



Assessing the Church Shooting in Sutherland Springs, Texas, November 5, 2017

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This article presents an overview and assessment of Devin Patrick Kelley's shooting rampage in Sutherland Springs, Texas, on November 5, 2017. It discusses the incident, the attacker's biographical background, his pathway to violence, and the tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) used in his attack. Since this article was written in the attack's immediate aftermath, it is based on preliminary publicly available information, with additional information likely to provide an extensive amount of greater insight into this active shooter attack.

The Incident

On November 5, 2017, at around 11:20 am, Devin Patrick Kelley, aged 26, conducted a mass shooting at the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas, killing 26 persons and injuring 20 others while they were attending regular Sunday service. Kelley, who lived with his parents in nearby New Braunfels, Texas, had reportedly targeted the church because his estranged wife and her parents had worshipped there. Kelley's firearm was a Ruger AR-556 semi-automatic rifle. At the time of the shooting, only his wife's grandmother was in attendance, and she was among those fatally shot. Following the shooting, as he exited the church, he was confronted by Stephen Willeford, a local resident (and former NRA firearms instructor), who shot Kelley twice. Despite being wounded, Kelley, who had dropped his rifle, managed to flee in his Ford Explorer, as Willeford fired additional rounds through the vehicle's window. Willeford managed to flag down a passing pickup truck, and they pursued Kelley in a high-speed chase for about 10 miles when he lost control of his vehicle, crashing it. Kelley was then found dead of a self-inflicted gunshot to his head. Two handguns were found in Kelley's vehicle: a Glock 9 mm and a Ruger .22-caliber.

Biographical Information

Kelley was raised in New Braunfels, Texas. He attended New Braunfels High School, where he was described as an "outcast." After graduating, he enlisted in the U.S. Air Force, serving in logistics readiness at Holloman Air Force Base in New Mexico, from 2010 until 2014. He married in April 2011, but soon after, was charged with assaulting his wife and fracturing his stepson's skull. At around that time, his behavioral problems led to his being admitted to Peak Behavioral Health Services, a mental health facility in Santa Teresa, New Mexico. In June 2012, Kelley escaped from that facility, but was arrested at a nearby bus terminal in El Paso, Texas. In November 2012, following his release from the mental health facility, he was convicted for the assault on his wife and stepson by a general court-martial on two counts of Article 128 UCMJ. He was sentenced to 12 months of confinement at a Navy brig in San Diego and a reduction in rank to the lowest grade of E-1. While in jail, Kelley's marriage ended in divorce. In May 2014, he was dismissed from the Air Force with a bad conduct discharge.

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After his release, Kelley returned to New Braunfels, where he lived at his parents' home in a converted barn. Shortly thereafter, in June 2013, in Comal County, he was investigated for sexual assault and rape, and for a physical assault of Danielle Shields, his girlfriend at the time, but no charges were filed. On April 14, 2014, he married Shields. After the couple moved into a mobile home in a recreational vehicle park in Colorado Springs, Colorado, in August 2014 he was charged with committing animal cruelty.ⁱ This misdemeanor charge was dismissed in March 2016 once he completed his deferred sentence of probation. In a separate incident involving Kelley, in January 2015, a protective order was granted against him by a resident of El Paso County, Colorado.

At the time of the shooting, Kelley was living at his parents' property in New Braunfels. He was licensed by the Texas Department of Public Safety as a security guard, and was a security worker at the Summit Vacation and RV Resort in New Braunfels. He had previously worked as an unarmed security guard at the Schlitterbahn water park in New Braunfels, but was fired after less than six weeks on the job because the season was reaching its peak and he was considered a "bad fit."ⁱⁱ

Pathway into Violence

Kelley's pathway into violence was a lengthy process. According to Calhoun, a pathway into violence consists of six phases. The first phase is **grievance**. Although Kelley had engaged in violent actions over a lengthy period due to a variety of factors, it can be speculated that the target for the grievance driving his murderous rampage was likely his estrangement from his second wife, who had sometimes attended the First Baptist Church with her family.

The second phase is **violent ideation**. As an expression of such ideation, it is reported that Kelley had kept sending threatening text messages to his estranged wife's mother.

While violent ideation is not necessarily indicative that an individual is likely to carry out a violent attack, certain conditions are necessary to drive a minority of such individuals to cross the threshold into violence. In the case of Kelley, such conditions were not publicly known because they were likely to be under investigation, but, in general, they consist of an overwhelming feeling of rage, hopelessness and suicide about one's own circumstances, with the taking of revenge against the target of one's grievance. Furthermore, once the threshold is crossed, in preparing to conduct an attack, two types of responses are likely: reactive or predatory. A reactive response generally takes place the day (or a few days) of crossing the threshold into violence, while a predatory response usually takes weeks, months, or, in some cases, several years before an attack takes place.

In Kelley's case, his response was predatory, as he appeared to take a lengthy period to plan and prepare his attack. The third phase in the trajectory is **planning**. It involves planning the type of attack to be conducted, the identity and location of the target to be attacked, and the types of weapons to be used in the attack, and the dates for the attack. Although it is not publicly known how and when Kelley had planned the particulars for his attack, it is reported

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that he had entered the fourth phase, **planning**. In planning his attack, Kelley appeared to exhibit the characteristics of a predatory response, as he had started accumulating his weapons and ammunition over a period of several years. It is reported that he had purchased his firearms at gun stores in Colorado and in Texas between 2014 and 2017.ⁱⁱⁱ In another preparatory step, on October 29, a week prior to the shooting, he posted a photo on his Facebook profile of an AR-pattern rifle – the type of rifle that he used in the attack.^{iv}

In the last pre-incident phase, **probing and breaches**, on the morning of his attack Kelley drove his vehicle to the gas station across the street from the church. In the final phase, **attack**, Kelley exited his vehicle wearing his tactical gear and began firing in the direction of the church.

Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTPs)

Tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) refer to an attacker’s strategy, action and weaponry used to achieve an operation’s overall objectives. In the case of Kelley’s shooting attack, his TTPs consisted of wearing black tactical gear, a ballistic vest and a black mask featuring a white skull face on it,^v with his weaponry consisting of a Ruger AR-556 semi-automatic rifle. He began attacking the church as part of his entrance, and, once inside, he proceeded to fire methodically up and down an aisle at the people in the pews.^{vi} Also as part of his TTPs, he had planned to drive his vehicle to escape from the scene of his attack.

ⁱ http://www.dailycamera.com/state-west-news/ci_31432215/gunman-who-killed-26-people-texas-cited-cruelty.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.mysanantonio.com/news/local/article/Suspected-church-shooter-grew-up-in-New-12334947.php>.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.clickorlando.com/news/national/how-was-texas-shooter-able-to-legally-purchase-a-gun>.

^{iv} <https://www.yahoo.com/news/devin-patrick-kelley-former-air-003843017.html>.

^v <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/survivors-texas-massacre-recalls-moments-gunman-entered-church-article-1.3616562>.

^{vi} <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/08/us/texas-shooting-video-devin-kelley.html>.