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Police chief's death shows dangers facing emergency responders

Officer dies in highway accident

Tuesday, July 13, 2004

By Paula Reed Ward, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

When Elk Lick Police Chief Sheridan O. Caton died early Sunday morning on his way to assist a neighboring Somerset County department in a vehicle pursuit, he went out the way he wanted.

His friends said the chief hoped to live a long life, but if he didn't, he wanted to die on the job.

"He'd have said, 'Thank you, God, for answering my prayers. I left this world in the line of duty, helping people,' " said a friend and former trainee, Ron Ackerman.

Ackerman now serves as chief of the Meyersdale Police Department, where Caton spent 29 years of his law enforcement career. Caton retired from there in 1994, and a few months later was asked to lead the small, three-officer Elk Lick department, where he had been ever since.

About 12:30 a.m. Sunday, Caton, 60, responded to a call for assistance from nearby Confluence police who were pursuing a suspected drunken driver. Caton was traveling north along two-lane, rural Listonburg Road in Addison when his vehicle collided head-on with another car.

State police at Somerset, who are handling the investigation, have not released many details. The initial police report stated that both vehicles were traveling close to the yellow center line. The driver of the second car, Warren Earl Christopher, 40, of Confluence, may face driving under the influence charges.

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Although tragic, the death of an emergency responder on the way to a scene is not uncommon.

Last year, 53 police officers across the country were killed in auto accidents on the job, according to the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund, and 37 firefighters were killed heading to or from calls, more than were killed fighting fires, according to the National Fire Protection Association.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reports that over a 10-year period, from 1991 to 2000, 27 emergency medical services personnel were killed in ambulance crashes.

Jack Grant, a spokesman for the International Association of Chiefs of Police in Alexandria, Va., said one of the most important things emergency responders can do is drive defensively.

"You can't assume people are going to know you're there or they're going to react the way they're supposed to," Grant said.

The law requires a motorist traveling on the same road as a responder to pull off to the right side of the road and stop until the emergency vehicle has passed. It is unsafe to block intersections or to pull off the left.

Police officers are taught to survey their surroundings while driving, and especially watch for vehicles pulling out in front of them. But as vehicles reach higher speeds and adrenaline creeps in, emergency responders may get a type of tunnel vision, Grant said.

"As your speed increases, your area of focus decreases," he said. "You're seeing only the area in front of you and not the things off to the sides."

Often passing motorists don't hear the sirens or see the lights until the emergency vehicle is right behind them.

In some cases, even that isn't enough.

Paul Koons, a firefighter with the Indiana Fire Association in Indiana Borough, has been driving fire trucks for 12 years. Just last week on the way to a call, a car pulled out in front of the 66,000-pound fire truck he was driving, with full lights and sirens on, and stayed there for a mile.

That made Koons angry, not just for holding him up, but for the dangerous possibilities it held for everyone involved.

When Koons started as a firefighter, all that was necessary to drive an engine or ladder truck was a commercial driver's license. Now, though, many departments are requiring a state-run Emergency Vehicle Operations Course offered to firefighters and ambulance drivers.

Ackerman, who worked with Caton for 16 years in the Meyersdale Police Department, said his mentor taught him about driver and officer safety.

"He wanted everything done by the book," Ackerman said. "[But] he knew there was always risk -- things could happen anyway."

Caton's daughter, Roxanne Knopsnyder, described her father as the most dedicated cop she'd ever seen.

"Anytime he got a call, his adrenaline took over," she said.

He loved the rush of it all, the excitement and helping people in the community. Caton's favorite part of law enforcement was conducting drug raids, said Knopsnyder, 38, of Somerset.

Her father was so well-versed in the study of illegal drugs and trends that he could identify any pill handed to him, she said.

In addition to Knopsnyder, Caton is survived by a son, Brian Caton, of Alice Springs, Australia; two brothers, Harry Caton and Wilson Caton, both of Meyersdale; five sisters, Veda Logue, Myrtle Race and Rosemary Meyers, all of Meyersdale, Agnes Crissinger, of Erin, Tenn., and Beulah Cerretta, of Boynton; and four grandchildren.

Arrangements are being handled by William Rowe Price Funeral Home, 325 Main St., Meyersdale.

Visitation will be from 7 to 9 p.m. tonight and 2 to 4 and 7 to 9 p.m. tomorrow. A service will be held at the funeral home at 11 a.m. Thursday, followed by interment with full police honors at Greenville Union Cemetery.

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