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In the Line of Duty

**OFFICER FATALITIES CAUSED BY DRUNKEN DRIVERS
ON THE INCREASE
by Craig W. Floyd**

JD's Tavern, about 20 miles from Springfield, Illinois, has had more than its fair share of trouble. According to one newspaper report, local law enforcement agencies were called 32 times for help during a 10-month period in 2007. "Way too much manpower has been dedicated to that one location," said Sangamon County Sheriff's Captain Jack Campbell.

During the early morning hours of October 28, 2007, trouble had broken out once again. Two sheriff's deputies who had been called to JD's on another matter found themselves in a middle of a parking lot melee involving about 10 other people. When one of the deputies was struck in the head, they called for backup.

Illinois State Trooper Brian McMillen responded to the emergency call. It was about 2:44 a.m. and Trooper McMillen had his lights and siren on. As he was nearing JD's, a 22-year-old drunken driver crossed the center line and crashed into Trooper McMillen's vehicle, causing it to spin into oncoming traffic. He was struck a second time by another drunken driver and Trooper McMillen's car burst into flames. The 24-

year-old trooper, who had been on the job for less than a year, was trapped inside his patrol car and he was pronounced dead on the scene. He was survived by his wife, Angela, his parents and 10 siblings.

His former high school basketball coach, Gary Bowker, said Brian would always do whatever it took for the good of the team. “You watch movies with gladiators and warriors. The only thing warriors like that fear is a dishonorable death . . . For Brian, he was hustling his tail off to help someone in need in an unselfish manner and that’s just so typical.”

The driver charged with causing the crash that took Trooper McMillen’s life had a history of drunken and reckless driving violations. He was already serving 12 months of court supervision for another DUI charge, and his license had been suspended twice—for an underage liquor violation, and for having three or more moving violations.

Brian McMillen’s death was one of seven law enforcement fatalities last year caused by drunken drivers. Other officers who were involved in automobile crashes caused by drunken drivers included: Needville (TX) Chief of Police Ernest Valencia Mendoza; Los Angeles County (CA) Deputy Sheriff Raul Vasquez Gama; and Patrol Officer Scott Bell of the Jacksonville (FL) Sheriff’s Office. In an incident eerily similar to Trooper McMillen’s, Guam Police Sergeant Frankie E. Smith was responding to a fight that had broken out at a local nightclub when his motorcycle was struck by a drunk driver on December 30.

Gainesville (FL) Police Lieutenant Corey Dahlem was struck and killed on April 4, 2007, by a drunken driver while on foot patrol following the NCAA basketball game at the University of Florida. Lisa Renee Beaulieu, a Beaumont (TX) police officer, was struck and killed later that same month by a driver under the influence of alcohol while investigating an earlier traffic accident.

According to the records kept by the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund (NLEOMF), 462 officers in American history have been killed in traffic-related incidents caused by drivers under the influence of alcohol. Of those 462 officers, 220 were struck and killed while outside of their vehicles, 198 were killed in automobile crashes and 44 died in motorcycle crashes.

The first law officer known to have been killed by a drunken driver was Patrick A. Butler, chief of police in Weymouth, Massachusetts. On the night of April 15, 1915, Chief Butler left his home and was walking to the police station when he noticed a car driving toward him with no lights on. The 60-year-old chief walked into the street and signaled for the driver to stop. After hearing a scream, neighbors ran to the scene and found Chief Butler lying under the car with a fractured skull and broken neck. According to newspaper reports, the man who struck the chief had three quarts of whiskey in his car at the time of his arrest “and he was too dazed to talk coherently.” Witnesses said the car had “zig-zagged unsteadily, always on the wrong side of the street,” a short time before the accident.

Aggressive enforcement of drunk driving laws has made it safer on our roadways for the driving public. Just consider, for example, that the number of alcohol-related deaths nationwide was 22,084 in 1990, compared to 17,602 in 2006—a 20 percent reduction. However, the crackdown on drunk drivers has put officers at greater risk and resulted in a rising number of fatalities among our law enforcement ranks.

A careful analysis of the records kept by the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund shows that the number of officers killed in traffic-related incidents caused by persons under the influence of alcohol has risen by a staggering 41 percent over the last three decades. During the 10 years between 1978-1987, there were 74 officers killed in traffic-related incidents caused by persons under the influence of alcohol. From 1988-1997, that figure rose to 89; and from 1998-2007, the total was 104. Over the last 10 years, 6.2 percent of the total number of officers killed in the line of duty (1,671) were caused by drunken drivers, compared to 3.8 percent of the total fatalities between 1978-1987 (1,933).

The dedication of our law enforcement professionals in ridding our roads of drunk drivers was certainly exemplified on March 27, 1985. Patrolman Thomas Strunk, a three-year veteran of the Billerica (MA) Police Department, was off duty that day. Tom and his wife, Nancy, were heading home after running some errands with their three young sons.

They were just a few miles from home when Tom saw a car ahead of him swerving all over the road. After following the vehicle for a short distance he became convinced that the driver was probably drunk and posed a serious threat to others on the road. So, Patrolman Strunk pulled the driver over. Before he got out of the car, Tom told his wife and sons not to worry—he would be right back.

But when he approached the man's car, identified himself as a police officer and asked the man to step out of the car, the driver attempted to flee. The man rolled up the car window, trapping Patrolman Strunk's arm, and then took off, dragging Tom alongside at speeds reaching 55 miles per hour. The driver soon lost control of the vehicle and smashed into a pole. Tom Strunk died less than an hour later. He never regained consciousness.

His young son, Jeff, watched in horror that day as his father was killed by a drunk driver. He could have easily blamed the law enforcement profession for his father's death. Instead, though, he decided to help finish the job his father had started and joined the Billerica Police Department, where he now proudly serves.

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Craig W. Floyd is chairman of the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund and is a regular contributor to AMERICAN POLICE BEAT. Visit www.nleomf.com for more information about law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty.

(Note to Editor: This article will be published in the October 2008 issue of AMERICAN POLICE BEAT, a national law enforcement publication. It may be reprinted in whole, or part, in your publication, but it must include the following attribution: "Reprinted with permission of the author and AMERICAN POLICE BEAT.")