

# “You know how dangerous this is to put a narrative like this out there?”

The Bethlehem Gadfly Uncategorized October 3, 2020

🌀 *Latest in a series of posts in the wake of the George Floyd murder* 🌀

“The marchers contend state police have, at every turn, attempted to place at least some of the blame for what instigated the shooting on them.”

*Selections from Joseph Darius Jaafari of Spotlight PA and Ryan Deto of Pittsburgh City Paper, “A changing story by police on a rural Pa. shooting helped fuel white vigilantes and misinformation.” Spotlight Pa., September 30, 2020. (printed today in the Morning Call with the headline “Shifting police accounts fuel racist anger against marchers.”)*

*click through to the article to find a video after the shooting by one of the marchers*



It was a bit after 11 p.m. in late August when Frank Nitty and a group of Black and white civil rights activists stopped along a highway in rural Bedford County. The group was on day 20 of a march from Milwaukee to Washington, D.C. . . . On that night in Pennsylvania, with just flashlights and the occasional passing car lighting their way down Lincoln Highway, things got out of hand. . . . Shots rang out. . . . The incident made national news for a day, another thread in the country’s ongoing struggle with racism. But a closer examination by Spotlight PA and Pittsburgh City Paper reveals a changing narrative by law enforcement authorities the next day, the effects those inconsistencies had in how the story was portrayed, and how local community members took up arms in response.

Pennsylvania State Police [initially said](#) an “argument” between residents and the marchers “culminated in gun fire.” But by the end of the day, the official story had [changed twice](#). In the final version of events, police said the property owners had called them about a gathering of people in a private business parking lot. Before troopers could arrive, police said, the property owners confronted the marchers, the confrontation escalated, and “gun shots were exchanged.”

But interviews with nine marchers and a review of four videos from the scene do not support those official accounts — namely, the contention that there was some form of confrontation with the marchers before the shots, and the possibility that a marcher had fired first.

The marchers contend state police have, at every turn, attempted to place at least some of the blame for what instigated the shooting on them. In another video taken after a news conference the day after the shooting, and reviewed by the news organizations, the marchers directly disputed the characterization of an “argument” with a state police detective, who then agreed that the “argument did not happen.”

But the narrative that the marchers were somehow at fault took hold. Fueled by social media posts that parroted — and then embellished — the state police’s version of events, white vigilantes wielding guns descended upon their town squares in Bedford Borough and McConnellsburg, sure that they needed to protect their small towns from “Antifa.”

As a result, the marchers faced continued threats in the days that followed, including being threatened with a gunshot a second time, and having to walk on roads chalked with messages such as “n—s suck,” “pick cotton,” and “go home.”

“There’s no way to mentally prepare someone to being called ‘n—’,” Nitty said, adding that getting him and his team through to the Maryland border required “resilience and prayer.”

When they got to Schellsburg, three people in the group went live on Facebook. The videos show that the marchers stopped at the bottom of a hill to prepare for a climb, loading children and older marchers in vans so they didn’t have to make the venture uphill. On one side of Lincoln Highway was a white house. On the other, a towing garage. Both belong

to John Myers. . . . “I says, ‘Hey y’all, there’s a guy that’s looking out the door.’ It was dark, dark, dark, dark in this rural part of Pennsylvania, anyway. And after seeing that, I immediately heard gunshots.” The footage shows some marchers questioning what they heard before a second shot is fired. In the video, John Myers emerges from his house after the first shot is fired and then meets his son, Terry, who appears walking down the road toward the marchers. Terry hands an item to his father and then aims a shotgun back at marchers. In one video, the younger Myers yells at the marchers to “get the f— out of here,” before another gunshot is heard. In footage captured by a marcher on a cell phone, Tory Lowe, a marcher who was in front of the crowd, pleads with John and Terry Myers, saying “there’s no need to be violent,” before another round is fired. “This man came out of nowhere and just started shooting,” Lowe said. “I kept screaming that there are children with us, and it wasn’t until I said there was a pastor with us that he stopped shooting.” One marcher was shot in the face, treated at a nearby hospital for minor injuries, and released the next day.

