised of sworn personnel responsible for gathering intelligence and managing logistics when the ERT is activated

## INTRODUCTION

This report proceeds in four sections: Section I opens with a timeline of the events; Section II lays out the factual findings of the investigation; Section III analyzes the relevant legal standard; and Section IV outlines the conclusions and decision of the Office of the Commonwealth's Attorney.

The timeline below is organized in chronological order, beginning at 4:44 p.m. when an ACPD officer first heard what initially sounded like gunshots in the neighborhood of 844 N. Burlington St., and ending at 8:24 p.m. when the residence exploded. Unless otherwise noted, events described take place outside 844 N. Burlington St. The timeline is reconstructed from the sources cited above.

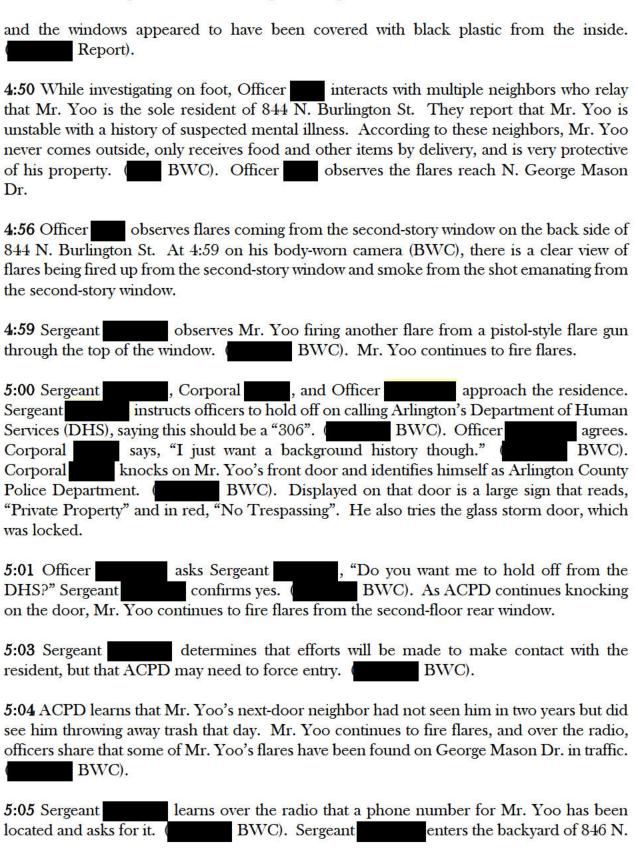
## I. TIMELINE



<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> All times are p.m. unless otherwise noted.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Because approximately 73 officers responded or were otherwise involved in this incident, at the request of ACPD, the names are redacted for officers' safety, but officer ranks are included. In addition, again at the request of ACPD, information ACPD considers tactically sensitive is also redacted.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> See Figure 1.

