
Neil Allen MacInnis

A Profile

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The Attack

On 12 April 2013, shortly before 2:00 in the afternoon, Neil Allen MacInnis committed a rampage attack at the New River Valley Mall. Armed with a pump-action shotgun, he entered a satellite campus of New River Community College located at the mall. He attempted to open fire at a group of people near the front desk, but failed to disengage the safety on his firearm, giving people an opportunity to flee.¹

After disengaging the safety, MacInnis shot at a fleeing staff member. She managed to hide in a closet, but he shot through the closet door, hitting her in the hand. He then returned to the school's lobby, where he shot a female student in the back.²

In an apparent search for more victims, MacInnis roamed through hallways lined with classrooms. He fired into at least one occupied classroom, though nobody was injured. At one point, he feigned being a victim, begging students to unlock a classroom door. He yelled, "Help, help, he's gonna get me. Let me in."³

He left the school without injuring anyone besides the first two women he had shot. An off-duty security guard spotted MacInnis outside the school and ordered him to drop the shotgun, which he did. The guard then tackled MacInnis and held him down until law enforcement arrived. The rampage ended in less than ten minutes.⁴

Preparation and Aftermath

MacInnis purchased the shotgun and ammunition on 10 April 2013. He went home and recorded several videos in which he discussed his impending attack. He lamented that the attack would likely end with his arrest and last about ten minutes. MacInnis also discussed how he thought Wal-Mart employees were rude, how he hated his long-distance relationship with an ex-girlfriend, and how he remembered all the times he

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NEIL ALLEN MACINNIS

Perpetrator Dossier

Attack date	12 April 2013
Attack site	New River Community College
Location	Christiansburg, Virginia, United States
Age at incident	18
Killed	0
Wounded	2
Outcome	Apprehended
Shooter population	College
Psychological type	Psychotic
Attack type	Random

had been rejected by people. He said it was too easy to buy a gun, that mentally ill people should not be able to purchase weapons, and that he felt schools should have better security.⁵ During the videos, he compared himself to the Columbine, Virginia Tech, and Aurora movie theater shooters.⁶ MacInnis worked for Virginia Tech; what role this may have played is unclear.⁷

The morning of the attack, MacInnis purchased more ammunition from a local Wal-Mart. He left 300 dollars for his manager at the Old Navy in the New River Mall. He included a note which read, "For anyone who needs it."⁸ MacInnis posted about the attack online, identifying himself as the shooter and providing a web link where people could listen to Christiansburg's public safety radio traffic. He wrote,

I'm a bit nervous because I've never really handled a shotgun but for a few times with the Christiansburg police.⁹ Anyways this is not a highscores game but actually a lesson (that's why I'm at school).¹⁰

MacInnis indicated that he wanted to escape and did not plan to commit suicide during the attack.¹¹

After the shooting, MacInnis made a full confession to police. He said he had chosen his victims at random. He knew what he was doing was wrong, that it was against the law, and that he would probably be caught. He told police that during the attack he felt "so blacked out." "I was just, like, doing it," he said.¹² This could be a somatosensory illusion or depersonalization, which psychotic shooters have experienced.

A court psychologist determined that MacInnis was competent at the time of the attack and also competent to stand trial. He pled guilty and was sentenced to at least thirty-eight years in prison.¹³

Background

Neil MacInnis had a long history of mental health problems. He attempted to commit suicide at age fifteen and had made two more attempts prior to his attack at New

River Community College. His family had placed him in a rehabilitation center after his suicide attempts, and he was given access to additional mental health counseling.¹⁴

At the sentencing, MacInnis's family claimed he was a kind boy who would not hurt a fly and that they had no idea he had homicidal thoughts.¹⁵ However, his parents had once discovered a story he wrote about how he planned to carry out an attack on Christiansburg High School while he was a student there. They provided that story to a mental health professional he was seeing at the time. That attack was prevented because MacInnis was not old enough to purchase a firearm.¹⁶

MacInnis lied to his doctors, claiming he did not have homicidal ideations, when he had actually been thinking about shooting people for years.¹⁷ He had been on medication, but because he was doing so well, his doctors recommended he stop taking it in January 2013.¹⁸

