



Man charged with murder after car rams anti-far-right protesters in Charlottesville

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James Fields, from Ohio, arrested following attack at ‘Unite the Right’ gathering, and two police officers die in helicopter crash

A man has been arrested and charged with murder after a car rammed into a group of people peacefully protesting against a white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, on Saturday, killing one person and injuring 19.

In a separate incident, two police officers were killed when their helicopter crashed.

Police said the fatal victim of the car ramming was a 32-year-old woman and that they were attempting to notify her family before releasing more details.

Col Martin Kumer, the superintendent of Albemarle-Charlottesville Regional Jail, told the Guardian that 20-year-old James Fields of Ohio had been arrested following the attack.

“He has been charged with second degree murder, three counts of malicious wounding and failing to stop at an accident that resulted in a death,” Kumer said in an email.

The Richmond FBI field office said it was also opening a civil rights investigation of the accident along with the Justice Department’s civil rights division and the district US attorney’s office.

Ohio state vehicle registration records show that a Dodge Challenger car with a licence plate

matching the one used in the attack is registered to Fields at his address in Maumee.

A Virginia police helicopter officials said was assisting with the rally crashed outside Charlottesville, killing the pilot and a trooper.

State police said in a statement the helicopter was “assisting public safety resources with the ongoing situation” when it crashed in a wooded area. The pilot, Lieutenant H Jay Cullen, 48, of Midlothian, Virginia, and Trooper-pilot Berke Bates of Quinton, Virginia, died at the scene.

The deaths came at the end of a day marked by violent clashes between far-right nationalists and people who had come to protest their occupation of a downtown park containing a statue of the Confederate general Robert E Lee.

Donald Trump condemned the “violence on many sides”, but faced criticism for failing to directly denounce the far-right demonstrators.

Witnesses said those hit by the car were people peacefully protesting the planned white supremacist rally and footage showed the vehicle crashing into another car, throwing people over the top of it.

The driver was later arrested, authorities said, on suspicion of criminal homicide.

The photographer Pat Jarrett, who was close by when the incident took place, told the Guardian: “A gray Dodge Charger plowed into a sedan and then into a minivan. Bodies flew. People were terrified and screaming. Those closest to it said it was definitely a violent attack. The driver, who people later described as a skinny white guy with a straggly beard, reversed out of there and drove off, the front end of his car all smashed up.”

The death was announced in a tweet by the Charlottesville mayor, Mike Signer, who wrote: “I am heartbroken that a life has been lost here. I urge all people of good will – go home.”

Speaking at a press conference on Saturday evening, the governor of Virginia, Terry McAuliffe, who had earlier declared a state of emergency, said he had a message to the white supremacists: “Go home... Shame on you. You pretend you are patriots, but you are anything but a patriot.”

Earlier on Saturday afternoon, Trump, speaking from Bedminster, New Jersey, at a scheduled event for veterans’ healthcare, said: “We condemn in the strongest possible terms this egregious display of hatred, bigotry and violence on many sides, on many sides.” Trump added that this has been “going on for a long time in our country. Not Donald Trump, not Barack Obama. A long, long time.”

A White House spokesperson later amplified the president’s remarks, telling the Guardian: “The president was condemning hatred, bigotry and violence from all sources and all sides. There was violence between protesters and counter-protesters today.”

The Republican senator Marco Rubio tweeted that it was important for Trump to describe the events as a “terror attack by white supremacists”.

The US attorney general, Jeff Sessions, said: “The violence and deaths in Charlottesville strike at the heart of American law and justice. When such actions arise from racial bigotry and hatred, they betray our core values and cannot be tolerated.

“I have talked with FBI director Chris Wray, FBI agents on the scene, and law enforcement officials for the state of Virginia. The FBI has been supporting state and local authorities throughout the day. US attorney Rick Mountcastle has commenced a federal investigation and will have the full support of the Department of Justice. Justice will prevail.”

The police declared an unlawful assembly alert and a spokesman for the force said the Virginia national guard “will closely monitor the situation and will be able to rapidly respond and provide additional assistance if needed”.

The car attack came about two hours after state police in riot gear had cleared Emancipation Park, the site of the Robert E Lee statue. The city’s decision in February to remove the statue drew earlier protests by the “alt-right” and the Ku Klux Klan.

At about 11.40am ET, after almost an hour of missile exchanges, gas attacks and intermittent face-to-face melees, police cleared the park with riot troops. The far-right groups were largely compliant, but they were forced to run the gauntlet of counter-protesters as they walked west along Market Street.

