

Trooper Edwin J. Gasque

50 years later, slain trooper's star still shines brightly
10/15/2011 © St. Petersburg Times

Bill Stevens

On Oct. 26, 1961, Florida Highway Patrol Trooper Edwin J. Gasque discovered two robbers hiding in palmettos near Jacksonville. One of the robbers raised his hands in surrender.

Then a bullet tore through Gasque's chest.

His wife had just returned home from the beach when other troopers came to her door. Her 9-year-old daughter played innocently in the yard, unaware that the arrival of men in uniforms could only be bad news.

A week later, police in Georgia captured the killer.

A half-century has passed, but Eddie Gasque's death still echoes through the lives of his wife and daughter — and the man who pulled the trigger.

"We have never stopped thinking about Eddie," said his widow, Kate. "How could we?"

In small-town Dade City, everybody knew the Gasque (pronounced gas-kew) family. Sometimes that was a good thing, sometimes not. Eddie's grandfather built the landmark multistory Edwinola Hotel in 1912. Eddie's father, a shipbuilder in Tampa, stayed drunk much of the time.

By age 12, Eddie was working in citrus groves and giving his mother his earnings. He walked to the Methodist church each Sunday with his four sisters. He made good grades in school.

Even as a boy, he could throw a baseball through a wall. He dominated the sandlots. In his senior year at Pasco High School in 1948, he was captain of the championship football team, vice president of the Future Farmers of America and secure enough to sing in the glee club. His classmates voted him the most popular student.

The University of Tampa gave Eddie a full scholarship to play baseball. He pitched so well for two years, the Cleveland Indians drafted him and gave him a \$25,000 bonus and a ticket to the minor leagues.

At 19, he won 13 games for the Daytona Beach Islanders. He met Kate at the beach and they married on Sept. 22, 1951. The next season, "The Big Q" won 20 of 27 decisions. He expected Cleveland would call him up any minute, but the Indians already had four of baseball's best pitchers: Bob Feller, Mike Garcia, Bob Lemon and Early Wynn.

On June 29, 1952, Eddie and Kate celebrated the arrival of a daughter they named Katherine Ann. A few months later, the Army came calling. Pvt. Gasque's assignment for the next two years: baseball. The 220-pound right-hander pitched the Third Army to the service championship.

After his discharge, he played three more seasons for Cleveland's minor league teams. In Indianapolis, his roommate on road trips was 21-year-old Roger Maris, who would go on to break Babe Ruth's single-season home run record as one of the greatest of all New York Yankees.

Eddie, meanwhile, grew tired of the travel. He suffered several injuries, including a broken bone in his throwing arm during winter league competition in Venezuela. At 28, with a wife, daughter and 3-year-old son, he yearned for a more traditional life.

More security.

Gasque joined the Florida Highway Patrol and finished first in his graduating class.

After two years stationed in Jacksonville, he earned a transfer to Daytona Beach, where he lived. He headed home on the afternoon of Oct. 26, 1961. This would be his final, 170-mile round-trip commute.

As he drove, Gasque received orders over his radio. Two men had robbed a supermarket and shot at a Duval County sheriff's deputy. Hundreds of lawmen converged near Baldwin, a small town on U.S. 301 west of Jacksonville.

The trooper hooked up with dog handler Elmer Duke and a bloodhound named Major. They followed tracks off an isolated road into a clump of palmettos. Major got excited. His leash pulled tight.

Gasque saw the two men, cocked his shotgun.

Dewitt Addison, killer, recalls that day in chilling detail:

"He told my partner, 'You're a dead son of a bitch.' I shot him in the left forearm. I always hit what I aimed at, and I didn't intend to kill him. The bullet shattered into his chest."

Addison, 83, told his story in an interview in August at Columbia Correctional Institution near Lake City. He was matter-of-fact, diminished by age and his time in prison, but not an entirely changed man.

"He committed suicide," Addison said. "When he cocked that shotgun, I had no choice."

Eddie Gasque died a hero, the fifth trooper killed in the line of duty since the state formed the highway patrol in 1931. In his photograph on the FHP's memorial wall of honor in Tallahassee, Gasque remains handsome and forever young.

The man who shot him doesn't look so good.

His hair is gray, his face wrinkled and weathered. He spends most of his time in a prison hospital, sick and in constant pain. Nobody visits him.

Addison grew up on a farm in Lake Butler, the fifth of nine children. He said his father ran moonshine to get the money to buy the farm and then settled into an ordinary life, raising crops and honeybees. He died of diabetes at 38.

"I stood at the foot of his bed when he took his last breath," recalled Addison, who was 9. "My mother married a man who turned the farm into a tobacco road dump."

Addison dropped out of school in the ninth grade and moved to Miami to live with older siblings. At 17 he joined the Navy. During his first assignment in Virginia, he broke a Coke bottle over another sailor's head and wound up in the brig.

