

# Alaska Dispatch News

## **Pair of state troopers shot, killed in Tanana; local man arrested after standoff**

[Jerzy Shedlock](#)

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TANANA -- Drove of Alaska State Troopers descended on the tiny Interior Alaska village of Tanana Thursday afternoon following a fatal shooting of two of their own. Grief-stricken residents watched as troopers in full SWAT gear surrounded a small brown house with black trim and waited as the man they'd allegedly tried to arrest earlier in the afternoon holed himself inside.

Much remains unclear, but what is known is troopers Sgt. Patrick "Scott" Johnson and Gabriel "Gabe" Rich, both members of the Fairbanks Rural Service Unit, were killed in the line of duty. They were reportedly responding to a report from Wednesday night that a man had brandished a gun in the village.

According to reports from several residents, local man Arvin Kangas became irate when he wasn't paid \$150 for a couch. He allegedly tried to remove the couch from the buyer's home and made threats to some of the villagers, which one resident took seriously enough to call Tanana's village public safety officer.

On Friday, Nathaniel Lee Kangas, 19 of Tanana, was arrested for the murder of Johnson and Rich, according to a statement from trooper Spokesperson Megan Peters. Formal charges for Nathaniel Kangas are pending. Arvin Kangas, 58 of Tanana, was also taken into custody Thursday night. Arvin Kangas is charged with fourth degree assault and driving with a license revoked. The charges stem from a Wednesday incident with a Tanana village public safety officer.

The bodies of both troopers have been recovered from Tanana and are being transported to the State Medical Examiner's Office in Anchorage, with an expected arrival at 11:15 a.m. at Signature Air Cargo, located at 3600 Old International Airport Drive. From there, a small procession will accompany them to the State Medical Examiner's Office. There will be a 24-hour vigil conducted by the Alaska State Troopers and other law enforcement officers who may request to participate.

On Thursday, village public safety officer Mark Haglin called for backup from the troopers in Fairbanks, 130 miles east of Tanana. VPSOs are unarmed peace officers employed by Native nonprofit corporations with state funding. Money from the state is passed through to the nonprofits,

covering the officers' salaries and benefits. But the nonprofits write the paychecks and decide who to hire. The troopers who responded to Haglin's call tried to arrest Kangas, several residents reported. What happened next is uncertain, but ensuing events left Rich and Johnson dead and Kangas holed up inside a village home.

According to Pat Moore, a member of the Tanana city council, who said he heard the information from law enforcement officers, Kangas' son emerged from their First Avenue home and allegedly shot and killed the two troopers. Someone was able to detain the younger man, but Kangas wandered off with an assault rifle and ended up in a home a block away on Eamole Street.

Ruby Cruger, a relative of the two men involved, and several other village residents gave a similar account of events. Law enforcement officials have not yet offered an account of how the shootings happened. Sach was flown out of the village earlier in the day after being arrested. Charges in the case have yet to be filed.

Troopers spent several hours outside the home, taking cover behind rusty pickup trucks and log sheds waiting for Kangas to emerge. He eventually exited the house around 10:25 p.m.

## **History among scattered belongings**

Tanana is located 2 miles west of the junction of the Tanana and Yukon Rivers. The latter river runs along First Avenue, where Kangas' house and the scene of the shooting are located.

Off Kangas' front porch, the Yukon remains frozen as snow and ice slowly melt away in the state's early summer months. Thursday would have been a warm, pleasant day in the village had tragedy not struck. The temperature floated around the low 60s throughout the afternoon.

Kangas' small one-story home is painted dark red. Two trucks sit in the lawn. Containers and other odds and ends are scattered on the yard surrounding the modest dwelling -- a fuel tank rusted brownish orange, a weathered wooden dog sled and spare tires.

This is typical of most homes in the village. Just substitute a few snowmachines, ATVs or piles of firewood with the items strewn around Kangas' house. Residences, especially on First, are separated by abandoned wooden buildings that appear ready to topple over at any minute.

Tanana has a long history. It was a trading settlement for the Koyukon and Tanana Athabascans long before European contact. In 1880, Harper's Station, an Alaska Commercial Company trading post, was established 13 miles downriver from the present site. In 1881 Church of England missionaries from Canada built a mission 8 miles downriver. During World War II, an air base was established near Tanana as a refueling stop for the lend-lease aircraft program.

The city itself was incorporated in 1961. About two decades later, it became a first-class incorporated city in order to assume control of its local school system. It now includes many of the modern

facilities present in Alaska's rural communities: a health clinic, a post office and a runway for small aircraft.

