

Corporal Cleo L. Tomlinson, Jr.
Trooper Merle J. Cook
Trooper Robert L. Pruitt
End of Watch: Monday, July 13, 1981



Honoring 3 fallen troopers
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Phil Genovar was one of the first at the scene in 1981 when an airplane crash off Old Moultrie Road took the lives of three Florida Highway Patrol troopers who were among those chasing a suspect wanted in a series of burglaries.

On Friday, he was at the ceremony where the names of the three troopers were added to a memorial in front of the St. Johns County Sheriff's Office. It was 26 years to the day since Cpl. C.L. Tomlinson Jr., Trooper R. L. Pruitt and Trooper Merle J. Cook died in a heavily wooded area behind Ponce de Leon Mall.

"I can't understand why it took so long to honor them," said the longtime businessman and community volunteer who was the chief of Station 5, St. Augustine South, when the crash occurred. "It's late, but at least it's finally happened."

Sheriff David Shoar credited Genovar with telling him of the deaths and suggesting their names be added to the memorial that honors St. Johns Sheriff's deputies.

For Genovar, the ceremony was the culmination of years of calling and writing state and area officials trying to get the men honored.

A 21-gun salute, a recitation about each trooper, a prayer and the playing of "Taps" marked the 10 a.m. ceremony attended by dozens of FHP troopers, law enforcement officers from St. Johns, State Attorney office representatives, and friends and family of the troopers.

How it happened

The troopers honored were killed while providing aerial support to the Sheriff's Office, directing them to a burglary suspect who had been targeting the St. Augustine South area.

The search for the suspect, later identified as Mack Daniel Mims, began in the early morning of July 13 after a Shore Drive resident reported waking up and finding a man in his bedroom reaching for his trousers. The suspect fled out the back door after reportedly taking \$5 and a wristwatch.

Deputies searching the area found a car parked on a road behind the victim's residence and inside an identification card with Mims' name. Around 8 a.m., an Argonaut Road resident reported a break-in, and several people reported a suspect in the area.

"Everybody was involved - the (Florida) Marine Patrol, the Sheriff's Office, police, Fish and Game," said Genovar.

Around 9:30 a.m., the three FHP troopers joined the search in a single-engine Cessna 172 airplane.

The search shifted to Ponce de Leon Mall around mid-morning. Shortly after 11 a.m., Mims entered the Belk-Hudson store, trying to blend in with the shoppers. Deputies entered the store. After Mims spotted them, he ran the length of the mall with officers in pursuit.

He headed toward the front door of Penney's and was ordered to stop. He didn't, and a deputy fired a shot. It missed Mims, who was heard to groan, according to an account in The Record. He headed out of Penney's toward a wooded area south of the mall.

The last transmission from the FHP plane was just before 11:15 a.m., when they spotted the suspect leaving and reported by public address system to the deputies that the suspect was 50 yards ahead of a deputy in pursuit. A deputy saw the suspect's head and fired, missing him.

The plane plunges

The plane went down after that, plunging into the southwest corner of the wooded area on the east side of Old Moultrie Road, just behind the mall.

"It went down like a white cross, and then there was a thud," said Margo Pope, who was an eyewitness to the crash and was at Friday's ceremony. "There was an eerie stillness after that."

Pope, who is now the opinion page editor for The Record, was education writer for The Florida Times-Union at the time. She happened to be at the Sears store, which was then located in front of the mall.

She remembers that, as she went in the store, the plane was flying low enough for her to make out Tomlinson's profile.

"He used to wear his hat at a certain angle, and I saw him in profile and with his hat."

When she walked back out of the store, she saw the plane again. She watched it circling. Then the engine made a sputtering sound as if it were cutting off, and the plane plunged down in woods south of the mall. It caught fire, but there was no explosion.

"You can never forget the thud," Pope said.

Mims was caught a few minutes later.

Family memories

Kathy Tomlinson Phillips was 12 years old when her father died. She was with her mother, Bonnie, and siblings at Friday's ceremonies.

She remembers the family had spent the weekend with her grandparents in Lake City. Her father wasn't scheduled to work.

"We were shelling peas (at a friend's house), and I don't think he wanted to have to shell them," she said, smiling. When the FHP called him to be an observer on the plane, Tomlinson agreed. He was the supervisor of the FHP contingent stationed in St. Johns County. After his death, the station was named for him.

"That was how he was. If they called him, he was going to be there. He would do whatever it took to help," Phillips said.

She remembers an FHP car driving up to the house and her mother going inside with the men.

"I heard a scream, and I knew something had happened to him," she said.

Her brother, Chet, was in training with the Marines at Camp LeJeune and was flown home. He later became a trooper and retired last year.

The family has remained close through the years. Her mother, Bonnie, ended up building a house on land she and her husband had bought. Phillips and her sister, Bonnie Marie, live in houses on each side of their mother, who recently retired from the FHP.

Friday's ceremony

At a reception after Friday's ceremony, Phillips looked around the room filled with troopers and other law enforcement officers.

"They've always been there for us," she said. "They've always been part of the family. It's just extended. They watched us growing up and they watched our children."

Col. Chris Knight, FHP director from Tallahassee, spoke at the ceremonies. At the reception afterward, he knelt beside Cook's widow, opened a small black jewelry box and presented her a round medallion with the emblem of the FHP.

"It's known as a leadership coin. The medallions are carried by all troopers in honor of the agency," said Capt. Brent Coates out of the FHP station in Palatka.

Each widow received one as troopers stood at their side, watching over them.