

Hostage in School

By **BILL JOHNSON**
and **TOD WATTS**
Staff Writers

A gunman who shouted "I've come to die, kill me!" was shot to death by police outside St. Cecilia's School yesterday afternoon while his young hostage ran to safety and two armed companions held the rest of the school's pupils and teachers captive.

The man, identified by police as Melvin Burch, 25, of 1116 N. Groveland, fell dead, his body hit by pistol shots and shotgun blasts, shortly after he left the school building holding 10-year-old John Ardis, son of former Ald. James Ardis, at gunpoint.

Eyewitnesses said Burch left the school, a pistol in his right hand pointed at the head of young Ardis.

Burch fired two shots from his pistol as he walked around the side of the building, shouting "I've come to die, kill me, kill me."

The Ardis boy then ran for his life while Burch fell victim to the fusillade fired by police who surrounded the building.

The other two armed men were arrested after holding the school's students and teachers captive from about 2:30 p.m. until shortly before 4 p.m.

The hostages, although badly frightened and shaken, were not injured and were released by the two gunmen inside the school about an hour after police had killed the man outside. The gunmen were then arrested.

The other gunmen, Eddie "Duke" Blake, 31, who gave police an address of 439 W. Fourth, and Robert Funches, 21, who said he lived at 436 W. Sixth, were being held without charge last night in Peoria County jail.

Police said the three men apparently started their rampage with an armed robbery in which they obtained a sup-

ply of guns and ammunition at Brown's Auto Store, 416 SW Adams, just a block from the Peoria police station, about 2:10 p.m.

About 15 to 20 minutes later, the carload of men pulled up to a door near the southwest corner of the school at 602 W. Richmond, officers were told.

The trio left the car engine running, confronted a group

noticed the late model car with the engine running near the rear door of the school.

He said it matched the general description of the car used in the armed robbery so he drove up on the lot to investigate.

An unidentified teacher came out of the building and told Davis about the armed men in the basement, Davis said.

"As I ran past a basement window to radio for help, there were several shots," he said. Before the battle was over, the basement windows of the school were riddled with bullets.

"One of the teachers told me that one of the men had issued a threat that they would kill five children for every one of them that was killed," Davis said. He said the men had also threatened that they had explosives inside the building.

Within minutes of the officer's radio alert, the building was surrounded with Peoria policemen, who were joined by Peoria County, State and several Federal Bureau of Investigation agents.

During the hour and a half ordeal, officers could be seen crouched by any available cover in the area, brandishing shotguns or holding pistols in their hands.

Police stood behind trees, leaned against the sides of nearby buildings and knelt behind squad cars watching for movement past the windows or near the doors.

A COMMAND post was set up in the nearby parking lot of Peoria High School. High school officials were notified and told to hold students in class until the armed men were apprehended.

An officer said the high school students had been told to move from the west side of the building and told not to leave school.

On The Inside

Additional stories and pictures are on the following pages:

A-10:

"I'm still scared," echo 3 boys who fled.

A-11:

Teacher told us to get under desks, student says.

B-1:

Pictures of the 90 minutes of terror.

D-16:

Phone call dials on-the-spot news from gunmen.

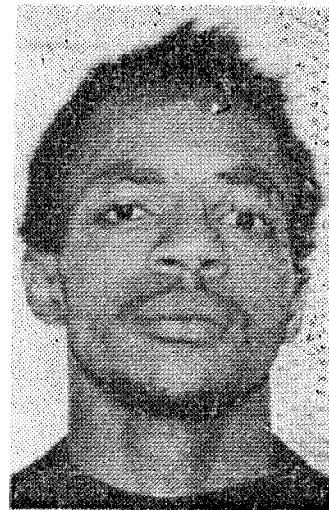
Teachers, pupils find gun drama a terrifying nightmare.

of students on the playground and forced them inside the school at gunpoint through an old wooden door that was once used to deliver coal.

Inside they surprised Mrs. Patricia Bauer, 36, of 812 W. Eleanor, two other women, and several students making decorations in the basement cafeteria. They also brought another class of students down into the basement, officers said.

Word of the three armed men spread throughout the old two-story brick school building and police were quickly aware of the situation.

Peoria Police Sgt. Donald Davis was in the area and



MELVIN BURCH

Peoria Police Sgt. John Simmons and several other officers attempted to enter the building through a door on the northwest side.

They said they were quickly driven back by an unknown number of shots, many of which passed through the door the policemen had just opened. One bullet passed through the door window as it eased shut when the officers fled to safety.

Police said gunfire erupted from three sides of the building, the east, west and the south. They could give no estimate of the number of shots fired.

Officers were ordered not to return the shots at the men inside the building because of the hostages and other students and teachers who were trapped on the second floor.

