

**Trooper Ronald G. Smith**  
*End of Watch: Sunday, December 23, 1973*



\*\*\*\*\*

**Memorial honors slain state trooper**  
**Published on Friday, October 8, 2010 in the Williston Pioneer**

For 37 years, the place where Trooper Ronald Gordon Smith took his last breath remained an almost anonymous piece of earth, its significance lost among the pine needles, palmettos and oak trees.

Now, there's no mistaking that something tragic happened in that place next to U.S. 19 in Red Level, where Smith, a Florida Highway Patrolman of eight months, was gunned down at the age of 28.

On Saturday, about 130 people — including grandchildren Smith never met and his daughter, Alicia Hayes, who was not yet 2 years old at the time of his death — gathered there for a memorial dedication honoring Smith and his service to FHP.

The crowd included other of Smith's family members, several dignitaries, dozens of current and former law enforcement officers and members of the National Association of Retired Law Enforcement Officers (NARLEO).

The new memorial, as well as the naming of the barge canal bridge in Smith's honor, will ensure that Smith's service and heroism won't be forgotten, NARLEO members said.

Smith had been patrolling his section of U.S. 19 on Dec. 23, 1973, when he spotted a vehicle parked near the road about a mile south of the barge canal bridge. Smith, only a few hours from the end of his shift, stopped to help the occupants of the vehicle.

Unbeknownst to the young trooper, the two occupants, Ronald Jones and Carl Ray Songer, were two felons who'd fled a work-release program in Oklahoma. Songer shot Smith several times and, though mortally wounded, Smith returned fire. The gunfire attracted the attention of a group of nearby hunters — Johnnie Hamilton, Willie Hamilton, Ralph Morris,

Richard Starling and Joseph Young — who rushed to Smith's aid and prevented Jones and Songer from escaping.

The memorial honored not only Smith but also the hunters, who, by catching Smith's assailants, may have kept his death from becoming a tragic mystery.

The crowd cheered as the hunters were recognized during the dedication ceremony.

"This would be a 37-year mystery, a 37-year search for justice if it had not been for the four hunters," NARLEO member Tom Moore said.

It's possible that Smith's actions prevented Jones and Songer from harming another person in the future, said NARLEO member Chris Talar.

"His actions that day might have saved somebody's life," Talar said. "Somebody could be in the audience right now who owes their life to Trooper Ronald Gordon Smith."

NARLEO President Andrew Tarpey said Smith will always be remembered.

"This tribute is one way to show ... that we will never forget the actions and deeds of our fallen hero," Tarpey said. "Let us keep his memory in our minds and hearts. We will never forget."

During the ceremony, state Rep. Ron Schultz read a letter from Gov. Charlie Crist praising Smith. Schultz's successor, Jimmie T. Smith, read a proclamation by State Sen. Charlie Dean honoring the slain trooper.

The mayors of Crystal River and Inverness and county officials also read proclamations by their respective governments.

**Family, hunters recall life, death of Trooper Ronald Gordon Smith**  
**Published on Saturday, October 2, 2010 in the Citrus County Chronicle**

Alicia Hayes was only 2 years old when her father was killed.

Most of the memories she has are based on the recollections and stories of others. The more personal memories involve courthouses, lawyers and the many appeals by the man who murdered her father.

But out of all the sadness and disappointment, Hayes said she is delighted to finally be able to honor her father, Trooper Ronald Gordon Smith.

"It's a mix of sad and happy at the same time," she said.

At a reception dinner organized by the local chapter of the National Association of Retired Law Enforcement Officers (NARLEO), several people, including Hayes, gathered to recognize those who had a hand in erecting the new memorial in Smith's memory at the intersection of U.S. 19 and Basswood Drive. Also recognized were the hunters who stopped Smith's killer, Carl Ray Songer, and another felon from fleeing the scene of the shooting.

Richard Clark Starling, one of the hunters, said he thought it was really nice that NARLEO went out of its way to build a monument to honor Smith. He said he and one of the other hunters, Ralph Morris, still travel to Oklahoma for every parole board hearing they have for Songer to make sure he stays behind bars.

“We fought this thing all the way through to now,” he said.

When asked if they still remember what happened on that tragic day 37 years ago, Starling and Morris both agreed it was still fresh in their minds like it was yesterday.

“You don’t forget it,” Morris said.

\*\*\*

On Dec. 23, 1973, Smith was patrolling U.S. 19 with only a few more hours left of his shift. After he finished for the day, he planned on traveling to Tallahassee to move his wife and daughter to their new home in Crystal River.

About two miles south of the barge canal bridge, Smith saw a 1965 Chevrolet car parked near the highway in the woods. He stopped and approached two hunters on the other side of the street who were out looking for their dogs. The men told Smith there were two guys in the car.

The men in the car — Songer and Ronald Jones — were felons who had escaped from a work release program in Oklahoma. Almost out of gas and unable to stop at a station to fill up, the men had pulled over to rest for the night.

Smith approached the vehicle, first tapping on the driver’s side window. Jones, who was behind the vehicle, got out and handed the trooper some papers. Then Smith walked back to the car where Songer lay in the backseat.

The trooper opened the back door and began shaking Songer to wake him. Songer sat up and fired the first shot of five that fatally wounded Smith. Smith grabbed his gun and returned fire before falling to the ground.

The hunters, who witnessed the encounter, sprang into action as one shot Jones in the leg as he tried to flee. Then the men engaged in a short gunfight with Songer until he surrendered.

Songer later claimed that his alcohol- and drug-induced sleep caused him to fire repeatedly at Smith, not realizing he was a law enforcement officer. But the prosecution noted that the single-action pistol Songer used required a person to cock the hammer and pull the trigger each time the gun is fired, showing there was some thought to his actions.

Songer was originally sentenced to the death penalty, but after dozens of appeals, Songer’s sentence was reduced to life in prison. Songer is currently incarcerated in the Oklahoma State Prison.

\*\*\*

Starling, glancing over his shoulder, looked at Alicia, who he hadn't seen since she was 15 years old.

"I think she turned into a beautiful young lady," he said.

Starling insists he and the other hunters weren't the heroes that day.

"Smith was," he said.

Hayes, who met some of the hunters for the first time, said it was a privilege to finally see the men who she believes are heroes. It was also the first time she had been back to the area since she was a baby. Returning to a place that holds so many memories and meeting the men, she said, definitely was emotional.

"Everything has been emotional."

But she was glad to be in Citrus County because she said she felt it was good for her two sons, Rhett, 9, and Cole, 15, to learn about what kind of person their grandfather was.