

The D.C. Sniper Case
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Wednesday, October 2, 2002

At 6:02 P.M., about an hour before sunset on a warm, dry day in Montgomery County, MD, the evening rush hour was well underway as 55-year old James Martin drove into the parking lot of the Shoppers Food Warehouse at 2201 Randolph Road, Wheaton, MD 20902 (39.05976, -77.04756), while on his way home from work. He parked, and began walking toward the store entrance when he was shot and fell face down. A few parking spaces away, Kimberley Sadelson was loading groceries into her car when she heard a boom and saw Martin fall. She heard a woman scream and a man yell for someone to call 911. She made the call from her cell phone. When a dispatcher answered, she said "I'm at Shoppers Food Warehouse on Randolph Road and a man just fell in the parking lot. There was a loud noise, but we're not sure if he was shot."

Across Montgomery County, the usual calls went out to the people who were notified whenever a homicide occurred. Detective Patrick McNerney of the Department's Major Crimes Division, Homicide/Sex section, was notified of a homicide at a Wheaton supermarket. He alerted his supervisor, Detective Sergeant Nick DeCarlo, and led an evidence collection team to the scene. This was an unusual murder. Montgomery County's population of over 870,000 was generally safe. Traffic congestion was the county's major problem. The county had only twenty murders so far in 2002. There had been 47 traffic fatalities. About an hour earlier, a call had gone out over the Montgomery County police radio about a shooting in another shopping center a few miles away in the Aspen Hill neighborhood. A bullet had gone through the window of a Michael's arts and crafts store at 13850 Georgia Ave, Aspen Hill, MD 20906 (39.08109, -77.07812). It had struck one of the store's illuminated checkout signs about seven feet above the ground.

There was one potential clue. A pizza deliveryman named Steve Cribbin thought he had seen something. Cribbin had been resting in his car outside Papa John's Pizzeria three doors down from Michael's before reporting for work when he was startled by a loud boom. An army veteran, he recognized what he thought sounded like a rifle shot. He sat up and looked around. About thirty seconds later, he saw a blue car drive across the parking lot. It caught his attention because it was the only thing moving. He saw two African American men inside. They were laughing. He thought the car was a Thunderbird or a Malibu, or a Taurus or an Escort. He thought it appeared to be blue, maybe light blue. Cribbin was rattled and didn't want his story spread around. He was concerned that the shooter might come after him. The police were perplexed. The shot did not appear to have come from the area where Cribbin saw the car. His story was vague and the police discounted it.

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Thursday, October 3

7:41 A.M. In the Maryland suburbs north and west of Washington, D.C., the morning rush hour was reaching its peak as traffic poured downtown along four roughly parallel roads - Georgia Avenue, Connecticut Avenue, Rockville Pike, and Interstate 270. Two blocks from the traffic crush on Rockville Pike, James L "Sonny" Buchanan, a 39-year-old landscaper, was mowing grass behind a car dealership near the parking lot of the sprawling White Flint Mall, 11411 Rockville Pike, Kensington, MD 20895 (39.04293, -77.11062). Over the sound of the Lawn-Boy, there was a loud crack. In the parking lot of the car dealership, mechanics saw Buchanan staggering toward them. He had left his lawn mower, which continued to roll, and was clutching his chest. Buchanan got about 200 feet inside the fence and collapsed on his face. Jim King, a parts manager, got on the line to the emergency dispatcher. "This guy's lawn mower did something, man," King said, "It chopped him up. He's bleeding real bad. He's down and out...He's bleeding out the mouth. His lawn mower caught the curb or something."

8:02 A.M. Thirty-one minutes after Buchanan was shot and about six miles away, a cab driver from Pune, India, pulled up to a gas pump at a Mobil station at 4100 Aspen Hill Rd, Rockville, MD 20853 right off of Connecticut Avenue. The gas station was in the Aspen Hill neighborhood, half a block from where the bullet went through the window of the Michael's store the night before. Premkumar A. Walekar, a 54-year old father of two was pumping gas into his taxi when Caroline Namrow, a pediatrician from Leeds, England, pulled into the gas station. The front of Namrow's van was opposite the back of Walekar's taxi at the gas pumps. As she glanced down to get a credit card from her purse, she heard a bang, which she thought might have been his car. When she looked up, she saw Walekar walking toward her with a startled look on his face. "Call an ambulance," he said, and then collapsed beside her van.

8:37 A.M. Just as the medics gave up on Walekar at the Mobil station, an elderly man called 911 from a shopping center beside the Leisure World retirement community, a mile and a half north. The shopping center was just off Georgia Avenue, at 3701 Rossomoor Blvd, Silver Springs, MD 20902 (39.10088, -77.07313), still packed with rush hour traffic. Sarah Ramos, a 34-year old former law student from El Salvador, had taken the bus from her home and was sitting on a bench waiting to be picked up by a woman whose house she was going to clean. She had been reading, with her purse beside her on the bench and her head down. The .223 rifle bullet entered the top of her skull, leaving a tiny entry hole and causing extensive eggshell fractures.

9:58 A.M. At a Safeway store down a slight hill from a Shell station, Maria Welsh, a pediatric intensive care nurse, had just finished loading her minivan with groceries. As she backed out of her parking space, she heard a loud boom. As Welsh drove across the parking lot toward Connecticut Avenue, she heard someone crying, "Help, unhh, help me," and then saw a woman on the ground. The woman lay on the ground beside a burgundy minivan parked by the car vacuum at the Shell station at 10515 Connecticut

Ave, Kensington, MD 20895 (39.02761, -77.07624). Welsh dialed her cell phone as she drove toward the woman and saw that she was bleeding from the mouth and nose. The victim, Lori Lewis Rivera, had fallen under the open door of her car. Welsh untangled her from the hose of the vacuum. She felt the woman's right wrist and neck for a pulse and noticed that her lips and fingers were turning blue. She looked to see if she was breathing. She wasn't. By now, the full impact of what was happening was clear to the police. A sniper was stalking central Montgomery County, apparently killing at random. Five people had been murdered in 16 hours, four of them within a span of 2 hours and 17 minutes.

The shootings had occurred in a densely populated area in the Washington suburbs, in well-traveled areas and in daylight. Witnesses reported hearing a very loud gunshot, but none had seen the shooter. In each case there was a single shot, a single victim. There seemed to be no link among the victims - two white men, a white woman, an Indian man, and a Hispanic woman. There was, however, one seemingly solid clue. A 20-year old Guatemalan immigrant was working with a landscaping crew on the shopping center grounds near Leisure World that morning. He told the police that he had seen Sarah Ramos walk past a nearby post office, pick up a booklet on top of one of the mailboxes, and sit on the bench. He saw her open the booklet. Moments later, he heard a loud explosion. He thought it was a tire blowing out. When he looked back at Ramos, he realized she had been hit and was on the bench, shaking. Villeda then saw a white truck with a small cab and a box-type rear speeding in front of Ramos. The truck turned onto a side street and headed toward Georgia Avenue (39.10397, -77.07626). Villeda could see exhaust smoke belching from the tailpipe as the truck sped away. The truck had an engine that sounded like a diesel. It had purple or black lettering in English, which he couldn't read. The truck had a dent in the rear and damage to the right rear bumper. Two men were inside. He couldn't describe them or read the license tag. Police broadcast a lookout for the vehicle. Villeda was interviewed again and again in the coming days and his report would take on huge significance. White box trucks and vans were repeatedly stopped at gunpoint. The public saw them everywhere. There were over 70 thousand white trucks in Maryland.