Bullets bounced off a car in the parking lot behind the building and struck a house. Slugs fired out the east side of the building fell harmlessly on the athletic

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field of Peoria High School. Several bullets struck the Central Park Swimming Pool building and the high school.

Police said the three armed men were apparently shooting at the policemen and also firing "wildly" through the windows at no particular target.

After the gunshots subsided, Burch emerged through the same door police had just attempted to enter and was holding the Ardis boy as hostage.

Officer Richard Gamble said he was standing near the door when Burch and the small boy came outside. He said Burch was armed with two .38 caliber pistols, one of which he was holding against the boy's head.

Burch yelled "get back!" at Gamble, and fired one shot at the officer as he scrambled over an eight-foot embankment down to Richmond St. in front of the school.

Peoria Police Sgt. Donald Storey ordered the officers to retreat and yelled "Don't shoot, we'll move out of the way."

Police said Burch then walked his young hostage along the north side of the building and yelled the same phrase three times to policemen.

They quoted him as saying, "I've come to die, kill me, kill me."

As he walked around the

northeast corner of the building, he removed the gun from the boy's head and fired one shot into the air.

Police said the boy broke away from Burch and ran. Officers then opened fire on the man.

One officer, standing about 20 feet from Burch, said he fired two rounds of double 00 buckshot at the man. Several other officers shot at the man with their .38 caliber service revolvers.

Police said Burch then fell to the ground and Officer Gamble walked over to disarm the wounded man. As the officer neared Burch, Burch attempted to raise up, apparently in an attempt to fire his gun.

Another officer nearby shot at the man a final time, and Burch collapsed in the grass. Two officers later ran up and pulled the body down to the street shortly before the other two men surrendered.

Police said no more shots were fired.

Peoria Police Capt. Gail Owens said he and a teacher, Mrs. Terry Fox, entered the building to talk to the two remaining gunmen after they had sent out word they wanted to talk with police.

They also requested two lawyers, Robert Jones and James Reynolds, both who arrived on the scene, but did not talk to the men until later.

Capt. Owens said the two men made him strip off his clothes down to his under-

shorts to convince them he was not armed.

He said the two men wanted police to guarantee they would allow the two to leave without being arrested or harmed.

He said "They also asked for protection for their family. I didn't understand that."

Owens said he refused the two gunmen's demands, and told them they would not be harmed if they would surrender. The men refused to give up their guns.

MISS Juliette Whitaker, director of the day care center, Community Action Agency, said the gunmen asked to talk to her while they were in the school.

Miss Whitaker said Funches told her they were "doing this to protect their families." She said he wouldn't explain what he meant by this statement.

She said they spoke of a "list of 71 persons endangered" whom they were trying to protect.

It was Funches, she said, who asked to see the two lawyers because they were afraid the police would beat them.

John Burch, Melvin's brother, arrived on the scene and went into the building to talk with the gunmen.

Police said it was the brother who was successful in convincing the two men to give themselves up.

Blakes and Funches were immediately handcuffed and taken to county jail. Detectives said the two

men's lawyer had prevented them from talking with the suspects.

Police said they could offer no motive for the men's actions.

Police said the details of the armed robbery at Brown's Auto Store, about 20 minutes before the men entered the school were as follows:

An employe, William E. Yakley, told police he noticed three men enter the store and immediately split up and head in different directions.

Yakley said one of the men approached him and asked him where the best motel in town was located. The other two men headed for the gun counter and started talking to the clerk, Carl Kinzer.

The first man then pulled a .357 magnum revolver and yelled "Just be calm, man, this is a holdup. If you don't want these guys to get it, lay down."

Yakley said both employes and the store patrons cooperated with the gunmen, who ordered Kinzer to fill a suitcase with ten .38-caliber revolvers from a display shelf. They also took 40 boxes of ammunition and two .30-06 high-powered rifles.

Police were told the three gunmen ordered a clerk and a customer to accompany them to their car which was parked and waiting in front of the store.

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The trio released the hostages, jumped into the car and fled northwest on Adams, according to police.

The men then drove to the school, where they held the hostages for about an hour and a half. During this time, traffic in the vicinity was rerouted.

Several school buses were not allowed to pick up children at the school. Teachers were told to go on with their classes. Police made arrangements for the stranded children to get home.

Concerned parents rushed through police lines after the ordeal was over, hugging their children who were escorted from the building by police.

Members of the tactical unit of the police, wearing armored jackets, searched the school building thoroughly for any people they might have left behind.

Police said they found most of the weapons and ammunition in the basement. They said it would have been enough fire power for the men to have "holed up" for two weeks.

Some children were still crying, others were beginning to smile. Everyone kept glancing back at the noisy, quiet school building as police began their task of investigating.

As a tow truck moved from the school lot, pulling the disabled car, armed men's disabled car from beside the school, rain began to fall.

An officer said the two large side tires of the vehicle had been deflated and the keys to the car taken by another officer during the height of the confrontation.