Though he was found competent, the court psychologist determined that MacInnis suffered serious mental illness and that he was a danger to himself and others. This was made evident by a number of statements he had made while imprisoned, awaiting trial. According to prosecutors, he "made comments about shooting imaginary people, wanting to lie under his victims' bodies and feel their blood on him and how he felt like a god during the shootings."¹⁹

MacInnis displayed a flattened affect during his court appearances, often showing no emotion. While watching the videos he had made prior to the attack, he displayed an inappropriate affect by laughing and smirking.²⁰ At his sentencing, MacInnis acknowledged he suffered from serious mental illness and that he "sometimes acts without thinking." He apologized to his victims; he said he never stopped thinking about them and praying for them, and he wished them well moving forward.²¹

Discussion

MacInnis appears to best fit Langman's typology of a psychotic shooter. The details of his mental illness have not been expounded on publicly, but there is some evidence of psychosis, such as his comments about imaginary people. Further supporting this classification is the lack of evidence to support a classification as traumatic or psychopathic. Some of MacInnis's post-attack behavior could be seen as psychopathic, such as laughing during his court appearance and saying he "felt like a god" during the attack. However, these could reasonably be explained as inappropriate affect and delusions of grandeur respectively. Additionally, other actions are decidedly not psychopathic, such as his apology and prayer for his victims and his decision to leave money to help others with the Old Navy manager.

In fact, MacInnis framed his attack as a helpful lesson. He appears to have lacked a connection to reality. This was expressed by his uncle during court: "[MacInnis] talked about how mentally ill people shouldn't buy guns, so he decided to buy a gun. He talked about how schools should be protected, so he decided to attack a school."²² The disconnect between his actions and his beliefs reflects distorted thinking. Though evidence of psychosis is limited, MacInnis's behavior before, during, and after the attack is most consistent with that of a psychotic shooter.

Notes

- 1 Melissa Powell, "MacInnis to Serve 38 Years for Shooting at New River Mall," *Roanoke Times*, 23 July 2014, www.roanoke.com/news/local/montgomery_county/macinnis-to-serve-years-for-shooting-at-new-river-mall/article_30e0362a-9106-5895-b2ac-c9085b4a2370.html.
- 2 Melissa Powell, "Videos at Hearing Give Insight to Mall Shooter MacInnis," *Roanoke Times*, 16 April 2014, www.roanoke.com/news/crime/christiansburg/videos-at-hearing-give-insight-to-mall-shooter-macinnis/article_bb5254f4-c55d-11e3-9eb2-001a4bcf6878.html.
- 3 Powell, "Videos at Hearing."
- 4 Alexis Shaw, "Weapons, Ammo Used in Va. Community College Attack May Have Been Posted Online By Shooter." *ABC News*, 13 Apr. 2013, abcnews.go.com/US/neil-macinnis-online-posts-detail-weapons-ammo-va/story?id=18946729.
- 5 Powell, "Videos at Hearing."
- 6 Brandi Hephner Labanc and Brian O. Hemphill, *College in the Crosshairs: an Administrative Perspective on Prevention of Gun Violence* (Stylus Publishing, 2015).
- 7 Paul Farrell, "Neil MacInnis: Top 10 Facts You Need to Know," *Heavy.com*, 13 April 2013, heavy.com/news/2013/04/neil-macinnis-virginia-mall-shooting-gunman/.
- 8 Powell, "Videos at Hearing."
- 9 In 2012, MacInnis had attended the Christiansburg Civilian Police Academy, a ten-week program in which citizens had the opportunity to do ride-alongs and learn to shoot.
- 10 Farrell, "Neil MacInnis: Top 10 Facts."
- 11 Farrell, "Neil MacInnis: Top 10 Facts."
- 12 Powell, "Videos at Hearing."
- 13 Powell, "MacInnis to Serve 38 Years."
- 14 Powell, "MacInnis to Serve 38 Years."
- 15 Powell, "MacInnis to Serve 38 Years."
- 16 Powell, "Videos at Hearing."
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- 21 Powell, "MacInnis to Serve 38 Years."
- 22 Powell, "MacInnis to Serve 38 Years." SS.1