Shortly after 11 A.M., Montgomery County Police Chief Charles Moose stood near the mobile command center for the first of many press briefings during the next three weeks. He listed the shootings, locations, and times, starting with James Martin's killing the night before. "We strongly feel that these are all connected." He described the white truck and said that police were already inundated with calls about white vans all over the country. He said police could not yet get to every report, but urged the public to be observant and suspicious and to call 911. He said the suspects were "calculating" and were still out there. But, he added "We don't need panic." He asked potential witnesses to search their memories. "I am convinced that someone knows who's doing this. I am convinced that someone has seen something."

Promises of help came from everywhere. The FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) offered an array of experts and facilities, as well as dogs that could

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track the smell of gunpowder. The Maryland State Police offered troopers, the FBI offered crime scene technicians and a helicopter. The US Marshals Service and the Secret Service both offered help. Michael Bouchard, special agent in charge of the ATF's Baltimore field office, dispatched several agents to help the Montgomery County police. Moose said he didn't know much about the killer or killers, other than this was a "very accurate marksman," "a skilled shooter," who was bold and cunning enough to kill in broad daylight under the noses of the police. He said the County was trying to set up a tip line and to come up with money for a reward. Calls to 911 were already triple the previous day's number. White vans and box trucks were being stopped all over the metropolitan area. Moose again appealed to the public for help. "This is not some lightning bolt from the sky. Somebody knows. Somebody saw it."

At 9:20 P.M. that evening, Pascal Charlot, a 72-year old Haitian immigrant, got off a bus and was standing under a streetlight on the southeast corner of Georgia Avenue and 1100 Kalmia Rd NW, Washington, DC 20012 (38.98393, -77.02646), about to cross the street where the Tropicana restaurant was located. He had just raised his right hand to his chin when a bullet smashed into his palm and punched into his chest near his left collarbone. After smashing his collarbone and several ribs, the bullet then fragmented and scattered through his upper chest, neck, and shoulders. A witness reported a red Toyota driving quickly away from the scene. Police traced the Toyota a short while later in Montgomery County, and found it was driven by a man who had heard the shot but had nothing to do with the shooting.

Friday, October 4

Shortly after 6:30 A.M., Police Chief Moose held his first press conference of the day. Overnight, there had been no more shootings in Montgomery County. "All was quiet," he said. He did not mention - and was not asked about - the Charlot killing in the District the evening before. There was still some confusion about that case.

At 8:30 A.M., the Maryland Medical Examiners started performing autopsies on the five Maryland victims. Each had been killed by a single bullet. All had small entrance wounds, along with massive internal injuries. Three had large exit wounds. Two showed the snowstorm X-ray pattern of a fragmented ultra-high velocity rifle bullet that had come apart on impact. The absence of soot near the entry wounds indicated that the victims were shot at long range. The D.C. Medical Examiner's Office conducted the autopsy on Pascal Charlot and found the same pattern. The Maryland Medical Examiners recovered numerous bullet fragments from the victims, and an almost complete copper jacket from a .223 bullet in Walekar's left lung. They labeled all the fragments, placed them in evidence bags, and turned them over to the police.

Moose held a press conference at noon to announce that the FBI would soon provide a profile of the killer or killers. He cautioned that the profile was just a "tool." Investigators were concerned that it would create "tunnel vision" and would cause potential suspects to be missed by the public or the police. Moose said, "We want to stress that when we

release the information that we not release it in a way that somehow it now eliminates people and causes us to get too focused on a path and potentially miss the suspect." He did not know that the very trap he had hoped to avoid had already been set. A reporter asked what the chances were that the suspects were still in the white truck. Moose replied that he had to proceed as if they were. "We don't eliminate anything until the evidence eliminates it," he said. The profilers were unsure about the sniper's race but said about 80 percent of such serial killers had been white. They thought he would frequent gun shows, be interested in books and movies about the military, and take pride in his prowess with firearms. He would be a taker of calculated risks, would not be confrontational, and would not be involved in a long-term relationship. He would come and go as he pleased. He would be hypersensitive and suspicious, and would pay close attention to media coverage. The profilers carefully expressed their conclusions in terms of probabilities and qualifications. Although the investigators were cautious in profiling the killers, the media were not. They compared the sniper to almost every serial killer in recent years. The consensus of TV profilers was that the person responsible for these shootings was a white male with a military background, familiarity with firearms, and a grievance. Detectives chuckled that it was the same profile that the experts always seemed to produce, no matter what the case.

At about 2:30 P.M., 75 miles south of Montgomery County Police Headquarters, Caroline Seawall, a 43-year old mother of two, drove her minivan into a sprawling shopping center, the Spotsylvania Mall at 3102 Plank Rd, Fredericksburg, VA 22401 (38.29491, -77.51462), located about halfway between Washington, D.C., and Richmond, Virginia. The mall was just west of Interstate 95, near two exit ramps. Ms. Seawall parked in front of a Michael's arts and crafts store, where she was a regular customer. She did some shopping and returned to the parking lot to load packages into her van. As she was loading her minivan, Alex and Doris Jones, a couple from nearby Bowling Green, pulled up in their car behind Seawall and decided to wait for her parking spot. Just as Seawall was closing her van's rear hatch, Jones heard a loud pop and saw Seawall fall. He got out of his car and rushed over to her. "I've been shot," she shouted. "This woman's been shot!" Alex Jones yelled, and then suddenly realizing his own vulnerability, he dashed back to his car. He told his wife to duck down and, ducking low himself, he steered to the safety of a nearby furniture store. As he drove, he noticed a dark-colored car with New Jersey plates heading out of the lot right in front of him towards the Interstate entrance (38.29581, -77.50938). A furniture store worker had seen a black teenager in the same car parked earlier, but dismissed it. Jones thought the car seemed funny, out of place. And its back window seemed to be covered with something. Jones couldn't see inside. He mentioned the car to his wife, who was crouched in the back, but she hadn't seen it. Police quickly deduced that the attack was almost certainly the work of the sniper. The similarities to the other shootings were unmistakable - a single victim, one bullet, the backdrop, the sound. Only the result and the location were different. The victim survived, but the shooting zone had now been broadly expanded from the ten-square mile area in Maryland to a 75-mile corridor more than halfway to Richmond.

At Police Headquarters in Rockville, Patrick McNerney, the detective who had been put in charge of the Martin murder as well as the shooting at the Michael's store in Aspen Hill, had become convinced that the latter shooting was no practice run. He had gone to the scene with some sniper experts who showed him that the shot probably had been taken from low to the ground, missed the head of the person for whom it was intended, and hit the store window on an upward trajectory. Whoever was the target of that shooting was lucky and still walking around. Now there was another Michael's case. Police would shortly be checking Michael's employee and customer records, along with those of local Mobil and Shell employees, and records of gun owners, gun dealers, military personnel with sniper training, rifle club members, people who owned or leased white box trucks, and anything else they could think of.

