

Lakeport Police participate in police memorial ceremonies



Written by Elizabeth Larson

Monday, 21 May 2007



From left, Mike Stevenson, and Lakeport Police Officer Jarvis Leishman, Lt. Brad Rasmussen, Chief Kevin Burke and Officer Mark Hommer. Courtesy photo.

LAKEPORT – In honor of fallen law enforcement officers, a delegation of officers from Lakeport Police made a trip last week to Washington, D.C. The delegation participated in events for National Police Week, May 13-19, which included the 26th annual National Peace Officer Memorial Day services on May 15.

Chief Kevin Burke of Lakeport Police hadn't been to the ceremonies before, and when he found out the department hadn't ever sent a delegation, he decided to make the trip. "I saw it as a golden opportunity as sort of a team building exercise for our officers here, and to give them a chance to see law enforcement in a broad perspective," said Burke.

Burke took with him Lt. Brad Rasmussen, and Officers Jarvis Leishman and Mark Hommer. There was a special guest in their ranks, too, who they asked to accompany them. That was Mike Stevenson, who retired as Lakeport's city engineer in June of 2004. Stevenson wasn't going as a member of law enforcement, but as the family member of a fallen officer.

On Jan. 9, 2005, his son, Sgt. Howard K. Stevenson of the Ceres Police Department, was shot to death after responding to a call of a suspicious person at a liquor store. Howard K. Stevenson, 39, was a 20-year police veteran. After Burke came to the city as chief in early 2006, he learned about Stevenson's loss, and asked if he would like to travel with Lakeport Police this year.

Burke said surviving family members are invited to the ceremonies the year following the deaths of their loved ones. "It's an important way for them to start the healing process," he said. "So I invited him to accompany us back there."

Not yet ready to go

Stevenson said his family – including his wife, Phyllis, his daughter and daughter-in-law – went to the ceremonies last year, thanks to Concerns of Police Survivors Inc., or COPS for short, a group that assists families of law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty.

The commemoration also includes adding the names of fallen officers to a memorial wall. But he didn't go last year, Stevenson said. "I just wasn't ready." The chance came again this year, when COPS offered him an airplane ticket and a hotel room. Then came Burke's invitation. "I figured I was ready to see it," Stevenson said.

Stevenson's decision to go, said Burke, "really made the trip very, very special for us." Lt. Brad Rasmussen said the group left on the morning of Saturday, May 12, returning Wednesday, May 16.

Rasmussen said he saw one estimate that put attendance for the week's memorial events at 25,000 people from around the country and the world, with police agencies from England and Australia also in attendance.

Lakeport Police participated in the May 13 candlelight vigil, toured other police facilities in the city and visited a few memorials before the week's main commemoration, held on May 15, Rasmussen said.

That ceremony, held on the grounds of the US Capitol, was to honor the fallen officers. "I think it was probably one of the most impressive things I've seen in law enforcement," said Rasmussen.

Just as emotional was the duty the Lakeport officers helped perform at the event. Burke and his men joined a detail that included 14 police officers from Montgomery County, Maryland, which escorted family members into the event on the west front of the Capitol grounds, Rasmussen said.

Burke escorted the wife of a fallen officer, while Officer Mark Hommer escorted the two children of an officer from Texas who died in the line of duty. "It was a very sobering experience for all of us to see firsthand an event like this where you have hundreds of family members in one place," said Burke.

Officer Jarvis Leishman, who has been with Lakeport Police for five years, said the support for the families was an outstanding feature of the ceremonies. It was sobering, he said, to see the family members and be reminded of the risks. Of police work, Leishman said, "It's not just a job but it's a way of life for everyone involved, even our family members."

The high price of keeping citizens safe

Leishman pointed out that few people realize how many officers are actually lost each year. At this year's ceremony, 382 names were added to the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Wall – of those, 145 were local, state and federal officers who died in 2006, along with 237 names of people killed in earlier years

that were recently discovered.

With the recent additions, the wall will bear the names of 17,917 officers, according to the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund. "It's a real reminder for us of the risks that we take," said Burke.

President George W. Bush spoke at the ceremony, Burke reported. The president also spent several hours personally greeting each and every family member. Burke said it was important to show the families that "we don't forget."

For Stevenson, who saw his son's name on the memorial, it was both a melancholy time and a "very healing experience." An array of activities, including counseling and grief groups and tours, were organized for surviving family members, from parents and siblings to children and spouses, said Stevenson.

Stevenson said he's really glad he went, because the ceremonies provided some comfort for him. "There is a tremendous amount of support from the active duty police and COPS," he said.

Being with other survivors was important, said Stevenson.

"We have this terrible thing in common," he said, his voice catching.

Losing officers, said Stevenson, is the unfortunate price "that has to be paid for living the secure life we have."

For Lakeport's officers, it was a meaningful experience. Rasmussen said it was important for the agencies to get together to show their support for each other and the victims' families. Said Leishman, "I was honored to be a part of it."

Burke said it was a good experience for the group. "It gives you a renewed sense of belonging, even in your own department," he said, and a greater sense of commitment to a very difficult job.

County's lost officers aren't forgotten

Lakeport Police hasn't lost an officer in the line of duty, said Rasmussen. However, there are three local names among the thousands listed on the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial in Washington, all from the ranks of the Lake County Sheriff's Office.

They are:

- Sheriff George W. Kemp: Kemp was shot and killed Jan. 1, 1910. More details about Kemp were not available from the Officer Down Memorial Page.
- Deputy Sheriff William David Hoyt; Hoyt died on Oct. 11, 1967, at age 52. According to the Officer Down Memorial Page, Hoyt was shot and killed in the Lake County Courthouse by a prisoner who was being led into the courtroom. The prisoner, who was manacled to two other prisoners at the time, grabbed another deputy's gun and began firing. Despite being wounded, Hoyt staggered to a counter and retrieved another gun kept below it, then returned fire and wounded one of the prisoners. He later died of his injuries.
- Sgt. Richard J. Helbush: A 13-year veteran of the Lake County Sheriff's Office by age 34, Helbush died after being shot on May 2, 1981. The Officer Down Memorial Page reports that Helbush stopped to help two people who he thought were stranded motorists, but who turned out to be Robert Cox, 39, and Annika Deasy, 27, who were wanted for murder in Stockton.

After speaking with Cox and Deasy, Helbush turned to go back to his patrol car and was shot in the back three times. Cox and Deasy then took his, revolver and patrol car before fleeing the scene. When he didn't respond to radio calls, other sheriff's units searched for and found Helbush along the roadside.

Deputy Don Anderson helped chase down and apprehend Cox and Deasy following a gun battle. Today, Anderson is a defense attorney practicing in Lake County.

Cox later would hang himself in jail. Deasy was sentenced to 25 years to life in prison. She has served 24 years of her sentence.

A native of Sweden, Deasy's case has achieved celebrity status in that country. Efforts have been under way for years both in the US and in Sweden to convince California authorities to let her return to her home country.

For more information about the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial, visit www.nleomf.com; profiles of fallen officers can be found at www.odmp.org; the Concerns of Police Survivors Inc. can be found online at www.nationalcops.org.

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