

Trooper Donald E. Jennings
End of Watch: Friday, June 30, 1995



Life Lost In Service Is Celebrated
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Trooper Laid To Rest

Hundreds Attend Funeral

Somber ceremony attended the farewell on Thursday to a life lost in the line of duty.

Silent tears were shed. Solemn words were spoken. Bagpipes skirled a dirge, and planes roared overhead.

With all the respect and military pageantry accorded a fallen hero, law officers from all over the state gathered to bid goodbye to Florida Highway Patrol Trooper Donald Earl Jennings.

The 11-year veteran was crushed to death by a runaway truck last Friday as he was supervising a crew cleaning up an earlier accident on the Sawgrass Expressway in Sunrise. He left behind a wife, Cheryl, who is expected next month to deliver their first child, already named Christopher Alexander.

Elston Perry, elder at Jennings' church, Mount Olive Baptist Church, predicted the unborn son will have his father's mischievous smile and infectious laugh.

"With God there are no accidents. It was Don's time, his tour of duty had ended," Perry said. "Don has fulfilled his work; Cheryl will have a child and there'll be something to remember."

Many brown-clad troopers in the church quietly dabbed at tears. Jennings' widow, black-veiled and clutching a blue hankie, sat stoically before her husband's flag-draped coffin.

Framed against stained glass, friends, co-workers and relatives mounted the pulpit to describe the 33-year-old. Jennings, they remembered, was a loving man infused with compassion. In testament was a personnel file crammed with letters from motorists Jennings had assisted. He volunteered for unpopular accident duty as well as special enforcement details. He worked overtime after Hurricane Andrew to deliver food and water.

"In the nine years I worked with Donald Jennings, he never expressed to me that someone had made him mad or made him angry," said Trooper Stanley Davis, who attended the Highway Patrol academy with Jennings, then worked alongside him in Dade County, from where Jennings had transferred only last month.

Col. Ron Grimming, the Highway Patrol's director, uttered the thought on most troopers' minds: This could be me.

"As long as any man or woman chooses to serve in our honorable and dangerous profession, we will gather in such sad occasion," Grimming said. "The patrol family must once again adjust to the loss of a brother, but we will survive these dark days."

In closing, Highway Patrol chaplain Rick Braswell read a letter from Cheryl Jennings: "My husband always loved and enjoyed the Florida Highway Patrol and was proud to be a part of it. The Florida Highway Patrol shall continue to be in my heart and my prayers."

After the service, the grieving law officers, estimated at 1,500, departed the closed streets surrounding the Mount Olive church, 400 NW Ninth St. A black hearse, trailed by more than 500 police motorcycles, led a funeral cavalcade of officers from as far away as St. Petersburg and Key West.

More than 2 miles long, the procession rolled slowly past dozens of schoolchildren lining the street, hands over their hearts. It passed the Fort Lauderdale police station, where employees posed likewise in the median. Traffic officers saluted. Flags at the Broward Sheriff's Office headquarters on Northwest 27th Avenue snapped at half staff.

At Forest Lawn Memorial Gardens, officers stood in silent ranks.

A seven-man Highway Patrol rifle team fired three crisp volleys. The echoes hung in the air as a lone bugler played taps. Once the last wavering note concluded, the honor guard folded the flag atop Jennings's casket into a neat triangle and handed it to Cheryl Jennings. She sat in the pose of so many previous military and police widows - numbly, with flag on lap.

At 1:42 p.m. a brief radio call crackled across the graveyard and into every police radio and dispatch office in the county: "957 is 10-7." In police shorthand, it meant Jennings, badge number 957, was out of service.

Illustrating that grim message, three small planes came roaring out of the south, low over the cemetery. One, marked Florida Highway Patrol, sheared off alone to the east, toward the sea and disappeared.

Services Set For Trooper Killed In Line Of Duty
Published on Tuesday, July 4, 1995, in the Sun-Sentinel

Services for Donald E. Jennings, the Florida Highway Patrol trooper killed on Friday while directing traffic around a crash site on the Sawgrass Expressway, will be held Wednesday night and Thursday morning, Florida Highway Patrol officials said on Monday.

On Wednesday, from 5 to 8 p.m., services will be held at St. John's United Methodist Church, 1520 NW Fifth Street in Fort Lauderdale.

On Thursday, services commence at 11 a.m. at Mt. Olive Baptist Church, 400 NW Ninth Avenue in Fort Lauderdale.

Burial will be at Forest Lawn Memorial Gardens Cemetery, 499 NW 27th Ave., Fort Lauderdale.

Trooper Jennings is survived by his wife, Cheryl; his father, Willie; and 10 brothers and sisters.

Trooper Jennings, who was born and raised in Sneads, spent the last 11 years with the Florida Highway Patrol. He was 33.

A trust fund has been set up for Jennings' family. Anyone wishing to make a contribution can make checks payable to Donald E. Jennings Trust Fund, in care of Great Western Bank, 1040 Weston Road, Fort Lauderdale 33326.