McNerney went to the Spotsylvania Mall crime scene. At the mall parking lot, there was little information, just as in the other cases. The sniper had fired a single shot and then vanished. People had heard the shot and the victim's cries. No one had seen much of anything. The police dug the mangled bullet out of Seawall's van and turned it over to McNerney to carry it to the ATF lab in Rockville. By the time Chief Moose talked to reporters that evening, word had come from the D.C. ballistics lab that the fragments taken from Pascal Charlot's body had been positively matched to fragments recovered in the shootings of Walekar, Ramos, and Rivera. Although no fragments had yet been recovered from Martin and Buchanan, Moose said their shootings were almost certainly related to the others. The next day brought confirmation that ballistics tests linked Seawall's shooting with those of Walekar, Ramos, Rivera, and Charlot. The description of the dark-colored car with New Jersey tags appears in the book by Sari Horwitz and Michael Ruane, but Chief Moose, in his book, reported no eyewitnesses. Apparently, police discounted the description because they did not believe the car was connected to the shooting or the witness reported the sighting much later.

Saturday, October 5

It was not until two days after the killing of Pascal Charlot that Tony Patterson, the lead D.C. homicide detective on the Charlot case was canvassing the neighborhood and interviewing reluctant witnesses at the Tropicana. He was intrigued by the description of the older model Caprice. A witness named Mr. Largie described the car as dark-colored, possibly burgundy, but he wasn't sure. The street lighting was too poor to be certain. This was no white van. It was probably not even a white man's car. "Man, that's a brother's car." It sounded like a "hoopty," (a broken-down old car) a fellow detective said to Patterson when he heard of the Caprice.

Monday, October 7

Two days after he interviewed the witnesses at the Tropicana, D.C. Detective Patterson sent out a BOLO, a police teletype alerting all police officers across the region to be on the lookout for the car that the witness named Mr. Howard and Largie had seen the night of the murder of Pascal Charlot. Although the witnesses described the car as

possibly burgundy-colored, the alert said the car was burgundy colored, "an older model Chevrolet Caprice or vehicle of similar style...a 4-door with dark tinted windows." The alert was addressed to all area law enforcement agencies and was to be read at all roll calls. "Any officer coming into contact with similar vehicles, please stop and identify all occupants." That morning in Prince Georges County, Bowie, MD, about 15 miles from the Montgomery County line, Iran Brown, who had been banned from the school bus for three days for eating twizzlers on the bus, got a ride to school with his aunt, Tanya Brown. At 8:09 A.M., Iran got out of his aunt's car in front of Tasker Middle School, 4901 Collington Rd, Bowie, MD 20715 (38.95752, -76.74586). As Tanya Brown started to drive away, she heard a loud boom, a child's scream, and then Iran yelling, "Aunt Tanya!" She stopped, looked back, and saw Iran lying on the ground. A teacher standing in the doorway heard the shot and ran to the boy's side.

"What's wrong?" the teacher asked.

"I've been shot," Brown replied.

"Are you kidding?" the teacher asked.

"No," said Brown. He wasn't kidding.

Brown was taken by med-evac helicopter to Childrens Hospital in Washington, DC where he underwent extensive emergency surgery. He survived. Despite the BOLO, police queried computer databases numerous times in the next few weeks because of suspicions about the car's appearance on a traffic violation, and let the Caprice proceed on its way when they found no record of an outstanding complaint about the car registration or the driver.

Later that day, investigators swarmed over the area. Busloads of Montgomery County police cadets were brought in to assist the Prince Georges police. The U.S. Marshals Service brought in a search dog, which located the spot from which the shooter had fired on Iran Brown. Prince Georges police then brought in a bloodhound. The dog traced a trail through the woods and along the tennis courts to a specific space in the parking lot, where the scent disappeared. Police then went back over the trail the dog had followed, looking for clues. An ATF agent spotted something in the underbrush (38.95958, -76.74781). It was a tarot card, the Death card. Across the bottom was printed the word, Death. Across the top, neatly lettered in blue ink and bracketed by quote marks, was the message, "Call me God." On the back, two scrawled lines divided the card into three sections. The top segment contained the greeting "For you mr. Police." In the middle was written, "Code: 'Call me God.'" And on the bottom was a warning, "Do not release to the press." Police put the card inside a bag and had the bloodhound sniff. The dog then followed the scent from the card along the same path she had first traced, indicating the card was likely connected to the shooting. When Joseph Bergstrom, the lead homicide detective, saw the card, his instinct was to hide it. He thought it was an absolute ace in the hole and he didn't want anyone to see it. In addition, the search turned up more evidence. Scouring the area with rakes, Montgomery County police cadets found a shell casing from a .223 rifle bullet that police thought might have been ejected from

the shooter's rifle. The police wanted to handle the apparent overture from the shooter with utmost discretion. They revealed publicly only that they had found a shell casing.

Tuesday, October 8

Next day, Prince Georges County Police Chief Gerald M. Wilson sent some of his top officials to Rockville to brief Forsythe and two dozen other high level task force members. Bergstrom introduced himself and told the group he was worried someone might leak information about the card. He showed the shell casing and a copy of the card and the group discussed how to handle the card. The tarot card could not be kept secret. On the eleven o'clock news that night, Mike Buchanan, a veteran reporter with the local TV station, WUSA, reported that a tarot card with the wording "I am God," had been found. Buchanan later said he got a tip from the wife of a police officer. The Washington Post reported the story in its late editions the next morning. Both got the wording slightly wrong, reporting that the message read, "I am God." Neither news organization reported the warning "Do not release to the press". The police were incensed. The sniper had specifically warned them to keep quiet. At his news conference the next morning, Chief Moose angrily criticized the media. Little did Chief Moose know, but a dark blue Chevrolet Caprice with New Jersey tags was investigated because a person was sleeping inside. The car was found on West 28th Street, Baltimore, MD 21211 (39.31946, -76.62511).

Wednesday, October 9

The day almost passed without another attack, but at 8:10 P.M. a shooting was reported in Prince William County in Virginia, just south of the Civil War battlefield of Manassas, thirty-five miles from Rockville. Shortly after 8 P.M, Dean Harold Meyers, a 53-year old engineer, whose left arm had been badly disabled in Vietnam in 1970, left his office in Manassas, Virginia, for the 40 mile commute to his home in Gaithersburg, Maryland. Meyers stopped for gas at the Battlefield Sunoco station at 7203 Sudley Rd, Manassas, VA 20109 (38.79779, -77.51756) about a block from his office. The station was less than a thousand feet from exit 47 on Interstate 66 (38.80022, -77.51911). As he stood beside his car in the lights of the pump island, a gunshot cracked and a .223 bullet struck him behind the left ear, killing him instantly. Inside the gas station, the attendant thought he heard a tire explode. Someone dialed 911 and reported a suspected shooting. There was a fresh report of a white van speeding away, but police found that it belonged to a family who were having dinner in a restaurant near the gas station. The shot could have come from any number of places, such as a Bob Evans restaurant parking lot across the street or some nearby hedges. Two detectives reported finding something interesting across the street near a Bob Evans restaurant parking lot (38.79717, -77.51846) - a map of Baltimore and Baltimore County. The map, which was one of several items found at the crime scene, was not immediately examined or processed for fingerprints. Prince William police did not consider it to be of much value and did not report it to the task force. They

stored it in a locker. Weeks later, after John Allen Muhammad and Lee Boyd Malvo were arrested, their fingerprints were found among the many on the map.

