

Presiding Coroner's comments:

This inquest dealt with the death of Hugh Errol Riffel. The inquest took place in Whitehorse between October 6 and October 15, 2025.

Participant standing was granted to the RCMP, Chieftain Energy Limited Partnership and Air North Charter & Training Ltd., and Ms. Flora Moore.

The jury heard testimony about the events leading up to Mr. Riffel's death from a family member, ten police officers, four medical professionals and ten other civilian witnesses as well as an expert on police use of force theory and application. Additionally, the jury viewed civilian and police video footage and heard parts of a police dispatch audio recording.

The Evidence

Forty-four year old Hugh Errol Riffel died at the Air North compound on the 24th day of November 2022, at approximately 12:52 pm as a result of a gunshot wound to the abdomen. The jury classified his death as homicide. Homicide is a neutral term that does not imply fault or blame. "Homicide" is a death due to an intentional action by another person that is intended to cause harm.

An agreed-upon statement of facts identified that Hugh Riffel worked for Chieftain Energy as a long haul trucker from early 2020 to early 2021. On November 17, 2022, Mr. Riffel purchased a non-restricted .22 calibre rifle and ammunition in Red Deer, Alberta with a valid Possession and Acquisition License (PAL). Mr. Riffel then travelled from Red Deer, Alberta to Whitehorse, Yukon on November 22-23, 2022. Shortly after noon on November 24, 2022, Mr. Riffel went to the Air North compound and gained access by following other vehicles through a card lock gate.

Once inside the Air North compound Mr. Riffel exited his truck with his rifle. A Chieftain Energy employee testified that he encountered Mr. Riffel soon after Mr. Riffel entered the compound. Mr. Riffel got out of his vehicle and approached the witness. At this time Mr. Riffel attempted to shoot himself. The witness testified that Mr. Riffel's gun did not fire. Mr. Riffel got back into his truck and drove further into the compound. He then exited his vehicle and assaulted another Chieftain Energy employee, threatening to kill him. A third employee saw this occur and ran into the main Chieftain Energy building, where he alerted other employees of the threat.

A number of employee witnesses testified that they escaped the building through a back door and went to a nearby building that could be locked, as directed by one of their co-workers. As this occurred, the employee who had been assaulted outside came in and followed them through the back door. Video evidence showed Mr. Riffel entering the building with his gun just as the last person left.

Several employee witnesses testified to having various degrees of understanding of Air North's and/or Chieftain Energy's emergency response plans to a crisis or if such plans existed. Once the threat was learned of by management, an email was sent out to all employees alerting them of the threat. Not all employees had access to email while the events were unfolding. An RCMP officer, who was already at the RMCP hangar next to the Air North compound, testified that as

he was approaching the scene, he instructed the owner of Air North to lock down the compound.

The employee who directed his co-workers out of the building also testified that he notified the RCMP, who were dispatched to the scene. The witness remained on the phone with the dispatch center and provided updates as to what was happening. At this time Mr. Riffel continued to walk around the compound and entered a building. He watched Mr. Riffel walk around the compound, civilian witnesses and a nearby RCMP member heard two gunshots but did not witness the shots being fired.

Six RCMP officers in five vehicles arrived simultaneously, shortly thereafter, and drove into the Air North compound. They spotted Mr. Riffel and formed a line with their vehicles. Mr. Riffel approached and the RCMP officers commanded him to drop his weapon and get on the ground. Mr. Riffel continued to approach with rifle in hand and yelled at the officers to shoot him. Mr. Riffel did not respond to the officers' commands and continued to approach closing the distance between himself and the police. As Mr. Riffel drew near, he was shot by an RCMP officer.

Mr. Riffel fell to the ground and officers approached him, removed his rifle, and handcuffed him. RCMP medics immediately began First Aid and CPR. Primary care EMS paramedics arrived and took over First Aid and CPR on Mr. Riffel. A few minutes later a second ambulance with a Critical Care Paramedic arrived and assumed care of Mr. Riffel, who was loaded into an ambulance and taken to Whitehorse General Hospital. Upon the ambulance's arrival at the hospital, an emergency room physician assumed care of Mr. Riffel. The physician ceased interventions upon determining that Mr. Riffel was deceased. He testified that Mr. Riffel had been dead upon arrival at the hospital.

A pathologist testified that Mr. Riffel received a gunshot wound to his abdomen which injured several organs and caused extensive blood loss, causing Mr. Riffel's death. The pathologist testified that such an injury would typically result in death within one to two minutes. The pathologist also testified that Mr. Riffel had no significant health conditions or substances in his body that would have contributed to his death.

The jury also heard from an additional expert witness who explained the model and factors that the RCMP use when training police officers on the application of the use of force while protecting the public, themselves and subjects of concern.

The Jury's Recommendations

Recommendation #1 – To: Joe Sparling: President Air North

Ensure Air North and subsidiaries have a comprehensive emergency lockdown protocol for all facilities so that employees are informed about emergency situations in a timely manner, know who is in charge and have a secure space to go.

The jury heard testimony from employee witnesses who had different levels of understanding with respect to emergency response planning and the existence of emergency response protocols for employees. Further, the jury heard testimony that employees heard about Mr. Riffel being on the property with a gun through word of mouth or an email that was sent to all employees.

Recommendation # 2 – To: Joe Sparling: President Air North

Ensure that Air North and subsidiary employees are onboarded and participate in yearly emergency response drills including facility lockdowns and evacuation.

The jury heard testimony from employee witnesses who had different levels of understanding with respect to emergency response planning and the existence of emergency response protocols for employees.

Recommendation #3 - To: Joe Sparling: President Air North

Ensure that staff parking is outside the secure area and any access to secure space is accessible with staff ID cards.

The jury heard evidence that it was common for employees arriving at work to drive their personal vehicles into the secure area and park there, and that Mr. Riffel was able to enter the area in a truck by following another vehicle through the gate.

Recommendation #4 – To: Joe Sparling: President Air North

Ensure that all work spaces have locks on doors.

The jury heard testimony from employee witnesses that not all work spaces were lockable. The jury also heard evidence that since the incident, locks had been added to some of the doors at the hangars.



Presiding Coroner Michael Egilson