

**Trooper John C. Hagerty**  
*End of Watch: Wednesday, March 18, 1970*



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**FHP Deaths Underscore Dangers of Sky Patrols**  
**Published on Friday, April 25, 2003 in the Orlando Sentinel**

Five Florida Highway Patrol troopers have died in plane crashes since the agency's aviation program began in 1962.

John C. Hagerty, a traffic spotter in the Orlando FHP office, died when his Taylor Cub airplane was sliced in two by a U.S. Navy jet in midair about 8 miles northeast of Lakeland on March 18, 1970, according to the FHP and news reports.

Hagerty, 44, was doing speed-enforcement duties, and the Navy A7B Corsair jet, flying out of Cecil Field Naval Air Station near Jacksonville, was on its way to a bombing range when the collision occurred.

The tail section of Hagerty's single-engine plane ripped off, landing on Interstate 4. The fuselage fell into a swamp with Hagerty inside.

He was pronounced dead at Lakeland General Hospital.

The Navy pilot, Lt. John Hiltabidle, was not injured. His jet had a minor dent in the wing, according to Navy investigators.

Eleven years later, on July 13, 1981, Troopers Cleo L. Tomlinson Jr., Merle J. Cook and Robert L. Pruitt died in St. Johns County when their FHP plane crashed during a search for two breaking-and-entering suspects.

The patrol's most-recent airplane death was Oct. 2, 1985, when John C. Baxter Jr.'s Cessna 172 Skyhawk crashed near a warehouse in Manatee County.

Baxter, 57, a 25-year veteran of the highway patrol, was searching for a robbery suspect, according to a news report in the Orlando Sentinel.

Baxter's plane crashed into the parking lot of the Tropitone Furniture Co. in Bradenton, striking a 1983 Cadillac.

No one on the ground was injured.