Thursday, October 10

After retrieving bullet fragments during the autopsy on Meyers, Prince William authorities turned them over to the ATF lab in Rockville. Authorities later announced that the bullet fragments taken from his body matched those of the other sniper victims. In Rockville that morning, Chief Moose announced that there was a new consolidated tip line and gave out the number. Shortly after 7 A.M., the new phone number flashed on TV screens. Instantly, every phone line in the call center lit up. Within seconds, the call center was swamped. There was a tremendous sense of urgency. Gradually, the team worked out a system in which tip takers who received an especially promising tip would raise a hand and be taken to investigators for a quick exchange of data. The most pertinent tips were then immediately faxed or couriered to the task force in Rockville. The tips turned up dozens of likely suspects, but scores of weird, armed characters. Unbalanced people called. Ex-wives and ex-girlfriends called about their former partners. Based on the tips, teams of investigators knocked on doors, staked out houses and workplaces "sitting on" possible suspects, and tailing them in their cars. Police "borrowed" dozens of rifles so they could be test-fired at the ATF lab. At one point, Chief Moose recalled later that there were four prime suspects under surveillance. All had guns. All had strange histories and shady comings and goings. All had access to white vans. Then another shooting occurred and all were cleared. In Rockville, County Police Headquarters had become overwhelmed by the number of people in the task force. That day, the leaders agreed to rent space in a building next door and set up a Joint Operations Center (JOC) that would be staffed 24 hours a day. The FBI set up computers, telephones, TVs, office furniture and all the other equipment needed for the largest manhunt in law enforcement history.

Friday, October 11

Shortly after 9 A.M., Kenneth H. Bridges, a fifty-three year-old Philadelphia businessman pulled into an Exxon station at 5409 Jefferson Davis Hwy, Fredericksburg, VA 22407 (38.23578, -77.50187) near Massaponax, in Spotsylvania County, Virginia, and telephoned his wife on his cell phone. Bridges was an African-American entrepreneur with six children. On this drizzly morning, Bridges had gotten off I-95 to buy gas. He told his wife there was a state trooper fifty yards away from him working on a fender bender. At 9:28, he stepped out of his car and put the gasoline nozzle into his gas tank. Suddenly there was a boom and he slumped beside the gas pumps, shot in the back. The trooper, David Gray, ran to Bridges and began CPR. When the rescue squad arrived a few minutes later, Bridges had no pulse. He was rushed to Mary Washington hospital, three miles away, where he died. Hundreds of white vans were pulled over, not only on the interstate, but also on Route 1, the other major north-south route. Police concentrated on northbound traffic because witnesses had seen a white truck - this time a Chevy Astro

with ladder racks - head for the northbound ramp. The traffic tie-up was monumental, but the net remained empty.

Saturday-Sunday, October 12-13

No killings occurred on the Saturday and Sunday of Columbus Day weekend.

Monday, October 14

Just before 7:30 P.M., Ted and Linda Franklin drove into the lower level parking lot of the Home Depot store at 6201 Arlington Blvd, Falls Church, VA 22044 (38.86953, -77.15086) in the Seven Corners Shopping Center, near Falls Church, Virginia. Linda Franklin, a 47-year-old FBI analyst, had recently undergone a mastectomy for breast cancer. She had taken four months off and was still undergoing physical therapy. Shortly after 9 P.M, they had completed their shopping, wheeled their purchases out to their car, and started putting items into the trunk. While they were loading the car, there was a loud noise and Linda fell. A .223 rifle bullet had entered the left side of her head and come out above her right eye. The bullet had split her skull and then fragmented, with one small piece burying itself in the rubber seal of a Ford Bronco parked beside their car. Ted could do nothing for her. He got out his cell phone to dial 911 and noticed shoppers running for cover.

Inside the Home Depot, there were screams, and customers began backing away from the front entrance.

At the scene, police recovered two other bullet fragments and shipped them to the ATF lab in Rockville. This time, however, they had something else - a witness who said he had seen the whole thing. The witness, Matthew Dowdy, said he saw a gunman coming out of a cream-colored Chevy Astro van with a silver ladder rack and a dead right taillight. The gunman, he said, had olive skin and a mustache and wore a denim jacket. He said he saw the man raise a rifle he described as a version of the AK-47, fire, and then dash away in the van. Police broadcast a description of the gunman and the van to patrol cars. Fairfax County Police Chief J. Thomas Manger would say the next day he was confident the tip would lead to an arrest.

Tuesday, October 15

The next day, Amy M. Lefkoff, a dispatcher for the small Rockville City Police Department, was working the 7 A.M. to 3 P.M. shift. She was the only person on duty in the dispatch room in Rockville City Hall. County police headquarters was three miles away. Nevertheless, calls poured into her line at the rate of about one a minute. She handled about 500 calls that day. People saw the name Rockville on TV, looked up the number for the Rockville police, and called her. She had instructions to refer calls on the sniper case to the Montgomery County Police task force. Shortly after 11 A.M., the phone rang. "Rockville City Police, Lefkoff," she said, "This call is recorded."

"Good morning," a male voice said, "Don't say anything. Just listen. We're the people that are causing the killing in your area. Look on the tarot card. It says, 'Call me God. Do not release to the press.' We have called you three times before, trying to set up negotiations. We have got no response. People have died...". "Sir...", Lefkoff interrupted. The male voice tried to continue. "Get your people...". "I need to refer you to the Montgomery County Police hot line," Lefkoff said, following the instructions she had been given about sniper calls. "We are not investigating the crime. Would you like the number?" The caller hung up. It was a young man's voice, with a slightly clipped cadence. There were pauses with each sentence, as if the caller were reading from something. He had a smooth, distinct voice. He used the correct code from the tarot card, but Lefkoff did not know the code. Lefkoff wondered if the call was a prank - or the real thing. He referred to three previous attempts to contact the task force. Calls kept coming in and she continued to answer. When she got a break, she called her supervisor, Captain Mike England, who was in an office down the hall. Lefkoff told him she had received a strange call that he ought to hear. She rewound the tape and played it back when he came to her office. England thought it was interesting enough to send to the task force.

Although the snipers had instructed the police not to release the tarot card to the press, the media had reported the information. Because the press had gotten the wording wrong, however, saying it was, "I am God." Task force officials hoped the correct code was still viable. However, with the task force concerned over leaks, the wording was so closely held that the people on the tip lines did not know it. In Fairfax, investigators were still questioning Dowdy about the Franklin killing on October 16, but he was frustratingly vague. That afternoon, a Fairfax County detective was studying surveillance tapes taken from inside the Home Depot in the minutes after Linda Franklin was shot when he recognized Dowdy inside the store. Police soon concluded that Dowdy had been inside the store the whole time and was lying. After questioning, Dowdy claimed that he was relaying the story of a homeless friend who was afraid to go to the police.

Thursday, October 17

The background noise on the case was now so great that critical pieces of information were being lost. In Tacoma, Washington, an old friend of Muhammad, Robert Holmes, called the FBI tip line on October 17 to say he thought he knew who the sniper was. His information was entered into the FBI's Rapid Start database, but Holmes was not interviewed until five days later.