From the beginning, Pennsylvania State Police publicized a similar story to John and Terry Myers’ account. In its first news release, issued early the next morning, state police said that “an area residence and a group of individuals engaged in an argument, which culminated in gunfire.” The account then changed later in the day to an “incident” between the activists and two residents. By that afternoon, the official version of events changed again. “The confrontation escalated, and gunshots were exchanged between the property owners and the activists,” said a press release. But in the videos, the only time Terry Myers can be heard yelling at people to get away is after the first shot was fired.

“I can tell you that we had not interacted with either man before the gunshots rang out,” said Renee Muza, a video producer who was filming the documentary about the marchers and caught the shooting on camera. “We did not speak to, on any occasion, either man. We didn’t even see them.” When asked for the source of the narrative that an argument or confrontation resulted in gunfire, state police spokesperson Ryan Tarkowski said in an email that it was based on detectives interviewing witnesses who were willing to talk. All nine marchers interviewed by Spotlight PA and Pittsburgh City Paper said they told state police similar stories the next morning about a man shooting at

them unprovoked. The marchers also said they gave state police the same footage the news organizations reviewed. When marchers learned of the press releases, they confronted state police detectives while streaming live on Facebook. The detectives said on the stream that the narrative about an argument “isn’t coming from us.” Cpl. Aaron Allen, an officer assigned to the unit that responds to hate crimes in the western region of the state, said that he “fixed” the original press release to show that there wasn’t an argument, changing it to an “incident.” An organizer challenged Allen on a live stream, saying, “You know how dangerous this is to put a narrative like this out there?”

As the state police’s story changed, the suggestion that the marchers were, at least in part, to blame took hold on social media, sparking a snowball of misinformation that culminated in new threats to the group on their way to Washington. On Tuesday, the day after the shooting, Facebook users speculated without evidence that the marchers had looked inside the Myers’ property and were threatening to burn down a local Walmart as well as town centers. A Facebook post that has since been deleted said, “All Bedford County Hunters not busy tonight at 6 might want to go to Bedford County Courthouse to help defend it!!! BLM and Antifa are planning on burning it down!!!” Another Facebook post, shared 1,000 times, urged residents to defend their homes after the Schellsburg shooting. “I couldn’t believe it,” the post read. “Right in my backyard. Threats from BLM and Antifa pouring in to destroy buildings and homes... We will not allow you to destroy our towns. This has to end.” The marchers never came, but that didn’t stop dozens of people from showing up at the Bedford County Courthouse on Tuesday evening, wielding military-style rifles and camping out for more than four hours. Some demonstrators told a local TV news crew they were [waiting for the civil rights marchers](#). That same night, while many armed demonstrators were still at the courthouse, a group of other armed vigilantes learned the marchers were staying at the Hampton Inn hotel three miles away. One of them, Jeremy Decker, 43, drove to the hotel and fired a gun into the air outside the hotel. Decker was charged by state police with possessing a prohibited firearm, having a firearm not to be carried without a license, and reckless endangerment, according to a criminal complaint obtained by the news organizations.

On Wednesday at around 10:40 p.m. — two days after the original shooting — as the marchers made their way to the outskirts of McConnellsburg, in Fulton County, they walked over roads chalked with messages including “n—s suck,” [video](#) taken by the group shows. Also shown on the video drawn on the street: “pick cotton,” “slaves,” and “go home.” When the marchers finally got to McConnellsburg, around 1 a.m., there were several people waiting there for them, according to live video feeds. Some were friendly and offered water, others were confrontational and argued with Nitty and refused to shake his hand. Alexis Kaleigh, a McConnellsburg resident who supports the marchers and the Black Lives Matter movement, said she joined Nitty and the other civil rights marchers on Route 30 and saw the racist messages drawn on the street. “We wrote ‘Black Lives Matter’ and ‘we love you’ in chalk,” said Kaleigh. “We wrote things to outweigh the hate.”