

Police strike back at 'swatter' Seattle-area teen charged in making false 911 calls

By [Cody Switzer](#)
cody.switzer@timesnews.com

Over at least two years, police said, a resident of suburban Seattle told hundreds of emergency dispatchers nationwide that he would never be taken alive. Police said one of his claims of imminent danger sent police scrambling in Millcreek Township.

But police said the suspect, Randal Ellis, 19, gave no resistance when he was arrested at his parents' house several days ago.

Ellis is accused of a relatively new Internet-related crime called "swatting."

Police believe Ellis, of Mukilteo, Wash., used an online service for the hearing impaired and other high-tech methods to make false reports of escalating violence to police departments across the country -- including one to Millcreek police on Nov. 28, 2005.

Ellis' goal, police said, was to get special weapons and tactics teams -- or SWAT teams, hence the term "swatting" -- to respond to other people's homes.

Ellis, arrested Friday, faces charges for two of those calls, both to residences in Orange County, Calif. The false reports ended with SWAT team members taking down innocent people at gunpoint and holding them for questioning, said Detective Brian Sims, of the Orange County Sheriff's Department.

Sims, the lead investigator in the cases in California, said his probe showed Ellis placed swatting calls to emergency dispatchers throughout the country, frequently targeting the houses of people who Ellis believed cheated while playing online video games with him.

Ellis has not been charged in the Millcreek case, though Sims said his investigation showed Ellis was responsible for the fake call in November 2005. Whether Ellis will be charged in the Millcreek case is unclear.

Sims said he offered the entire swatting probe to federal investigators after he discovered many of the calls crossed state lines. Sims said the federal authorities passed on the investigation, leaving the cases to be tried on a state-by-state basis. California is the first state to charge Ellis.

Sims said he traced the calls to Ellis by searching computer records and seizing Ellis' computer June 14. Police accused Ellis of masking his identity in the pranks by using a free online service for the hearing impaired. Police said Ellis would relay a typed message by phone

through an operator, who would tell a 911 dispatcher about the distress call. The dispatcher, having no idea the call was phony, sent the police.

Tense situations

In California, Ellis is charged with two counts each of assault with a deadly weapon and false imprisonment, and one count each of misuse of the Internet and filing a false emergency report.

Sims said police filed the weapons charges because the calls were designed to have armed officers respond.

"When he sent us to the locations, he was actually using us as his trigger man," Sims said. "We are the ones that pointed the assault rifles at these victims based on his escalation" of reports.

Both Orange County calls ended with a SWAT team deployment and an arrest, Sims said.

No SWAT team was deployed in response to the Millcreek call in November 2005, but only by luck, Millcreek Detective Capt. Harry Love said.

The caller told a dispatcher he had shot two people and was holding hostages at a home in the 800 block of Montpelier Avenue. But when police arrived, the home was empty.

The family who had lived there -- including the teenage boy police believe was the target of the call because he had been cheating in an online video game -- had recently moved to West 31st Street. The caller was using out-of-date information, Love said.

The incident still put a stress on the Millcreek police, said Cpl. Donald Kucenski, one of the first patrolmen to arrive at the vacant house.

"I just remember the amount of people and man-hours it takes just to ensure that everyone is safe before we can even begin to investigate what actually occurred," Kucenski said. "Roads were being blocked off for fear that neighbors were going to other locations."

The investigator on the case for the Mukilteo police, Detective Lance Smith, who took Ellis into custody on Friday, said Mukilteo, a Seattle suburb along Puget Sound, wasn't targeted in the swatting calls.

"I believe there have been some in the area, but we haven't had any," Smith said.

Ellis was being held in Snohomish County Jail in Everett, Wash., Tuesday, awaiting extradition on a \$500,000 arrest warrant, prison officials said.

Sims said he plans to fly to Washington state on Thursday and bring Ellis back to California for arraignment on Friday.