Friday, October 18

About 4:30 P.M. on October 18, the snipers tried again to contact the task force. Someone called Chief Moose's number, which was in the phone book, and said he had information about the sniper. The call was automatically transferred to the Media Services office, according to Department protocol. Montgomery County police officer Derek Baliles took the call. "Shut up and listen." the caller said in a menacing tone, "And don't ask any questions." He told Baliles he knew who was responsible for the sniper

killings. But before he would say anything, he wanted Baliles to "verify" something for him. He told Baliles to call a Sergeant Martino at the Montgomery, Alabama, Police Department and ask about a liquor store holdup on Ann Street back in September, in which two women had been shot, one fatally. The caller gave Martino's number to Baliles. He told Baliles to check it out, and said he would call back later. "Okay," Baliles said, "Ask for 'Officer Derek' when you call back." A recording came on the line announcing that more money had to be deposited, and the line went dead. Baliles didn't know what to make of the call, but he was struck by the caller's threatening tone. He had scribbled down the number from his caller ID. He didn't know it then, but the call came from a pay phone in a gas station (37.75767, -77.46742) near the Ponderosa Steak House where Muhammad and Malvo had dined in September. Baliles relayed the information to Kristin Poole, a county police officer at the command center and then called Sergeant Scott Martino, a detective and part-time public affairs officer with the Montgomery, Alabama, police. Martino gave him the details of the September 21 murder of Claudine Parker and the wounding of Kellie Adams during a robbery outside a liquor store. The store was actually on Zelda Road, but only a block away from Ann Street. Police and witnesses had chased two suspects, but they got away. Forsythe then called Baliles and warned him not give the anonymous caller any specific details of the investigation if he calls back.

At 5:40 P.M., the person called back, asking for "Officer Derek." He was put on hold for a moment before Baliles picked up the phone and recognized his voice. Again, Baliles wrote down the caller ID number, which was different. This call came from a pay phone at a Fastmart store (XXXXX) about a mile away from the Ashland gas station. The caller told Baliles to speak quickly because he didn't have much time. Baliles gave him a general report of the Alabama crime, and the caller told him the information was correct. He then told Baliles that he would have to call back when he found some more change, as well as a pay phone that was not under surveillance. The call was then disconnected. Baliles reported to the command center that the person had called back. Baliles wrote an extensive report of these calls, but only assigned it to a routine category, not immediate or priority. The call to Baliles was the first successful contact the snipers made with the task force.

8:30 P.M. Unknown to the police, four hours after Malvo called Baliles, Malvo and Muhammad telephoned Monsignor William V. Sullivan, the pastor St. Ann's Church in Ashland, Virginia (37.75921, -77.48849). Muhammad got on the line first and said he'd been trying to reach the priest and then said, "I've got someone here who wants to talk to you." Sullivan could hear noise in the background, as though the phone was in a public place. Then Malvo came on. He had an accent that Sullivan couldn't place. It was not a southern drawl or anything one might hear around Ashland. Malvo said he knew who was doing the sniper shootings. Then he began talking about some crime in Alabama, something about ballistics tests, and the same gun being involved, and a woman at Seven Corners who didn't have to die. Malvo was rambling, and Sullivan was not getting it. Malvo told him to start writing some things down. Sullivan grabbed his grocery list and began scribbling. He may have dropped the phone. Malvo thought he had scared him.

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"For you, Mr. Police," Malvo said, "Call me God, Do not release to the press." Malvo made a reference to this being on some sort of card. At first Sullivan didn't know what he was talking about. Then it clicked. "Oh yeah," he thought, "I remember reading about that." Malvo went on about a liquor store and somebody named Ann, and people being for real. Sullivan thought it didn't make much sense. It sounded as if the guy was just rambling and repeating stuff he had seen on TV. He suggested the caller should talk to the police. "Why did you call me?" he asked. "Because they will record what I have to say," Malvo replied, "I know you're the church and you're not taping this." The conversation rambled on, and finally Sullivan got a little impatient. "I'm not going to stand here forever...What do you want me to do?" He asked the caller why he didn't just call the police. There was no answer, and the call ended. During the conversation, Sullivan thought, "Oh my, he's got a great imagination." Sullivan never called the police.

Saturday, October 19

Just before 8 P.M. on a rainy evening, Jeff Hopper and his wife, Stephanie, finished dinner at the Ponderosa Steak House in Ashland 809 England St, Ashland, VA 23005 (37.75728, -77.46637) and were walking to their car in the parking lot. They were returning to their home in Melbourne, Florida after visiting Stephanie's sister in Lansdale, Pennsylvania. It was five days after the Franklin murder, a Saturday, and the sniper had never attacked on a weekend. In rural Pennsylvania, Dean Meyers was buried that day behind a brick church where he had grown up. While Meyers' family was gathered at his gravesite, his townhouse in Gaithersburg, which was still filled with his belongings, was burglarized.

The Hoppers were holding hands as they walked across the parking lot when both heard a loud noise. Stephanie thought it was a car backfire. Jeff thought it sounded like an explosion. For a split second he looked for fire and smoke, and then felt a concussion in the air and an ache in his stomach. He brought his hand to his abdomen and slowly fell to the ground. The bullet, a .223, struck Hopper in the abdomen below the sternum and fragmented. It ripped through his stomach, damaged his liver, spleen, pancreas, diaphragm, and a kidney. It then struck and broke a rib on his left side, but did not exit. Its core and a jacket fragment were recovered later when he was rushed to Virginia Commonwealth University's Medical College of Virginia Hospital in Richmond. Hopper survived.

Later that night, ATF Special Agent Ray Neely, searching the area twenty or thirty feet inside the wood line (37.75691, -77.46491) with his gunpowder-sniffing Labrador, found an empty cartridge casing from a .223 rifle round. A sharp-eyed investigator also found an empty bag of cinna-raisin snack food behind a nearby tree. Police would later find Malvo's thumbprint on the bag. Another ATF agent and Sergeant James S. Garrett of the Hanover County Sheriff's Office discovered a ziploc Halloween bag attached to a tree with two thumbtacks, while tracing the escape route used by whoever left the shell casing. Inside was a folded piece of pink paper. A county forensics expert pried the bag off the tree with the tacks still attached and dropped it into an evidence envelope. The

message was printed on several sheets of lined paper, the first of which had five stars drawn on it. It began with the same lines as the tarot card: For you mr. Police "Call me God." Do not release to the Press. The message continued on the second page with a complaint from the snipers that they had not been able to get their message across to the task force and listed the phone numbers they had called. "We have tried to contact you to start negotiation, but the incompetence (sic) of your forces in (i) Montgomery Police "Officer Derick" at 240-773-5000, (ii) Rockville Police Dept. 'female officer' at 301-309-3100, (iii) Task Force 'FBI' 'female' at 888-324-8800 (four times), (iv) Priest at Ashland, (v) CNN, Washington, D.C., at 202-898-7900. These people took calls for a Hoax or Joke," the message continued, "so your failure to respond has cost you five lives." Actually, nine people had been killed thus far, but there had been five shootings since the tarot card had been left. The snipers now came to the heart of their demands. They wanted \$10 million placed in a Bank of America account, whose number, PIN, activation date, and expiration date they provided. It was a Platinum Visa account in the name of Jill Lynn Farrell, an Arizona Greyhound bus driver whose credit card had been stolen from her bus in March. "We will have unlimited withdraw (sic) at any atm world-wide," the message continued, "You will activate the bank account, credit card, and Pin number."