Deaths Of Trooper, Girl, 5, Launch Holiday Weekend
Published on Saturday, July 1, 1995, in the Sun-Sentinel

The holiday traffic death count in Broward began on Friday with three serious accidents, including the death of a trooper from the Florida Highway Patrol, which is responsible for curbing the annual Fourth of July highway carnage.

The trooper, Donald E. Jennings, 33, was killed when a Ford Bronco rolled over and crushed him on the Sawgrass Expressway near Commercial Boulevard in Sunrise about 2 p.m.

The second accident left a 5-year-old girl dead and her mother in critical condition after their car plunged into a Coral Springs canal. And another woman and three children were injured, one critically, after their car collided with a cement truck on Interstate 95 in Hollywood.

Jennings, whose wife is eight months pregnant, was outside his car directing the routine cleanup from a previous accident in the southbound lanes when he was struck.

His patrol car, lights flashing, was parked in the expressway's outside lane to shield workers clearing debris. No traffic cones or other warnings were set up, the highway patrol said.

Two cars - a red Firebird and a Dodge van - were stopped behind Jennings' car waiting to pass when the Bronco clipped them from the rear. The brown and beige utility truck then careened into the emergency lane where Jennings, a 10-year veteran, was standing.

The Bronco, driven by Fred Tufo, 53, of Coral Springs, skidded sideways, flipped and pinned Jennings.

"The truck flew into him," said the Firebird's driver, Laurence "Andrew" Coppa, 21, of Coral Springs. "He was in pretty bad shape."

Coppa and the driver of the white van, Carlos Calderon, 37, of Boca Raton, were not injured.

Tufo was treated at Broward General Medical Center and released.

Charges are pending in the case.

About two-dozen fellow troopers in patrol cars quickly converged on the site. Some wept and hugged openly after Jennings was flown to Broward General Medical Center, where he was pronounced dead on arrival.

"It is an extremely, extremely difficult time, and particularly for these troopers you see standing totally lost because they just lost a comrade," said Lt. Jerry Donaldson as he gestured at the grieving troopers at the crash scene.

Jennings grew up in Sneads, a rural Florida town near the Georgia state line. He graduated from the Florida Highway Patrol Academy in 1984 and was assigned to Troop E, where he patrolled the roads in south Dade County. He was there almost 10 years before transferring to Troop K in Broward in November. He recently moved from the Olympic Heights neighborhood in Miami to Broward.

"He was always good natured," said Sgt. William Johnson, who worked with Jennings for four years with Troop E in Miami. "He was the kind of man the state was proud to have working. He was an exceptional young man."

Jennings is survived by his wife, Cheryl; his father, Willie Jennings of Sneads; and 10 brothers and sisters.

He was the second trooper to die after being struck on a Broward highway in the past three years.

On July 16, 1992, trooper Kimberly Hurd was hit and killed by a drunken driver on I-95 between Sample Road and Southwest 10th Street.

Earlier Friday in Coral Springs, Amelia Gselman, 34, and her daughter, Alana, 5, were trapped in their car under water for five to 10 minutes after being struck by a car, which police said ran a stop sign.

Gselman, a physical therapist at Coral Springs Medical Center, was heading to work about 7 a.m. The Margate woman and her daughter were passing through the intersection of Northwest 31st Court and 94th Avenue, when they were stuck by a Mitsubishi driven by Robyn Anne Rice, 21.

Police Sgt. Jeff Maslan said Rice ran the stop sign. She slammed into the driver's side of Gselman's car, knocking it into a 6-foot-deep canal, where it landed upside-down.

Firefighters, police officers, postal workers and passers-by jumped into the water and freed them.

Alana was taken to Broward General Medical Center, where she later died. Gselman was in critical condition at North Broward Medical Center late Friday. Rice, of Plantation, was treated at Coral Springs Medical Center and released.

Maslan said no charges have been filed, but the investigation is continuing.

The Gselmans' next-door neighbor, Ginni Ficarra, was stunned by news of the crash.

"My little boy plays with Alana," Ficarra said. "She loved to play outside with him. They had just got a pool and were always out by [it] with the radio playing. They were a real close family."

A relative said Rice did not want to comment.

A third accident on Friday left another 5-year-old, Dimitry Charles, in critical condition at Memorial Regional Hospital in Hollywood.

Carole Exantus, 33, Fort Lauderdale, was driving her red 1995 Toyota south on I-95 with Dimitry and two other children in the backseat. Just north of Stirling Road, for an unknown reason, Exantus twice swerved in front of a blue cement truck driven by Levie Kelley Jr.

The cement mixer hit the Toyota both times, and the car came to rest against a median wall.

Exantus and two of the children, Yvens-Son Jeudy, 4, and Leonce Ylanmir Jeudy, 5, were treated and released at Memorial. Kelley was not injured.

Last year, 28 people died on Florida roads during the Independence Day weekend, traditionally one of the most dangerous times to travel.

This year's death count began at 12:01 Friday morning and runs until midnight Tuesday.