"The guy poured cold water on me when I was sleeping," he said. "He stood there laughing and said, 'I got that little Cracker.' I cracked his skull."

The Navy kicked him out. Addison soon turned to cracking safes. "I got good at it," he said. By 1953, he was serving a four-year prison sentence for burglary. A second conviction landed him at a prison work camp in Moore Haven. He escaped in May 1961 and connected with another career thief he had met while serving time, Rudolph Pavlas, 46.

They had just robbed a safe near Baldwin on Oct. 26 when they stopped on the side of a country road to change clothes. Duval County sheriff's Deputy J.L. Parmenter, on routine patrol, saw the men standing behind their car and pulled over.

"We had money and an acetylene torch in the car. I couldn't let him find it," Addison said. "I drew down on him."

They handcuffed Parmenter to a tree, but he got free, radioed for help and began a chase. Addison fired a rifle and pierced the deputy's radiator. The two men drove several miles before pulling off in the palmettos where Addison shot Gasque.

A week later, Addison and Pavlas were arrested after robbing a drugstore in Dawson, Ga.

Addison's attorney tried an insanity defense. "I was told to play dumb," he said. "I'd let my mouth fall open and just say, 'Duh.' "

The jury convicted him of first-degree murder. The sentence: life in prison.

"I could have killed three cops that day," Addison said. "That's why I didn't get the electric chair."

Pavlas got 35 years for second-degree murder. He served only 11 and died in July 1987 at age 72.

Addison got out of prison once, for a while. The Florida Parole and Probation Commission released him on Feb. 17, 1981. Records offer little to explain why a cop killer would be granted parole.

He moved to Columbus, Ga., and began working for a business that made dental plates, a skill he had perfected in prison.

But by April 1989, Addison was back in prison. He forged at least six checks on the account of the dental lab where he worked, illegally possessed a 12-gauge shotgun and drove a vehicle while under the influence of alcohol.

That's the official record. Addison's version: He beat a woman over the head with a metal pipe in a dispute over \$400.

Fifty years after Addison killed Eddie Gasque, the enormity of what he did is not lost on him.

"Am I sorry? Of course. Look what it did to his family and to mine. I took his life and ruined mine."

Kate Gasque attended every day of the trial. She thought it odd that Dewitt Addison's name was so similar to a character in the 1950 movie All About Eve. George Sanders won an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor as the sardonic movie critic Addison DeWitt.

"The whole thing was surreal," she said.

Addison's mother testified that he had once been kicked in the head by a horse, and Kate thought to herself, "Well, that's too bad."

She talked wistfully about her days with Eddie. She was two years his senior and working for an insurance company when they met in Daytona Beach.

"He was in good shape," she said. "Of course, so was I back then." She wasn't much of a sports fan, but started hanging around the ballpark.

On his days off, Eddie went fishing. At night, he and Kate went dancing. They fell in love to Blue Moon, which became their song. People often mistook them for brother and sister because they both had dark hair and blue eyes.

Their daughter, Katherine Ann, arrived nine months after the wedding. But in the midst of their joy came a tragedy: Eddie's mother, Marjorie, was killed in a wreck on her way to see the baby.

Eddie was leaving the hospital when the ambulance arrived with his mother.

Eddie's own death came nine years later, announced by the troopers at her door. She remembered being in shock. She remembered her 5-year-old son, Mike, asking: "Does this mean Daddy will never take me fishing again?"

She kept her children away from the funeral, not wanting them to see their father's body. She would regret it later.

"They didn't get closure," she said.

Kate remarried in 1965, divorced eight years later and went back to her original married name. She worked 22 years as a records clerk for the Daytona Beach Police Department.

She survived lung cancer, but endured yet another loss: Her son shot himself to death in 2002 at age 46. He had been an electrician but suffered a traumatic back injury in a car wreck. He fought alcohol addiction.

"Mike was a lost soul," she said. "He never got over his father's death."

The Highway Patrol renamed its Daytona Beach office 25 years ago to honor Gasque, and law enforcement agencies routinely include him during memorial services.

"He's never far from my heart," Kate said. "I've had lots of tragedy, but I'm not alone. You just go on."

Kate Gasque said she hardly thinks about her husband's killer. Her daughter, Katherine, 59, does enough for both of them.

"It makes me crazy," Katherine said. "Not that I wish anyone's death, but it's a closure that still hasn't come. I get notices when he gets moved in and out of their medical facility. It's like somebody jabbing you with a sharp stick. You'd think at my age and after all these years, I'd get over it."

She doesn't trust the state of Florida to keep Addison behind bars. She resents that he was ever released. Last year Katherine was appalled when she did a Google search for Dewitt Addison and found a MySpace page with a picture of him in prison garb.