The message then explained that the snipers would contact authorities at 6 A.M. Sunday at the Ponderosa "Buffet" (37.75746, -77.46664) and left a telephone number they planned to call. "You have until 9 A.M. Monday morning to complete transaction." Option two was to ignore option one and "trying to catch us." If the police chose option two, "then prepare you (sic) body bags." To underscore the threat, they wrote a postscript, "your children are not safe anywhere at any time." The writers closed with, "If we give you our word (then) that is what takes place. 'Word is bond.'" The message provided a wealth of potential evidence - from the references to the phone calls, the stolen credit card, the handwriting, and the unusual expressions in the message. The handwriting would later be matched to the tarot card by the Questioned Document Section of the Secret Service. The message confirmed again that there was more than one sniper. The note enabled investigators to identify the priest in Ashland and Officer Derek Baliles. Baliles was able to match the voice he heard with a recording of the call to Lefkoff. Monsignor Sullivan was able to report references to the Alabama crime, the tarot card code, and the reference to the Linda Franklin killing. The note linked several items that the police had previously not connected. The mention of the Visa card connected the sniper to the theft of the card in Arizona from Greyhound bus driver Jill Farrell on March 25, and to Tacoma, where records indicated that the card had been used to buy gas in April. When task force members contacted Derek Baliles and the priest in Ashland, Virginia, they linked the snipers to the Alabama shooting.

The message contained instructions, demands, and deadlines, but the task force did not receive the message in time to meet the deadlines. The ziploc bag was not found until late and was not handed over to ATF investigators until 2 A.M. By the time the bag was transported to the lab, opened, analyzed, and the letter examined, it was past 6 A.M. on Sunday, the hour when the snipers said the police should expect their call. And there was

another problem. The phone number the snipers left for the Ponderosa was incorrect. They had transposed two digits. It was the number for someone's home.

Sunday, October 20

The deadline had passed. At 9:40 A.M. on Sunday, one of the pair called the FBI hot line. "Don't talk," the caller said, "Just listen. Call me God. I left a note at back of the Ponderosa. I'm trying to reach you at the Ponderosa. Be there for a call in ten minutes." But nobody was there. The hot line call takers had no idea what the Ponderosa note said. The task force had to reestablish contact. Jim Cavanaugh suggested that they broadcast an appeal for the sniper to call again. To simplify things, they would ask him to call the number he gave in his letter. Police arranged to have the telephone company reroute calls to the correct Ponderosa number and the incorrect number in the letter to the Joint Operations Center. The sniper would be able to get through on either number, without operators or transfers or protocols. At about 7 P.M. Sunday evening, Pat Downing, chief of detectives of the Montgomery, Alabama, police, called Police Chief John H. Wilson. Downing told Wilson about the phone call Scott Martino had received from the sniper task force and the possible connection of the Parker/Adams liquor store shooting in September with the sniper attacks. The idea of a connection with the sniper case had come up before in staff meetings, but seemed remote. The Alabama crime was a robbery, and eyewitness accounts and bullet fragments recovered from Parker's body initially indicated that the weapon was a .22 caliber pistol.

Montgomery Alabama police at first were skeptical that the one of the two suspects was even involved in the Alabama shooting. Wilson knew that anyone with even a parking ticket is going to "haul buggy" when police sirens are wailing all around. The suspect had been in such a hurry that witnesses saw him drop something, which turned out to be a catalog for Armalite rifle accessories. There was a gun show in town that day. Two detectives decided to pick up the catalog as potential evidence, even though they weren't sure the person who dropped it was connected to the case. The catalog had a number of fingerprints on it. Police also found a print on a receipt stapled to a small paper bag Adams was carrying. But the prints didn't match anything in local or statewide databases, or in neighboring Georgia. Alabama was not one of the 19 states electronically linked to the FBI's new national fingerprint database. Alabama investigators had prepared the prints for shipping to the FBI to look for matches, but had not yet sent them. The task force asked if a local FBI agent, Margaret Faulkner, a former Montgomery police detective, could bring the evidence - bullet fragments as well as the fingerprints - to Rockville for analysis. Wilson agreed and said Faulkner could fly up to Washington with the evidence on Monday.

About the same time the two Alabama police were talking, Chief Moose was holding a press conference in Rockville. He said, "Tonight, we will not take any questions, "We ask you to understand." After a few additional words, he added, "I would like for people in the media to carry this point. Carry it clearly and carry it often. To the person who left us a message at the Ponderosa last night, you gave us a telephone number. We do want to

talk to you. Call us at the number you provided.' "He did not mention that the deadline had passed more than twelve hours earlier.

Monday, October 21

7:57 A.M. Responding to Moose's appeal the night before, Muhammad and Malvo called back. They called the Ponderosa number from a pay phone at an Exxon station at Parham Road and West Broad Street in Henrico County, 8208 W Broad St, Richmond, VA (37.62999, -77.53474) just north of Richmond. Baltimore FBI agent Jackie Dalrymple took the call, which had been automatically forwarded to the command center in Rockville. Previously, she had received a number of phone calls from people calling the Ponderosa about meals or work schedules. When the phone rang at 7:57 A.M., a voice said, "Is this the Ponderosa?"

"Um, who is this?" Dalrymple asked.

"Don't say anything, but listen," the caller said, and he started a tape that he was holding next to the phone.

"Dearest police, call me God. Do not release to the press. Five red stars. You have our terms. They are non-negotiable. If you choose option one, you will hold a press conference, stating to the media that you believe you have caught the sniper like a duck in a noose. Repeat every word exactly as you heard it. If you choose option two, be sure to remember he (sic) will not deviate. P.S. Your children are not safe."

"I am listening," Dalrymple said, "I am listening." But the caller hung up.

The call had lasted 38 seconds. It matched perfectly the Ponderosa note - the same code phrases, the stars, and the threat to children. No one but the sniper would know those details. After two weeks of bungled attempts, the snipers and the police were finally in contact.

At 8:03 A.M., six minutes later, Dalrymple informed US Marshall Inspector Tim Hein of the call. To Hein, the six minute delay seemed like six hours. Every second counted in cases like this. Armed with the number from caller ID, and with the aid of the local phone company, Hein traced the call to a pay phone outside the Exxon station at Parham Road and West Broad Street within minutes. The gas station was located about four miles from where the snipers had made their futile Ponderosa call the day before.

At 8:07, Hein told top FBI and ATF officials at the JOC where the phone call originated. They, in turn, telephoned an FBI command post in Richmond. Federal agents and local police had pay phones throughout the area under surveillance. Henrico County police Chief Henry W. Stanley gave the order for his officers to get to the Exxon station. Stanley and the other officials in Richmond did not know that the sniper had hung up ten minutes before. They believed he was still on the phone. At 8:08 A.M., Henrico County police officer Roger Condrey spotted a man in a white van on a pay phone at the Exxon station. Condrey radioed in what he saw and the on-scene commander gave the order for officers to move in. They closed down the streets and secured the gas station. The response was anything but soft.

8:32 A.M. It was raining that Monday morning, October 21 as Edgar Rivera Garcia, a carpenter from Mexico, was sitting in a white Plymouth minivan with a roof rack, talking on a pay phone at the Exxon station. He had been on the phone thirty-five minutes, parked close enough to the phone kiosk that he didn't have to get out of his vehicle. Across the street, Jose Morales, an illegal immigrant, walked across the parking lot of a convenience store to call his wife in Guatemala. Thirty-five minutes after the sniper had called the Rockville task force; Henrico SWAT officers swept across the parking lot of the Exxon station, hauled Edgar Rivera Garcia out of his van at gunpoint, and grabbed Morales as well. Later, they seized the pay phones. Weeks later, investigators learned how close they had come to catching the sniper. Malvo would tell his interrogators that he was among the bystanders who watched the raid as it took place. "I saw the Mexicans," he said, "I watched it, but I wasn't in the car." The call to Dalrymple had in fact raised new questions for investigators, beginning with the reference to the duck in a noose. Investigators quickly learned that it came from an obscure folk tale about a boastful rabbit that tried to catch a duck in a noose. The duck was caught, but flew away, dragging the rabbit until it finally let go and fell. Some task force members listening to the tape thought the caller was Hispanic, others thought he sounded Caribbean, possibly Jamaican.