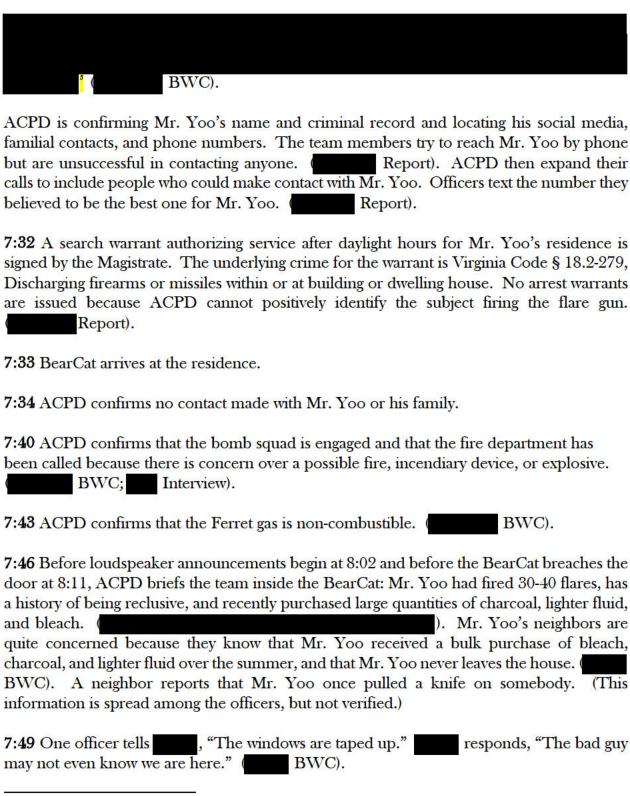


Burlington St. with the neighbor's permission, and from the neighbor's back deck, he observes toilet paper and bleach or cleaning solution bottles all over the backyard. (Report).
5:06 Sergeant , with his weapon drawn, announces loudly he is ACPD and instructs Mr. Yoo to stop shooting flares. (BWC). He addresses Mr. Yoo by name and asks if he can hear him. (BWC). Mr. Yoo continues to fire flares. Sergeant uses his mobile phone to take a video of Mr. Yoo shooting flares. Foot traffic is heavy, so ACPD officers close off Bluemont Junction Trail, which runs behind Fire Station 2. ACPD observes that the windows of the house are covered with black plastic from the inside. (BWC).
5:09 Multiple neighbors note Mr. Yoo threw various items out of the window that day. A neighbor says the postal carrier has noted the inhabitant receives "end-of-world type magazines," may be a veteran, and may have weapons. The neighbors report Mr. Yoo (some don't know his name) is reclusive, "looks at people funny," keeps to himself, and keeps his "windows all wrapped up." BWC). Sergeant and ACPD officers all go out into the field. Into his radio, Sergeant states that ACPD can try a quick phone call once but they "gotta end this." BWC). (No flares are observed after 5:09, after approximately 41 flare rounds are heard on BWC.)
5:11 ACPD makes arrangements for the use of non-lethal force.
5:13 Sergeant realizes Mr. Yoo has not been called on the telephone. He attempts to make arrangements for Mr. Yoo to be called. BWC).
5:18 ACPD appears to make contact by phone and determines it is a wrong number.
5:20 Sergeant transfers BWC to Corporal whose BWC has run out of battery. (References will continue to be BWC because video is tagged as Sergeant.)
5:26 ACPD makes two announcements over a PA system that occupants of 844 Burlington St. come outside and meet the ACPD on the front steps of the residence.
5:28 Officers discuss possible charges. (BWC). An officer relays that Mr. Yoo once pulled a knife on a neighbor in defense of his home when there were discussions of the house being sold (but this information remains unconfirmed). (BWC).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> See Figure 2.

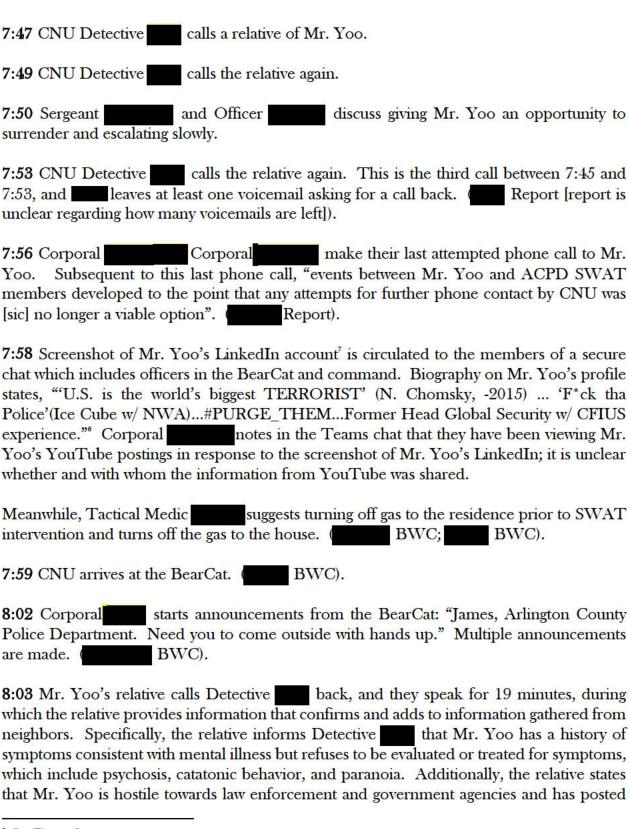
5:30 ACPD officers discuss Mr. Yoo's possible mental health status.

5:35 ACPD begins a SWAT consult and confirms that the flares required combustion to be fired. BWC). Shortly after, ACPD discusses bringing a negotiating team into the process. When SWAT begins their tactical response, there have been no flares fired since 5:09, and no success in reaching Mr. Yoo by knocking on his door, calling him or his family, texting, and calling out to him.
5:52 ACPD officers consider whether, based on the remarks made by Mr. Yoo's neighbors, an ECO route is appropriate. (BWC).
6:00 Detective responds to the area of 844 N. Buchanan St. shortly after 6:00 p.m. in her capacity as a member of the Crisis Negotiation Unit and helps gather intelligence on Mr. Yoo. Report).
6:07 Officers discuss use of less lethal forms of force and make a plan for escalation if necessary.
6:15 CNU attempts to gather more information about Mr. Yoo from family members, but are not successful reaching anyone.
6:22 Lights are believed to be on inside, but officers are unable to confirm from outside because of the window coverings. (BWC).
6:40 Corporal says to a female officer, "
BWC).
7:00 Lieutenant arrives on scene and requests ACFD's medical and Bomb Squad. ACPD also requests the BearCat. Lieutenant establishes a plan of action for the incident involving
7:21 CNU makes multiple attempts at phone calls; all are without success.
7:22 Sergeant asks if there is a warrant yet; there is not. (BWC).  Lieutenant states, "Even with the search warrant, we still gotta knock and announce."  BWC). "We can do that from the PA."



<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Ferret gas is often referred to as "gas" by ACPD. Investigation by the CIRT revealed that ACPD did not use flammable materials when officers breached the residence, and there is no indication that ACPD used any flammable materials.

Interview).

