

Coronavirus

Stormtrooper trying to get customers' attention taken down by officers in Canada

Callers reported seeing a weapon being carried by an employee who had been trying to drum up business for a restaurant hit hard by the coronavirus.



A woman dressed as a stormtrooper speaks to Lethbridge police Monday when they believed the gun she had could be real. The actions of those officers are now being investigated internally after video of the incident was posted to social media. Brad Whalen

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By Tim Stelloh

A restaurant employee in a “Star Wars” costume was detained in Canada on Sunday after 911 callers reported seeing someone in a Stormtrooper costume with a gun, police said.

The employee, who was carrying a plastic blaster, had been trying to drum up business for the struggling restaurant, which opened two months before Canadian authorities shuttered eat-in dining because of the coronavirus, the woman’s boss, Brad Whalen, told NBC News.



A stormtrooper stands at the entrance to the Coco Vanilla Galactic Cantina restaurant. Brad Whalen

The promotion occurred on “May the 4th Be With You Day,” the unofficial holiday dedicated to the film franchise. The restaurant, Coco Vanilla Galactic Cantina, is “Star Wars” themed and serves pizza and [donair](#) in the city of Lethbridge, Alberta.

[A video](#) showed multiple officers, some with their guns drawn, shouting at the employee to get on the ground. The worker, who Whalen did not want to identify, could be seen face down in Coco Vanilla’s parking lot. She could be heard sobbing while officers handcuffed her.

In a statement, Lethbridge Police Services said the woman did not initially comply with the officers’ instructions to get on the ground.

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“The weapon was ultimately confirmed to be a fake firearm,” the statement said. The woman was not arrested, the statement added, but suffered a minor injury that didn’t require medical attention.

Police Chief Scott Woods ordered an investigation after reviewing the video and other details, the statement said.

The department declined to comment further.

Whalen was watching the incident as it occurred and can be heard in the video telling officers that the weapon is plastic.

“When she was told to drop the blaster, she did,” he said. Whalen said it was also difficult to move in the \$1,200 costume, which he decided to use for the promotion when showing “Star Wars” films to customers wasn’t an option for May 4.

“That’s what she was trying to yell,” he said. “You can’t kneel. You can’t sit when you wear it.”

Whalen, a carpenter, spent \$200,000 opening the shop in January. After coronavirus restrictions went into effect, he was clearing \$50 a day, he said. “Just to operate it’s \$350 a day – and that’s when I don’t have full staff,” he said.

He’d begun promoting auctions and other events online to generate business. When he settled on using the Stormtrooper armor, the employee, who’s been working with him since January, happily agreed to wear it.

“The ironic thing is, she’s not even a ‘Star Wars’ fan,” he said. “Now I don’t think we’ll ever convince her to be one.”

Fans of the franchise may try to change that. Dozens of comments on the restaurant's Facebook page offered messages of support, including from some wearing Stormtrooper costumes. And more support came from the leading man of another franchise, William Shatner.

"Captain’s Log Stardate 49," the Star Trek actor [tweeted](#). "Sending my contempt this morning to the [@lethpolice](#) of Alberta, Canada & [@LPSChiefl](#). Rifles drawn for a plastic toy Cosplayer? Didn’t comply right away? Are you blind Chief? Watch the video to see how quickly she complied. This cannot be covered up."

Tim Stelloh

Tim Stelloh is a reporter for NBC News, based in California.