

Sleep soundly Moscow, the threat is 'contained'

Marty Trillhaase The Lewiston Tribune

Only if a trained, heavily armed terrorist had targeted Moscow and the University of Idaho could that community have been placed in greater peril on the night of Aug. 22.

Yet, student body and public alike slumbered in ignorance, unaware of just how close they came to a catastrophe.

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Why?

Ask the UI and the Moscow Police Department.

At 8:40 p.m., former UI assistant Professor Ernesto Bustamante lay in wait outside the off-campus home of his former lover, 22-year-old graduate student Katy Benoit. When she stepped outside to smoke a cigarette, Bustamante fired 11 rounds from a .45 caliber Smith and Wesson. He then sped off in a rental car. A neighbor took down the license plate and alerted the police.

Bustamante was rage in motion, obviously unstable, a lethal threat to anyone he came in contact with and he was at large.

Anywhere else in post-Virginia Tech America, the college student body would have been notified and the campus locked down.

Anywhere else in post-9/11 America, the police would have taken at most an hour to round up the rudimentary facts before disclosing the threat to ordinary citizens. By 10 p.m., newspaper Internet sites, radio and television would have displayed Bustamante's picture or description. He would have been deemed armed, dangerous and a person to avoid. The rental car would have been identified.

Immediately, people would go inside and lock their doors. They might also help provide leads for law enforcement to track down the suspect.

Not in Moscow.

Instead Bustamante may have trolled Moscow for 80 minutes before he checked in at the University Inn at 10 p.m.

Police waited until about midnight to say anything - just an hour before an Idaho State Police trooper spotted the rental car at the University Inn parking lot.

Rooms adjacent to Bustamante's were evacuated. Efforts to communicate with him faltered.

Using a .44 caliber revolver, Bustamante ended his life at about 5:50 a.m.

Only then, at about 7 a.m. did the UI alert its student body that it may have been in jeopardy.

"We felt we pretty much had it contained," is how police Lt. Dave Lehmitz justified keeping citizens

ignorant of the threat.

If that was a questionable assertion on Tuesday night, the argument totally dissolved as new facts emerged. Bustamante was better armed than any of the individual cops he confronted. His immediate arsenal included:

- * the .45 caliber murder weapon.
- * the .44 caliber revolver involved in his suicide.
- * a .45 caliber Springfield Armory handgun.
- * a .380 caliber Ruger LCP handgun.
- * a 9mm Glock handgun.
- * a Taurus Judge, capable of firing a .45 caliber bullet or a .410 gauge shotgun shell.

And he had more in the rental car - three handguns, a .22 rifle and a 12-gauge shotgun.

Eleven weapons at the disposal of a person suffering from multiple personality disorder. Two of those personalities had names - "the beast" and the "psychopathic killer" - that presaged violence.

Eleven guns held by someone who had been prescribed four psychotropic drugs psychiatrist Dr. Peter Breggin described as a cocktail for violence and suicide.

"I see this kind of thing all the time from just one of the drugs. But in combination, they get worse," Breggin told the Tribune's Joel Mills.

Eleven guns in the possession of a man who had threatened another woman.

That adds up to the means and the opportunity to devastate Moscow. Only by some miracle did Bustamante lack the motivation.

Four years ago, Jason Hamilton unleashed hell, first killing his wife and then firing his weapons at the Latah County Courthouse. Before turning his gun on himself, Hamilton killed a Moscow police officer and a church caretaker, and wounded two more officers and a UI student.

How many more warnings does Moscow need? - M.T.