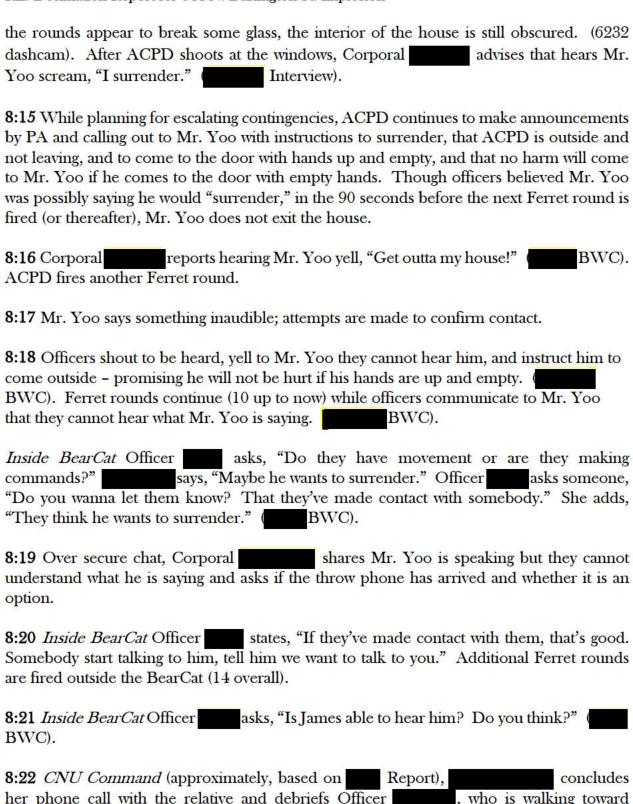


See Figure 3.

on LinkedIn and YouTube about his feelings. The relative also indicates that Mr. Yoo's parents are deceased, but that Mr. Yoo loved his mother very much. The relative provides with several email addresses for Mr. Yoo. The phone call ends at approximately 8:22. Unfortunately, CNU was about to share the information gathered with command when the house exploded. 8:05 Bright flood lights continue and loud playing of sirens begins in addition to blue and red emergency lights. (BWC). ACPD announces search warrant (and continues to do so multiple times throughout). 8:11 "James, the police department is going to break your front door. Move away from your BWC). BearCat breaches Mr. Yoo's front door with the ram. BWC; 6232 dashcam). Mr. Yoo shoots approximately 17 gunshots after the breach. (6232 dashcam). No shots appear to leave the house or ricochet. BWC). The second round of 17 shots are fired from inside the house, less than 10 seconds after the first set of shots ends. Mr. Yoo does not appear to have fired any shots outside the house towards ACPD, as no bullets reach or ricochet to areas where police are located. ( 8:12 Mr. Yoo is believed to be yelling something to the effect of, "stop messing with my house or fucking with my house." (Interview). Officers hear what they believe is Mr. Yoo yelling four or five times, "surrender" or "I'm surrendering." (Interview). 8:13 ACPD hears a gunshot sound from inside the house. ( BWC). Sergeant says, "We're gonna break some stuff here." 8:14 Ferret (gas) rounds are shot by ACPD, . (CIRT PowerPoint; Report). In shooting gas rounds, ACPD use 40 mm Powder Barricade Rounds filled with Oleoresin Capsicum (OC); 40 mm Liquid Barricade Penetrator Rounds filled with OC; 40 mm Powder Barricade Rounds filled with CS;<sup>8</sup> and 40 mm Liquid Barricade Penetrator Rounds. (Report). While some of

<sup>&</sup>quot;"OC" is also known as pepper spray. R. David Tidwell & Brandon K. Wills, *Tear Gas and Pepper Spray Toxicity*, Nat'l Libr. of Med. (May 14, 2023), <a href="https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK544263/">https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK544263/</a>. When coming into contact with a person's eyes, pepper spray causes "immediate eye closure, acute eye pain, and temporary blindness." Jamie Smith, *What is pepper spray, and is it dangerous?*, Med. News Today, "https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/238262"https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/238262 (last updated Apr. 24, 2023). Pepper spray can also create an inability to breathe and speak, as well as a bubbling or boiling sensation in the eyes. *Id.* 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> CS is also known as "o-chlorobenzylidenemalononitrile," or tear gas. R. David Tidwell & Brandon K. Wills, *Tear Gas and Pepper Spray Toxicity*, Nat'l Libr.of Med. (May 14, 2023), <a href="https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK544263/">https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK544263/</a>.



command to debrief CNU about the call when the explosion occurs. It is not apparent that

the contents of the call were transmitted or received by command or communicated to the officers at 844 N. Burlington St. Outside 844, ACPD makes additional announcements.

**8:23** ACPD fires additional Ferret rounds (16 overall), makes announcements, and issues warning. Notice of communication with Mr. Yoo's relative circulated on the secure Teams chat, which included supervisors of the ERT, CNU, and TOC.

8:24:34 BearCat begins to maneuver toward the house.

8:24:36 Explosion begins from southwest corner of house, from the basement.

#### II. FACTUAL FINDINGS

## Critical Incident Review Team Investigation

In the aftermath of the explosion, the CIRT convened to investigate the circumstances surrounding Mr. Yoo's death while ACPD was attempting to execute a search warrant. In this vein, the CIRT investigated ACPD's use of force to apprehend Mr. Yoo. Here, the CIRT was led by First Sergeant of the Prince William Police Department, in collaboration with Detective (City of Fairfax Police Department) and Sergeant (City of Falls Church Police Department), and the CIRT was comprised of officers from the Prince William County Police Department, the City of Fairfax Police Department, the City of Falls Church Police Department, and the Manassas Park Police Department. The CIRT was assisted by the United States Department of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), Arlington County Fire Department (ACFD), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and the Loudoun County Combined Fire and Rescue System (LCFR).