Under the category of interests: "Dominos and murder."

She called the prison, the Highway Patrol, a victim's advocate. "Somebody on the outside did it for him, we figured. It was a sick joke. They took it down."

With the 50th anniversary of her father's death approaching, Katherine yearned for more information about him. She keeps his Army baseball jacket in a closet at her home near Atlanta. She has a copy of the contract he signed with Cleveland. Somebody paid \$280.80 for it at an auction because it included signatures of famous hitter Hank Greenberg, who was general manager for the Indians, and William Harridge, who was American League president.

She treasures a photograph somebody took of her dad with Roger Maris.

"He used to come over for dinner a lot," recalled Katherine. "He gave me gum. Isn't it funny what you remember?"

Katherine recently converted old 8-millimeter home movies to DVDs. They're not the highest quality, but they show clearly a happy young family playing together. She watches with a combination of joy and sadness as her muscular daddy cradles her in the crook of his arm.

She visited the Highway Patrol station in Jacksonville and saw his photograph on a wall with other troopers.

"Dad's was the only one in black and white," she said. "It almost seemed to be fading out."

Slain trooper Eddie Gasque was Pasco's stand-up guy
10/16/2011 © St. Petersburg Times

Bill Stevens

The 1948 Pasco High School yearbook is such a treasure the librarians in Dade City keep it in a secure room. You have to ask for it.

Eddie Gasque is featured on several pages — captain of the football team, vice president of the Future Farmers of America, glee club member.

King.

The senior class called their most popular students King and Queen, and Eddie posed alongside his girlfriend, a quiet, slender blonde named Mary Alice Jones. Her daddy worked at the cypress lumber mill in Lacoochee. Eddie would go see her on the weekends if he could borrow a truck.

The other day I called Mary Alice. She's been Mary Alice Copeland since she married a citrus executive named Warren Copeland in 1950 and moved to Lakeland. As we talked about the old days, she recalled picnics with Eddie on the banks of the Withlacoochee River. I read her a quote from Eddie in a section of the yearbook where seniors willed their favorite things to underclassmen: "I will my love for Lacoochee to anyone who appreciates beauty the way I do."

"He wrote that for me!" Mrs. Copeland squealed.

For a moment, she was young again.

"Eddie was my first love," she confided. "He had those beautiful deep blue eyes. He took care of his family. He was such a good person."

Sixty-three years after Eddie Gasque earned the title King of his high school, few people in Dade City know his story — or the heroism that led to his murder 50 years ago Oct. 26.

With that anniversary in mind, I set out in August to learn about him. You can read the story on 1A of today's paper. It mainly deals with Eddie's years after high school; his pro baseball career and the two years with the Florida Highway Patrol. It examines how his death reverberates all these years later through his widow, daughter and his killer, who at age 83 remains in prison.

But it does not include some other elements I'd like to share with you, recollections of people like Mary Alice Copeland who described a simpler time when the Dade City breezes carried the fresh scent of oranges and teenagers danced and swam at Lake Iola.

Jim Hudson, 80, played quarterback on the Pasco High football team that lost one game in four years. Eddie Gasque, bigger than most of the other boys at 200 pounds, cleared the way as a guard. His teammates made him captain.

"We played South Sumter one Friday night, and we were walking all over them," said Hudson, who retired from the citrus business and Withlacoochee Electric and stayed in town. "Eddie said, 'Who hasn't scored yet?' I raised my hand. He said, 'Just receive the snap and follow me.' I ran right over his butt into the end zone."

Hudson's dad was the city police chief. His mom operated the telephone switchboard and talked regularly to just about everyone in town. "Needless to say, if we did something bad, word traveled fast."

By "bad," he meant throwing green oranges or putting trash cans on top of street light poles. Not exactly high crime. "Nobody locked their cars or homes back then," Hudson said. "We worked, went fishing, played sports."

Two of Eddie's four sisters remain. Carole Jensen, 76, is the baby. She's a widow and lives in Nevada. Mary Louise Brock, 79, is in a Zephyrhills nursing home.

Hutch Brock, a Dade City lawyer and former mayor, is Mary Louise's son. When he learned I was working on a story about his Uncle Eddie, he knew exactly how to illustrate it. He went home and took a favorite picture from its frame — Eddie with baseball legend Roger Maris. They were roommates in Indianapolis before Maris became a star.

"Today, without a doubt, Eddie would have signed with the major leagues right out of school," Brock said, noting that the number of teams have doubled since then.

"I had to catch Eddie once in a game a year after he went to the University of Tampa and set a strikeout record," recalled Jim Hudson. "I didn't touch the first two or three pitches he threw. I called timeout and walked to the mound. He said, 'My fastball hops a little bit.' It hopped right over my mitt. My god, he could throw you some smoke.

"He was a great athlete and a good man."