And the town has no paved roads. Things many urban-dwelling Americans don't stop and think about are unnecessary off the road system in Alaska, like stoplights, crosswalks and sidewalks. There are none in Tanana.

## **'A black eye on the community'**

It was on that small runway that Johnson and Rich arrived earlier Thursday, around 2:30 p.m., said temporary village resident Natanel Kosydar, who works for heavy construction firm STG Inc. He and a team of workers are installing a microwave antenna at Grant Dome, a summit 17 miles south of the village, he said.

When the troopers landed, they were laughing and enjoying themselves, just two men on the job, Kosydar said.

They landed in a Cessna Caravan airplane. The plane sat next to the tarmac later in the afternoon as a team of troopers touched down in the village in another larger plane, painted white, blue and yellow with the agency's name decaled on its side.

Officers gathered in a circle after tossing a pile of gear on the dirt lot. VPSO Haglin was present there. He rubbed his eyes and appeared to get emotional in between conversations with the gathering law enforcement officials.

Tanana city council member Pat Moore drove up in a small white truck and offered some of the troopers a ride to town, though it was a short walk away from the tarmac.

Moore said both of the dead troopers had a presence in the community. Whenever a problem arose, they'd be there in two hours or less to help out, he said.

Johnson was liked by everyone in Tanana; he had a strong presence and good reputation among the locals, Moore said.

"It's going to be a black eye on the community," he said. "I never expected anything like this to happen."

The slain troopers are among a small number of [law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty in Alaska](#).

## **Mad about the government**

By a handful of locals' accounts, Kangas is a good man. Chuck Erhart, a lifelong resident of the village, said Kangas is harmless and would not hurt a soul.

“He wouldn’t hurt nobody,” he said.

Others tell a different story. They speak about a man mad at the government. They talk about a man who is a member of the “Athabascan Nation,” a small group of residents who’d like to see the village return to days past, when Alaska Natives were the sole residing race.

Ruby Cruger runs a local bed and breakfast situated atop the village’s general store and post office. Outside the store sits a lone gas pump. If villagers wish to fill up their ATVs and muddied trucks, it currently costs them \$6.39 a gallon. Besides keeping the bed and breakfast in working order and an eye around the store, Cruger lends a hand to her family. She said she is related to Kangas and his son, but only interacts with the two when they come into the store.

She said Kangas is often “raising hell about the government.” He and about a half-dozen other locals argue the need to take back the land and “kick all the white people out,” she said.

Kosydar, the construction worker, ran into Kangas on Wednesday night, down off First Avenue overlooking the Yukon. He said a small group was hanging around and talking about their project when Kangas showed up and began raving about autocracies the white man had brought down upon Natives. Kangas appeared well-versed in the subject, he said.

Erhart said his friend isn’t very well liked in the community, in part because he is always arguing the need for more Native rights. Erhart, a Native himself, said that turns some people off. But as for the standoff and holing himself up inside a home, it was simply a small retaliation against authority.

## **A standoff ends peacefully**

The standoff allegedly started around 7:30 p.m. Troopers in green body armor carrying assault rifles watched a brown house from around the corners of parked vehicles and nearby homes. They used a residence just next door as a staging area. Those behind the cover of the house appeared more at ease than those closer to where Kangas was staying.

Dogs chained up outside the Eamole street residence occasionally barked, likely confused by the stationary soldiers at their front step.

A group of locals stood and sat on four-wheelers and watched the scene slowly unfold. Nothing happened for hours, but they all wore solemn, anxious expressions on their faces. A line of kids leaned up against a truck in a nearby driveway watching as well.

Troopers had cleared the area surrounding the home, telling people to stay back or inside their homes. Alex Tarnai said he’d been inside his house, up the street from the SWAT team on high alert, and when he stepped outside he spotted a decked-out officer, donning bulletproof everything and holding a rifle. The officer told him to get back inside, which he did, he said.

The volatile situation appeared to have no end in sight. Onlookers claimed Kangas was equipped with an assault rifle. He'd also allegedly been drinking, something the man did not do that often, Erhart said.

Then, at 10:25 p.m., an older man wearing a navy blue t-shirt tucked into dark grey sweatpants walked out of the house toward the troopers. He was quickly handcuffed and escorted away.

Afterwards, troopers deployed a robotic rover that entered the house. The situation seemed to wind down shortly thereafter. Residents returned to their homes and a handful of officers remained in front of the hideout house.

"This town will never be the same," Tarnai said, standing outside his home.

Locals who'd been waiting for something to happen dispersed. A few returned to First Avenue, and sat and watched as troopers milled around the house where troopers Johnson and Rich died.