## **Explosion Origin and Cause Determination**

The ATF, in collaboration with the CIRT, the Arlington County Fire Marshal's Office, and the Loudoun County Fire Marshal's Office, conducted an origin and cause investigation of the fire and explosion and concluded that the explosion was incendiary, caused by Mr. Yoo. This conclusion was based on the recommended method of investigation laid out in the NFPA 921 Guide for Fire & Explosion Investigations:

The systematic pursuit of knowledge involving the recognition and definition of a problem; the collection of data through observation and experimentation; analysis of the data, the formulation, evaluation, and testing of a hypothesis; and, when possible, the selection of a final hypothesis.

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See Figure 4-8.

Here, investigators collected information and samples of material to develop and test all reasonable theories as to where and how the fire could have started, and investigators drew conclusions based on vetting those theories against the information and data. The Commonwealth confirmed these findings through consultation with an independent fire and explosion expert, Robert Rappaport, who confirmed many of the findings.

Battalion Chiefs 101 and 102 responded to 844 N. Burlington St. to support ACPD regarding an individual firing flares from his home over a public soccer field. (ATF Report). On December 5, investigators examined the scene by walking through the entire area where 844<sup>11</sup> and the adjacent duplex, 846, were nearly completely demolished. (ATF Report). The debris field stretched more than three blocks, and the explosion had such force that a Volvo XC90 parked in the carport had been moved several feet to the side of the house, towards the walking path. Around the car, investigators found a large number of bricks from the house and firearm ammunition of varying calibers, shotgun rounds, flares, and two flare guns. (ATF Report). Since none of these were observed prior to the explosion, investigators concluded they came from inside the house.

The most informative view of the explosion is from BWC belonging to Officer who was on the southwest side of the house where he could observe the southwest corner of the basement - the area believed to be the origin of the explosion.

The Loudoun County Fire Marshal brought a canine which alerted to three areas: the southeast corner of the house where the carport was located, wood from the front (north) area of the house, and wood from the area of the front entrance. (Loudoun County Fire Marshal's Office Report).

Investigators collected debris from these areas in four cylinder-shaped drums for testing by the ATF, and the contents of all four drums tested positive for gasoline. (ATF Report). A strong odor of gasoline emanated from around Mr. Yoo, who was found about 10 feet from the northeast corner of the house with his head closer to the middle of the house and his feet closer to the east. (ATF Report). Near Mr. Yoo's head, in an area consistent with Mr. Yoo being in possession of the shotgun at the time of the explosion, investigators located remnants of a 12-gauge shotgun. The magazine of the shotgun had a capacity of 7 rounds, and six rounds were in the magazine and one in the chamber. (Report). The

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Mr. Rappaport has served as a Fire Marshall, Fire Captain, Fire Investigator, and an Arson Task Force Officer. His CV can be found at Microsoft Word - Rappaport CV.doc (rappaportconsulting.com).

<sup>&</sup>quot; See Figure 9.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> See Figures 4-6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> The Commonwealth would have preferred that some samples near Mr. Yoo be collected and tested as well.

shotgun ammunition appeared to be melted inside of the gun. It could not be determined whether the round in the chamber was fired or not, because the ammunition was melted inside. Report). Investigators also found near Mr. Yoo a 9mm pistol with an extended magazine and flare guns. (ATF Report). All three of these items are competent ignition sources for the explosion. (ATF Report).

In the basement, investigators located two gas containers near the rear of the basement: a five gallon and a 15-20 gallon can. (ATF Report). These containers were damaged from the explosion but still contained gasoline. (ATF Report). A third container, an empty five gallon, was recovered.

Investigators concluded the blast seat for the explosion was near Mr. Yoo's body because of the strong odor of gasoline, the empty canister, and the positive tests indicating gasoline from the debris that was collected. (ATF Report). Because one canister was empty (as opposed to the other two canisters that were not empty), and because the items collected tested positive for gasoline, investigators concluded Mr. Yoo may have poured gasoline throughout the basement and possibly the first floor. (ATF Report).

Investigators concluded that vapors from the gasoline ignited and caused the explosion. (ATF Report). When, unaware that gasoline vapors were present inside the house, ACPD breached the front door, the action introduced enough fresh air into the house to change the ratio of air to gasoline vapor, creating the environment for maximum level of destructiveness. (ATF Report). However, while investigators identified the air to gas ratio as the most likely cause of the explosion, they were unable to isolate the ignition source. ATF investigators ruled out any of the major appliances being a cause of the explosion.<sup>14</sup>

ATF investigators also ruled out the munitions used by ACPD as an ignition source because they were verified to be non-flammable and safe for indoor use. The Ferret rounds used by ACPD are described by their manufacturer, Defense Technology, as "non-burning" ACPD did not discharge firearms or flash bangs, both of which would have been flammable.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Investigators concluded that the explosion was not caused or ignited by natural gas appliances such as the furnace and water heater because the natural gas supplying the appliances had been turned off by the SWAT team and the appliances were not tampered with and were not near the seat of the blast (although they were damaged). The oven and refrigerator were electric appliances and not in the area of origin. -The washer and dryer were significantly damaged, and it is unclear if either was in use at the time of the explosion.