Tuesday, October 22

Early Tuesday morning, Conrad Johnson, a thirty-five year old bus driver with a wife and two children stood on the steps of a blue-and-white public bus operated by Montgomery County's Ride On transit system. A female trainee was also on board the bus. They had just had breakfast and the trainee was sitting in a front seat on the right side. It was still dark, and Johnson, the son of Jamaican immigrants, was illuminated by the lights inside his bus which was parked at the morning staging area just off Connecticut Avenue in Aspen Hill, 14100 Grand Pre Rd, Silver Spring, MD 20906 (39.08679, -77.07454).

At 5:55 A.M., as Johnson was standing in the doorway of the bus, a gunshot boomed from the nearby woods. Johnson staggered back and fell in the aisle. A .223 rifle bullet had struck the right side of his upper abdomen, destroying most of his liver, pancreas, and right renal artery. The trainee called 911. After about two and a half hours, Johnson died on the operating table at 9:26 A.M. Back at the shooting scene, a massive search was underway, and traffic was in gridlock.

About 1:20 P.M., Nick DeCarlo organized a team of about 30 federal agents and local police to search the underbrush with rakes in the woods just beyond some basketball courts that seemed a likely spot for the sniper. About fifty feet inside the woods (39.08784, -77.07423), they found a ziploc bag impaled on a broken tree branch. Inside was another ziploc bag containing a note. County police forensics specialist David McGill pulled the bag off the tree branch and placed it in an evidence bag. At the

evidence truck, the note was handed to federal agents for processing, but Lieutenant Phil Raum copied the message as exactly as he could. The front side said, "For you, Mr. Police. Call me God. Do not release to the press. P.S. Your children are not safe. Can you hear us now? Do not play these childish games with us. You know our demands. Your choice. Thank you." The other side read: "For you Mr. Police.'Call me God.' Do not release to the press. You did not respond the message (sic). You departed from what we told you to say, and you departed from the time. Your incompetence has cost you another life. You have until 9 A.M. to deliver the money. And until eight a.m. to deliver this response, 'We have caught the sniper like a duck in a noose...' to let us know that you have our demands." The note was clear and chilling, and it was already hours past the deadline the snipers had stipulated.

At 7:14 P.M., Moose was back again in front of the reporters with a message for the snipers although it was more than ten hours past the deadline for the payment mentioned in the latest note. Moose read the following message: "For the past several days, you have attempted to communicate with us. We have researched the options you stated and found that it is not possible electronically to comply in the manner that you requested. However, we remain open and ready to talk to you about what you have mentioned. It is important that we do this without anyone else getting hurt. Call us at the same number you used before...If you would feel more comfortable, a private post office box or another secure method can be provided. You indicated that this is about more than violence. We are waiting to hear from you."

The task force was trying to put off the killer's demand for money without rejecting it. The authorities were not about to put \$10 million into the Visa card account. The FBI had discussed putting aside \$100,000 to use in the event negotiations reached the stage of an exchange of cash. That was a lot of money for the local authorities, but not for the federal agencies. Even so, the amount of money that could be retrieved from an ATM at any one time would be limited. The snipers apparently did not realize the limitations on ATM withdrawals.

Two key developments occurred that day, however. Just before 7 A.M., Mitch Hollers, an FBI fingerprint expert in Washington, D.C., took the prints from the gun catalog brought from Montgomery, Alabama, on Monday, and ran them through the FBI's new Integrated Automated Fingerprint Identification System (IAFIS). The system, only three years old, held a computerized database of forty-four million individuals arrested by an array of police agencies across the country. When Hollers ran the prints, there was a match - a Jamaican teenager who had been arrested as an illegal immigrant in Bellingham, Washington, on December 19, 2001. His name was Lee Boyd Malvo. When the INS record was pulled, it said he was involved in a custody dispute between his mother and a man named John "Mohammed. (sic)" Police now had two names that they could search on in their databases.

In Tacoma, Washington, investigators finally went to interview Robert Holmes, five days after he had first called. Holmes told them about Muhammad and his rifle, his sidekick,

Malvo, and Muhammad's ex-wife, Mildred. Holmes knew that Muhammad hated his ex-wife and that she lived in the Washington suburbs. He told the FBI about Muhammad's search for a silencer, and he gave them the silencer components that Muhammad left at his house.

Wednesday, October 23

With two names in hand, the huge law enforcement resources available to the task force swung into action. Snapshots of Malvo from his arrest with his mother by the Border Patrol in December 2001 were transmitted to law enforcement agencies across the country. A picture of Muhammad taken when he was detained by immigration officials in Miami in December 2001 wasn't very clear. About 1 A.M., after learning that Muhammad had once lived in California and had a driver's license, US Marshal Billy Sorukas called Marshal Ralph Garofalo, an old friend in San Diego where he had once worked, and asked if he could get a picture of Muhammad. Garofalo called back an hour later to report he had a black-and-white photo of Muhammad and was told to e-mail it as quickly as possible. At 2:30 A.M., Sorukas contacted the FBI's Criminal Justice Information Services Division in Clarksburg, West Virginia, to request an "off-line," or specialized law enforcement computer sweep, on Muhammad and Malvo that would turn up any contact they might have had with police. He had already asked Michael P. Moran, a Marshal Inspector working out of the Rockville command center, to run Muhammad's name through the FBI's Rapid Start database of sniper leads. Moran called back to report one hit. Under the heading, "Facts of Complaint", the entry briefly detailed Holmes' account of Muhammad and Malvo and the rifle. The report also detailed Muhammad's bitter divorce from a wife "who may reside in the Washington, D.C., area. When police discovered the anger Muhammad had exhibited toward his ex-wife, Mildred, they went to her home in Clinton, Maryland, and placed her and her children in protective custody.

At 5 A.M., a fax came in to Sorukas' office from Clarksburg, which briefly referred to Muhammad's encounter with a Baltimore policeman outside a doughnut shop on October 8. Sorukas couldn't tell what happened from the entry. Brian Sheppard, a Deputy US Marshal in Baltimore was asked to find out. In Baton Rouge, authorities interviewed Muhammad's relatives. In Tacoma, FBI agents had returned to Robert Holmes' house to play a recording for Holmes of Malvo's call to the Rockville police. Holmes identified Malvo's voice and also mentioned that bullets from Muhammad's rifle might still be in the tree trunk out back. Task force authorities didn't want to risk damaging the slugs in Holmes' yard by trying to dig them out of the tree stump, so they ordered the entire stump be removed and flown east for proper analysis. But they wanted it to be done discreetly without the media's knowledge. If the media reported the removal of the tree stump, the snipers might find out and dispose of the rifle they were using. The FBI, meanwhile, tracked down Malvo's mother, Una James, in Seattle and interviewed her. She was vague about how she met Muhammad, but told agents her son had left Florida to join him. She recounted how she had gone to find him and asked the Bellingham police for help. She said the only way she could contact her son was through

a phone number of a nurse who lived in Tacoma and was a friend of Muhammad. She gave the FBI the nurse's name and phone number.