After a brief stalemate, a hard core of about 100 far-right protesters relocated to McIntire Park, about two miles away from downtown, and gathered to hear speakers who had been scheduled for the “Unite the Right” event.

One of the speakers, the far-right figurehead Richard Spencer, said he had been maced on the way into the park and lashed out at police and city authorities.

“Never in my life have I felt like the government was cracking down on me until today,” said Spencer, who was flush-faced. “We came in peace and we were effectively thrown to the wolves.”

He said that “militarized police”, whom he compared to “stormtroopers”, “did not protect us, they funneled us towards the antifa ... I am a citizen of the USA”.

He said that they would not back down from protesting against the statue. When he mentioned Mayor Signer by name, the crowd chanted “Jew! Jew! Jew!”

Around the park, members of the far right were nursing and treating minor wounds. One of them, who declined to give his name, was bleeding from the head, and claimed to have been struck with an iron bar. Another young man, with a swastika tattoo on his chest and blood on his forehead, told photographers: “If you take my picture, I’ll cut you. I’m not even kidding.”

The meeting abruptly broke up just before 2pm, with some of the departing far-right demonstrators saying that counter-protesters were coming.

The local rightwing activist and former Daily Caller writer Jason Kessler had organized the event, planned to involve speeches from leading far right ideologues including Spencer, the podcaster Mike Peinovich, AKA “Mike Enoch”, and Matthew Heimbach, leader of the Traditionalist Workers party.

Throughout the morning leading up to the clearing of Emancipation Park, massed contingents from neo-Confederate and neofascist groups such as the League of the South, the National Socialist Movement, and the Traditionalist Workers party had made their way along Market Street towards the park’s entrances.

Just before 11am, a formation of about 200 people were briefly halted by protesters before moving towards the south-east gate. One of their number was seen to mace a young woman who approached the group. By the time they made it in, there were well over 500 far-right protesters in the park, with about 1,000 counter-protesters in the street.

This parade was watched over by Virginia state police, Charlottesville police officers, and armed “Three Percent” militia members, who were dressed in fatigues and open-carrying rifles.

Offering explicitly fascist chants like “You will not replace us” and “Blood and soil”, they had been met by counter-protesters seeking to prevent their entrance to the park. Some counter protesters, including many marching under red and black antifascist banners, sought to block the streets. This led to altercations with far-right groups, who were seen using chemical weapons, sticks and shields on their opponents.

Elsewhere, a group of clergy including Dr Cornel West linked arms at the top of stairs leading to the park in its southeast corner. The Rev Seth Wispelwey, of Sojourners United Church of Christ in Charlottesville, said of the faith-based action: “We’re here to counteract white supremacy, and to let people know that it is a system of evil and a system of sin.”

By 11.15am ET, when most of the far-right protesters were in the park, missiles such as empty bottles were being exchanged near the south east entrance. Far-right supporters formed a “Roman tortoise” shield wall at the gate.

Counter-protesters cleared when a gas weapon was released. Shortly later, smoke grenades were launched from the park into the crowd of counter-protesters. On both occasions, those in the street beat a temporary retreat.

As more projectiles flew, and successive attempts were made by the rightwing group to beat back counterprotesters, police made the decision to move in.

Steve Thomas, from Lynchburg, Virginia, had been a prominent participant in the counter protest, frequently remonstrating with the protesters. “I think that what we are witnessing here

has always been simmering beneath the surface, and now has been emboldened and enabled by the Trump administration's politics and rhetoric," he said.

On Friday night, a torchlight parade of hundreds of far right marchers entered the UVA campus, and set upon a much smaller group of counter protesters who were surrounding a statue of Thomas Jefferson.

In February, the city council narrowly voted to remove and sell the Robert E Lee statue, and to rename the park in which it stands from Lee Park to Emancipation Park. This was the culmination of a campaign to remove the statue started by a local high school student, Zyahna Bryant.

It was part of a wave of such removals of Confederate monuments across the south, which began after Dylann Roof massacred nine African American churchgoers in Charleston, South Carolina.

In response, last May, Richard Spencer led a torchlit white nationalist parade around the park. Then, on 8 July, about 50 members of the Loyal White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan held a rally in the park, and were greeted by around 1,000 counter-protesters. The day ended in turmoil after police used tear gas on some counter-protesters following the Klan's departure, and made 23 arrests.

Ben Jacobs and the Associated Press contributed to this report