While Defense Technology describes the four types of Ferret rounds used by ACPD as "non-burning", the first aid instructions associated with each type provide that exposure to Ferret rounds can cause a "burning sensation" in the eyes. See Ferret® 40 mm Powder Barricade Round, OC - Defense Technology (defense-technology.com), Ferret® 40 mm Liquid Barricade Penetrator Round, OC - Defense Technology (defense-technology.com) Ferret® 40 mm Powder Barricade Round, CS - Defense Technology (defense-technology.com) Ferret® 40 mm Liquid Barricade Penetrator Round, CS - Defense Technology (defense-technology.com). See also supra notes 8 and 9.

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Investigators could not rule out lighters or matches as an ignition source because these items could have been damaged or moved to another area from the explosion and not recovered. (ATF Report).

Mr. Rappaport, an independent expert with 27 years of experience in fire service and fire and explosive investigation, agreed with the following conclusions: (1) the Ferret rounds fired by ACPD can be ruled out as a competent ignition source, as the product specification sheet indicates they are "non-burning and suitable for indoor use"; (2) the gas appliances in the home could be ruled out as competent ignition sources; (3) fresh air introduced by the door breach helped create a flammable mixture necessary for gasoline vapors to ignite; (4) gasoline vapors were concentrated in the basement because gasoline vapors are heavier than air; (5) Mr. Yoo likely distributed gasoline, given the single empty fuel container with a missing cap; (6) the blast seat was in the basement, and Mr. Yoo was in the basement when the explosion occurred; and (7) Mr. Yoo utilized an unspecified competent ignition source including a match, lighter, flare, or discharge of a gun/ammunition to ignite gasoline vapors.

Thus, there is no evidence pointing to ACPD providing the ignition source or the cause of the explosion. On the other hand, the copious evidence of gasoline, flares, and firearms near Mr. Yoo's body and around the home do provide a basis to believe the ignition source was Mr. Yoo – regardless of whether the ignition was caused intentionally or accidentally.

## <u>Information Gathered After the Incident</u>

The CIRT Investigation revealed Mr. Yoo became the sole owner of 844 N. Burlington St. after his ex-wife was removed from the deed in January 2022, and that early in 2022 he covered the windows.

It also revealed that Mr. Yoo had purchased/transferred two guns on April 29, 2023 (a 12-gauge Black Aces Tactical FD 12 and a 12-guage Kel-Tec KS7), and one Smith & Wesson M&P 9mm on May 10, 2023, at NOVA Armory located at 2607 Wilson Blvd, Arlington, Virginia 22201. (ATF Firearms Transaction Record). Additionally, the CIRT Investigation revealed that between March 2023 and September 2023, Mr. Yoo spent more than \$9,400 on firearms, ammunition, and associated paraphernalia. (Bank of America Credit Card Account Summary).

Although Mr. Yoo had not failed to pay property taxes in the past, he did not pay his October 2023 property taxes in the amount of \$3,777.64, and had stopped his gardening services on October 12, 2023, asking them to donate the remaining lawn services. (Tax Balance Information Sheet; Email Correspondence Regarding Garbak Lawn Services).

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A search of the premises, conducted by Fire Marshals, CIRT investigators, and ATF Agents, revealed the following items of evidentiary value:

3 Orion flare guns,

1 Kel-Tec KS7 (12ga) pun shotgun,

1 Black Aces FD12 (12ga) semi-automatic shotgun,

1 Smith & Wesson MP 2.0 9mm semiautomatic handgun,

504 12 ga shotgun shells,

77 9mm rounds,

9.223 rounds,

51 flares.

3 12 ga shotgun drum magazines,

25 12 ga shotgun magazines,

5 9mm magazines,

2 empty Enola Gaye smoke grenades,

1 large gas can, and

2 small gas cans.

A great deal of investigatory work was performed after the explosion, all of which is consistent with and sets the stage for the tragic turn of events but is ultimately not relevant to the issue of what the ACPD knew at the time events were unfolding.

## III. LEGAL STANDARD AND ANALYSIS

## Legal Standard

Analysis of criminal liability of police use of force is driven by two lines of authority: decisions of the Supreme Court of the United States defining excessive force in civil rights lawsuits, and state use of force statutes providing defenses to charged criminal conduct. These two lines of authority, though distinct, are interconnected in the sense that both seek to determine whether the use of force, lethal or not, was reasonable given the circumstances. Specifically, civil rights claims for damages ask whether the use of force was reasonable "from the perspective of a reasonable officer on the scene" based on the circumstances known to the officer at the time. *Graham v. Connor*, 490 U.S. 386, 396-97 (1989) (civil action for damages related to injuries sustained during an investigatory stop subject to a Fourth Amendment

analysis).<sup>16</sup> In a similar vein, state use of force statutes generally ask whether the officer had a legal excuse or justification for use of force or self-defense.<sup>17</sup>

While Virginia has no statute controlling non-lethal use of force, Virginia addressed the use of *lethal* force by a law enforcement officer in 2021 through the passage of Virginia Code § 19.2-83.5, which provides in its entirety:

# § 19.2-83.5. Use of deadly force by a law-enforcement officer during an arrest or detention

A. A law-enforcement officer shall not use deadly force against a person unless:

- 1. The law-enforcement officer reasonably believes that deadly force is immediately necessary to protect the law-enforcement officer or another person, other than the subject of the use of deadly force, from the threat of serious bodily injury or death;
- 2. If feasible, the law-enforcement officer has provided a warning to the subject of the deadly force that he will use deadly force;
- 3. The law-enforcement officer's actions are reasonable, given the totality of the circumstances; and
- 4. All other options have been exhausted or do not reasonably lend themselves to the circumstances.
- **B.** In determining if a law-enforcement officer's use of deadly force is proper, the following factors shall be considered:
  - 1. The reasonableness of the law-enforcement officer's belief and actions from the perspective of a reasonable law-enforcement officer on the scene at the time of the incident; and
  - 2. The totality of the circumstances, including (i) the amount of time available to the law-enforcement officer to make a decision; (ii) whether

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> See also Tennessee v. Garner, 471 U.S. 1, 3, 11-12 (1985) (a law enforcement officer may not use deadly force to apprehend or prevent the escape of a suspect unless "the officer has probable cause to believe that the suspect poses a significant threat of death or serious physical injury to the officers or others").

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> See Griffin v. Commonwealth, 78 Va. App. 116, 131-32 (2023) (criminal prosecution of officer for assault explaining the Commonwealth required to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that either there was a willful touching without legal excuse or justification, or that there was legal excuse or justification, but the force used during the touching was excessive).

the subject of the use of deadly force (a) possessed or appeared to possess a deadly weapon and (b) refused to comply with the law-enforcement officer's lawful order to surrender an object believed to be a deadly weapon prior to the law-enforcement officer using deadly force; (iii) whether the law-enforcement officer engaged in de-escalation measures prior to the use of deadly force, including taking cover, waiting for backup, trying to calm the subject prior to the use of force, or using non-deadly force prior to the use of deadly force; (iv) whether any conduct by the law-enforcement officer prior to the use of deadly force intentionally increased the risk of a confrontation resulting in deadly force being used; and (v) the seriousness of the suspected crime.

By its terms, § 19.2-83.5 applies to use of deadly force; there is no specific statutory provision governing general intentional use of non-deadly force (whether or not it results in death). Moreover, there is no modern Virginia case law that directly controls the question of officer criminal liability in the use of non-lethal force resulting in death. But it logically follows that the same factors that determine criminal liability when officers use lethal force should be instructive in determining criminal liability when officers do not intentionally use lethal force, but their use of non-lethal force nevertheless results in death. And, though a civil case, Simpson v. Commonwealth <sup>19</sup> provides the most apt precedent in determining law enforcement liability applicable here. There, Virginia State Police were found not civilly liable for wrongful death after fatally shooting a mentally ill man who barricaded himself in his home and gave officers outside a receipt for a shotgun. The court found the police did not act with gross negligence when they attempted to bring about a resolution through negotiations and attempted various methods of less-lethal but escalating force to incapacitate the man, including through the use of military-style equipment, flashbangs, tear gas, and a stun gun before fatally shooting him when he emerged from the house firing his shotgun. The court found has shotgun.

In short, criminal liability of an officer's use of force, intentionally lethal or not intentionally lethal but resulting in death, turns on whether the use of force was reasonable, in light of information available at the time and based on the totality of circumstances.

When death results, the charges under consideration would be voluntary or involuntary manslaughter, or murder. Murder, to put it plainly, is a killing with malice, and will not be addressed here because there is no basis to imply malice.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> *Id.* at 12-13.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Section 19.2-83.4 prohibits chokeholds, firing into moving vehicles, and firing kinetic impact munitions specifically unless an officer or another person is in imminent danger of death or serious injury.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> No. 1:16CV162 (JCC/TCB), 2016 WL 3923887, at \*12 (E.D. Va. July 21, 2016).

 $<sup>^{20}</sup>$  *Id*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> VA Model Jury Instruction No. 33.230.

The elements of voluntary manslaughter require a killing which is a result of an intentional act and committed upon reasonable provocation.<sup>23</sup> Examples of voluntary manslaughter include acting in self-defense but having over-reacted, or killing in the heat of passion.<sup>24</sup> Involuntary manslaughter can be a death that is unintended but nevertheless is the result of gross negligence; the unlawful performance of a lawful act with carelessness; or the performance of an unlawful but not felonious act with carelessness when the act is so gross, wanton, and culpable as to show a callous disregard of human life.<sup>25</sup> Examples of involuntary manslaughter include causing a death while driving intoxicated,<sup>26</sup> accidentally discharging a firearm,<sup>27</sup> certain instances of child neglect or abuse,<sup>28</sup> and in the context of law enforcement, a police officer shooting an unarmed robbery suspect after mistakenly thinking the subject was reaching for a firearm.<sup>29</sup>

With respect to the execution of a search warrant, before resorting to forced entry into a premises to be searched, officers must first knock, identify themselves as police officers, state the reason for their presence, and wait a reasonable period of time for the occupants to answer the door.<sup>30</sup> Countervailing law enforcement interests, including the threat of physical harm to police, may even establish the reasonableness of an unannounced entry<sup>31</sup>