On Wednesday morning, word began spreading through the Joint Operations Center that the pieces of the puzzle were beginning to fall into place. After weeks of disappointed hopes and dozens of names wiped off the suspect board, Muhammad and Malvo were now the prime suspects. Task force leaders were concerned the sniper might strike again. A heated debate had been raging between the negotiating experts, who had painstakingly crafted Moose's replies to the sniper, and the profilers. The negotiating experts, led by the FBI's Gary Noesner, chief of the Bureau's Crisis Negotiation Unit, believed that the task force should do everything possible to engage the sniper. Dialogue might prevent more shooting. Cavanaugh agreed, recalling his experience with the Branch Davidians at Waco, where he had negotiated at least a temporary cease-fire. The negotiators believed it was necessary to respond to the sniper's messages. Other members believed that responding would only empower the sniper. For the moment, they prevailed. At first, the negotiating team was not even allowed to see the latest note from the sniper. Noesner was furious. His people were staffing the phones. If the sniper called again, how could they respond if they did not even know the contents of the note? Finally, that morning they were told the contents of the note.

By noon, the task force had drafted a reply which included the line: "You asked us to say, 'we have caught the sniper like a duck in a noose.'" Cavanaugh favored releasing the message immediately, but the profilers thought this sentence might be inflammatory. Forsythe would later seek a meeting with Moose to urge him to hear both sides. Publicly, Moose was saying little. At a news conference shortly after noon, he announced that ballistics comparisons matched the bullet that had killed Conrad Johnson to the other victims. Task force leaders had agreed that Moose would make the duck-in-a-noose response at 2 P.M. The media got word that Moose would make a statement at 2 P.M. The hour passed, and then several more. Noesner began calling FBI colleagues to find out the cause of the delay. He was told that Gary Bald was uncomfortable with the statement and that he had postponed its delivery because he wanted more input from the profilers. Cavanaugh was concerned that the delay was increasing the risk of another shooting. The license number of the Chevy Caprice was now quickly run through the crime computer databases. Numerous hits came back from tag checks throughout the Washington area over the past three weeks. Many were in stunning proximity to the killing sites. The task force now had pictures of the suspects, the make and model of a vehicle and license tags linked to them. But they had very little direct evidence that Muhammad and Malvo were the snipers. Even if the task force located the car, they would need a warrant to arrest the occupants and search the car. Muhammad had not been linked to any state offenses. However, the combination of an old domestic order of protection, Muhammad's possession of a rifle, and the rifle's out-of-state manufacture would make some sort of federal charge possible. The only evidence they had against Malvo were his fingerprints on the catalog and the shopping bag receipt at the Alabama liquor store shooting. If the prints placed Malvo at the Alabama shooting, and the calls to

Officer Baliles and the priest in Ashland linked the Alabama shooting to the sniper case, then Malvo could be detained on a federal warrant as a material witness.

At 11:50 P.M., Chief Moose finally appeared to announce that an arrest warrant had been issued for John Muhammad, also known as John Williams, on a federal firearms charge. While the charge had nothing to do with the sniper shootings, Moose said, Muhammad might have information "material to our investigation." Moose added that Muhammad, who was probably armed, might be accompanied by a juvenile. He urged people to call 911 or the FBI tip line if they had any information. Just beyond Frederick, Maryland, off I-70, a secluded rest stop (39.52458, -77.60062) with phones, bathrooms, vending machines, and picnic tables was located about a mile northwest of the small town of Jerusalem on the east slope of South Mountain. Malvo and Muhammad had indicated the spot on one of the maps later found in their car. They arrived there Wednesday night and backed into a parking spot where they could see who came and went. Muhammad lay down in the back seat and went to sleep. Malvo stayed in the front seat. He would say later, "I was supposed to cover, but I failed." He, too, soon fell asleep.

Thursday, October 24

Whitney Donahue, a refrigerator repairman who maintains supermarket refrigerators all around the Washington area, but lives in Greencastle, Pennsylvania, also knew about the rest stop and liked to break up his drive home there. His last stop that evening had been at a Shoppers Food Warehouse in Manassas, Virginia, not far from where Dean Meyers was killed. He was listening to the radio in his white van when he heard the news about Muhammad and Malvo. He wrote down their names and the car's license on the back of his time sheet. He thought the chances of spotting the car on his way home were about nil, but it would be interesting to keep a lookout during the hour or more it would take to reach home.

At about 12:30 A.M., Donahue pulled into the rest area. As he did, his headlights swept over the only two other cars there. One belonged to the rest stop's custodian, Larry Blank, whom he knew. The other, which was backed into its spot, was a Chevy Caprice. Donahue noted the New Jersey license plate, NDA-21Z. His heart started pounding as he said to himself, "Oh man." He pulled into a parking space, front first, across from the Caprice. He dialed 911 and reached the police dispatcher in Washington County, on the other side of the mountain. He could hear them, but they couldn't hear him. They hung up. He tried again but, again, the connection was bad. He went to the rest room, but when he came back he went to the rear of his van. He pretended to be examining one of his tires, but stole some glances at the Caprice and confirmed the tag number. Through the window glare, he thought he saw two people inside the car. He got back in his van and drove to an area of the parking lot where tractor trailers park. He was now out of sight of the Caprice. He dialed 911 and this time got a good connection. Washington County dispatch center transferred him to the Frederick County dispatchers because the rest stop technically was inside Frederick County. At the request of the dispatcher, Donahue confirmed the license plate number.

By 3:30 A.M. police assembled a nineteen-member SWAT team in a parking lot at a nearby McDonald's. There were five members from Montgomery County, five from the state police, and nine from the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team. A six-member assault team would attack the car and extract the occupants. It was now almost 3:30 A.M. and members of the task force were descending on the rest stop. Sniper teams were assigned to the woods to cover the entire area. When the snipers and perimeter teams were in place, the assault group entered the woods and made its way to the car. They thought either Muhammad or Malvo would be awake and keeping watch. The assault team halted near two large oak trees just at the edge of the woods, about twenty yards from the car. The men were helmeted and heavily armed. They wore gray gloves and black uniforms. Beyond the edge of the woods, there was no cover. It would take only a few seconds to reach the car. The "worst case" would be if the vehicle moved. The keys probably would be in the ignition. But they guessed it would take the occupants four seconds to react, turn the key, start the car, put it in gear, and start moving. The team thought they could be on the suspects in three and a half seconds. They couldn't see inside the tinted windows and weren't 100 percent certain the suspects were in the car. The six men rushed the car, smashing the windows and lighting up the interior with the bright lights on their automatic weapons.

Malvo was asleep lying on his right side in the front seat, his head by the steering wheel. He was pulled out. Inside the brightly lit car, the team could see Muhammad sit up in the back seat and raise his hands. Two of them got him out. Two others retrieved the keys from the ignition and opened the trunk carefully. They didn't know what was inside it. The assault had lasted about 30 seconds. Muhammad and Malvo were handcuffed. The assault team leader noticed a small lateral oblong hole cut in the car's trunk just above the license plate. The SWAT team turned Muhammad and Malvo over to the State Police.