#### Analysis

VA Code § 19.2-83.5 and analogous case law counsel that the reasonableness of the use of force should be evaluated, not in hindsight but from the perspective of the officers on the scene at the time of the incident. Section 19.2-83.5 also instructs that the reasonableness of the law enforcement officers' beliefs and actions should be based not on any single factor, but on the totality of the circumstances. Here, the totality of the circumstances on the scene, as officers understood them at the time, were as follows:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> VA Model Jury Instruction No. 33.500.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Bolyard v. Commonwealth, 11 Va.App. 274, 276 (1990); Barrett v. Commonwealth, 231 Va. 102, 105-06 (1986).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> VA Model Jury Instruction No. 33.600.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Hall v. Commonwealth, 32 Va.App. 616, 626 (2000).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> See Darnell v. Commonwealth, 6 Va.App. 485 (1988).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Craig v. Commonwealth, 34 Va.App. 155 (2000).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Matthew Barakat, 2<sup>d</sup> Grand Jury Indicts Officer for Involuntary Manslaughter in Virginia Mall Shooting, AP News (Oct. 12, 2023), <a href="https://apnews.com/article/tysons-mall-shooting-police-officer-indictment-f0990faec0f3e6b8ba06b360195748d9">https://apnews.com/article/tysons-mall-shooting-police-officer-indictment-f0990faec0f3e6b8ba06b360195748d9</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Park v. Commonwealth, 32 Va.App. 407, 412 (2000); Va. Code § 19.2-56(B). Wilson v. Arkansas, 514 U.S. 927, 927 (1995); Heaton v. Commonwealth, 215 Va. 137, 138 (1974); United States v. Beckford, 962 F.Supp. 767, 774-76 (E.D. Va. 1997) (SWAT raid plan forced entry into dwelling after identifying officers' concerns of a possible gunfight which formed the basis of evacuating neighbors).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> *Beckford*, 962 F.Supp. at 775.

- Mr. Yoo had already committed acts that endangered the public and his neighbors by repeatedly firing flares out his window and over a publicly accessed soccer field;
- ACPD observed a hand from the second-story window of 844 N. Burlington St. firing the flares from a flare gun;
- The flares were traveling far enough that they reached a major thoroughfare, N. George Mason Dr., and ACPD blocked traffic there and on the trail and the adjacent field;
- Officers gathered information about Mr. Yoo, his family background, and recent interactions with his neighbors, and learned: Mr. Yoo had stockpiled charcoal and lighter fluid even though he did not grill outside, large amounts of bleach and other cleaning supplies were delivered to the house in the weeks before December 4, 2023, that Mr. Yoo was receiving "end of world" magazines, and that neighbors were frightened;
- Officers evacuated the adjacent duplex and the neighbor next door;
- Officers attempted to speak with Mr. Yoo by knocking on his door and announcing themselves, by calling out to him from the backyard and porch of the adjoining property, and by using lights and a PA system;
- Officers tried to reach Mr. Yoo by calling him directly and through family members;
- Officers obtained a search warrant for the flare gun and announced to Mr. Yoo they possessed a warrant to search the house after daylight hours because of exigent circumstances, pursuant to Va. Code § 19.2-56(B);<sup>32</sup>
- Officers were aware Mr. Yoo had posted rhetoric on social media that could be interpreted as critical of law enforcement;<sup>33</sup>
- Officers breached the front door, to ensure they could be seen and heard while also applying pressure for Mr. Yoo to exit;
- Mr. Yoo then appeared to fire two volleys of 17 shots from inside the house and it became clear that in addition to a flare gun Mr. Yoo had firearms;
- Officers fired non-flammable and non-lethal chemical agents inside the house to get Mr. Yoo to come out:
- Officers did not discharge their firearms; and
- Officers repeatedly instructed Mr. Yoo to exit the house but he did not do so even while seemingly saying something about surrender.

Officers tried to obtain an arrest warrant for at least one felony. Based on conversations heard on BWC, it appears the Office of the Magistrate denied the arrest warrant, not because flares had not been fired, but because the Magistrate found the identity of the shooter had not been established. Police in Virginia initiate criminal charges by seeking warrants from the Magistrate; prosecutors do not initiate charges by warrant. However, it is the opinion of the Office of the Commonwealth's Attorney that there was probable cause for an arrest warrant and that identity was established based on the fact that Mr. Yoo was the owner and sole occupant of the residence, that neighbors reported he was reclusive and did not leave his home and only received deliveries.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> See Figure 3.

All of these factors negate the required elements of criminal negligence, carelessness, disproportionality, and lack of reasonableness that would be necessary to establish as an element of any manslaughter charge (and any malice necessary for a homicide charge).

Lastly, while not directly relevant to the reasonableness inquiry under § 19.2-83.5 of the totality of circumstances the officers knew at the time of the incident, it also bears noting that the investigation by the CIRT, and backed by ATF, the FBI, and ACPD, indicate the actions of the ACPD did not cause the explosion, and it is most likely that Mr. Yoo himself caused the explosion, whether it was accidental or purposeful.

In hindsight, it is possible to ask whether slower escalation might have been possible or advisable – particularly given the deployment of the CNU, the fact that Detective had made contact with and spoke at length with Mr. Yoo's relative, the fact that Mr. Yoo appeared to be experiencing a mental health crisis, the fact that Mr. Yoo had not fired a flare or other weapon from 5:09 p.m. until the breach began, and the fact that Mr. Yoo appeared to call out something (we still do not know what) about surrender. However, with the information they had at the time, ACPD had a reasonable basis to conclude that Mr. Yoo posed a danger to himself, officers, and the general public.

Therefore, it is the opinion of the Commonwealth's Attorney that there is no basis in law or fact to support criminal charges against members of ACPD.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

On the question of criminal liability surrounding the explosion at the residence at 844 N. Burlington St., Arlington, Virginia, on December 4, 2023, and the resulting death of Mr. James Yoo, no criminal charges are warranted and ACPD officers involved are exonerated from criminal wrongdoing. The report does not comment on ACPD policies or reach a conclusion about whether ACPD followed best practices with respect to de-escalation in general and de-escalation with respect to individuals experiencing mental health crisis in particular. Those issues are best left to the Independent Policing Auditor and the Community Oversight Board, which will review the incident independently. Nor does this report address questions of civil liability; those are best left to the courts.

 $\mathbf{V}$ 

# **APPENDIX**

Figure 1. Google Maps screenshot of the area surrounding 844 N. Burlington St., which is circled in red

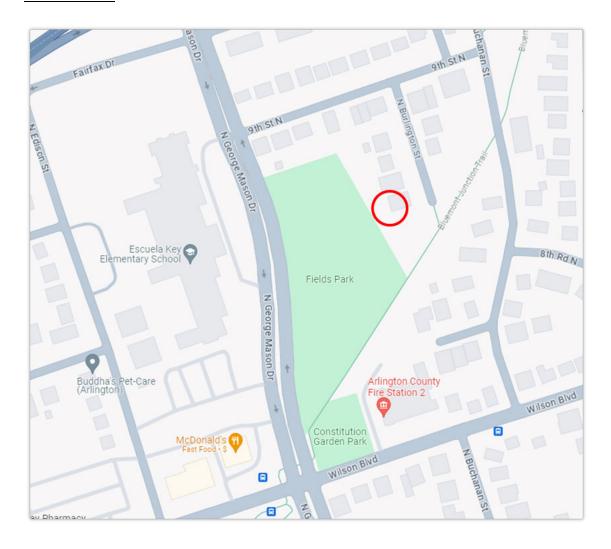


Figure 2. Screenshot of Sergeant

Video on Back Porch

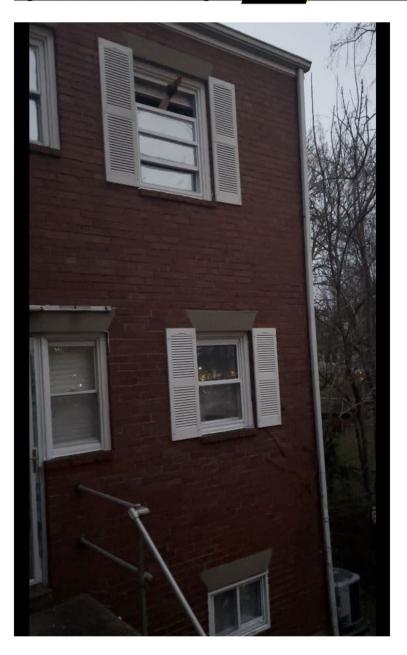


Figure 3. Screenshot of Mr. Yoo's LinkedIn profile, which was circulated among ACPD officers

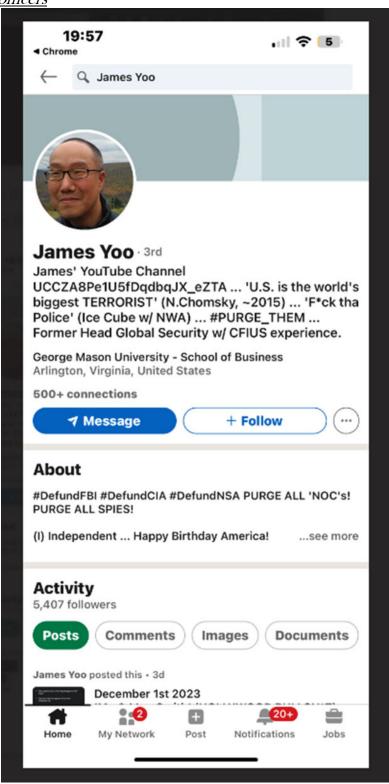


Figure 4. View of 844 N. Burlington St. from Officer BWC, right before explosion



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Figure 5. View of 844 N. Burlington St. from Officer BWC, at the moment of explosion



Figure 6. View of 844 N. Burlington St. from Officer explosion

2023-12-04 20:24:27 - 0500 AXON EDDY 3 X3082217/6

Figure 7. Screenshot from ACPD Car 6232 during explosion



Figure 8. Screenshot from ACPD Car 6232 one second after explosion



Figure 9. Aerial view of the remains of 844 N. Burlington St. after the explosion

