

Police Officer Killed in Traffic Collision in Wyoming

SUMMARY

A 48 year old law enforcement officer died from injuries suffered when his police car was struck in the side by another law enforcement vehicle while both were responding to a call regarding an escaped prisoner. The victim was travelling east on a county road, followed by a fellow officer, toward a destination where an escaped prisoner was reported to have been seen. As he approached the intersection of another county road an officer from another law enforcement agency, responding to the same call, was approaching on the second county road. Visibility was poor at that intersection due to darkness, weather conditions, a hill crest on the road the victim was driving, and a grove of trees at the intersection. A stop sign faced the second county road, giving the victim the right of way in routine traffic situations.

The victim had been talking with his fellow officer by police radio and his location and direction were available to anyone who heard that communication. As the officer entered the intersection, he was struck by the law enforcement vehicle that was entering the intersection from the side road. The impact forced the victim's vehicle into a gas main and power pole to his right, just beyond the intersection. Law Enforcement personnel from the vehicle that struck the officer were first responders, pulling the victim from his vehicle and beginning CPR across the street from the vehicle. They also radioed in to have the gas shut off from the main that had been broken on impact, and that was emitting gas into the area creating the potential hazard of fire and explosion. The victim was taken to the hospital where he was pronounced dead.

Employers may be able to minimize the potential for occurrence of this type of incident through the following precautions:

- **Maintain open inter-agency communication, particularly at times of potential crisis.**

INTRODUCTION

Late on a Monday night, September 6, 1993 a law enforcement officer was eastbound on a county road responding to a report that a prisoner who had escaped that day from a county jail within his community. The officer had been active in the initial apprehension of the prisoner, who was incarcerated while awaiting sentence for sexual assault charges. Following the escape, the victim was participating in a house-to-house search in the area where earlier sexual assaults had allegedly been conducted by the victim.

Shortly before midnight, the victim received a report that the fugitive had been spotted near the state's eastern border driving a car that had been stolen near where the house-to-house search was being

conducted. The victim and a fellow officer got into separate police vehicles and began driving in the direction of the county road that the escapee was believed to have taken.

As they approached the city limits, the victim radioed his fellow officer who was driving ahead of him. He asked, via police radio, if the other officer knew the road well enough to drive it in the dark with rain falling. On receiving a negative response, the victim took the lead, having told his fellow officer that there was a dangerous intersection ahead. The fellow officer then pulled in behind the victim and they topped the hillcrest a few yards west of the intersection.

Meanwhile, an officer, a jailer, and a search dog from another law enforcement agency were also responding to the report that the escapee had been seen. That vehicle was southbound on the county road that intersects the road that the victim was on. As the victim passed the grove of trees that hides the approach and entered the intersection, his vehicle was struck in the left side by the southbound vehicle.

INVESTIGATION

The WY- Wyoming FACE Project became aware of this incident through local media releases on September 7, 1993. Information requests were hand carried to coroner and law enforcement agencies and the project coordinator visited the scene with the victim's employer on September 8.

The victim had been employed by the law enforcement agency for 13 years and nine months, and had served at his present rank for seven years. He had received nearly 1300 hours of specialized POST and Law Enforcement training and was seen as a highly dedicated law enforcement officer.

He had been personally involved in the initial apprehension of the escaped prisoner who was subject of the search that was being conducted at the time of the incident. The victim was described as "instrumental in solving the rape cases" involving the prisoner in two states. Co-workers suggested that the victim's concern for local youth may have contributed to his determination to initially apprehend and recapture the prisoner.

The intersection where the incident occurred was marked with stop signs at the north and south entrances, giving legal right-of-way to vehicles traveling in the direction of the victim. Trees at the intersection minimized visibility, as did a rise shortly ahead of the intersection in the direction from which the victim was driving. The road was a two-lane county road which was wet as a result of falling rain. There is no artificial lighting at the intersection and the vehicles were travelling in darkness. Both law enforcement vehicles involved in the incident were travelling with emergency flashing lights, as was the vehicle following the victim as he approached the intersection. The victim was traveling at an estimated speed of 60 mph and the vehicle that struck him was estimated at 20+ mph.

As the victim entered the intersection from the west, another law enforcement vehicle was entering from the north, making a left turn. The impact of the crash in the center of the intersection forced the victim's car off the road to the right where it struck a power pole with the right rear door and a gas main with the right front fender, breaking the gas main and releasing gas into the air. The impact on the driver's side crushed the entire left side of the victim's vehicle from the front bumper to the rear door frame and crushing the left front door panel into the driver's compartment. Damage to the other vehicle included crushing the hood and front bumper with secondary impact to the rear as the vehicle spun around 270° coming to rest against the same power pole that the victim had struck earlier.

Officers from the second vehicle and from the vehicle that had been following the victim removed the victim from his car through the broken windshield and carried him across the street to a lawn area where they could attempt CPR. They also called for emergency shutoff of the gas main that had been broken by the impact to limit the potential for fire or explosion.

The victim was transported to a local hospital by ambulance with CPR in progress, asystole, and no evidence of respiration or pulse. He was treated and assessed, and pronounced dead in the emergency room less than 20 minutes after the incident occurred.

CAUSE OF DEATH

The Medical Examiner listed the cause of death as multiple trauma; basil w/skull fractures; transected spinal cord at allarto-occipital axis; lacerated descending thoracic aorta; fractured ribs.

RECOMMENDATIONS/DISCUSSION

This incident could have been prevented through improved communication between law enforcement agencies during a critical time when multiple agencies were involved in similar efforts. The victim was in radio communication with a fellow officer from his agency but was apparently not heard by other agency communications as he approached the intersection. Each of the agency responders had valid reason for being in the positions they were in as a means of re-apprehending an escaped prisoner. Both of the vehicles were reported to be travelling with emergency lights as a warning to any oncoming traffic that they were to be given clearance. Because of the rise ahead of the intersection the victim's lights may not have been visible until he closely approached the intersection, and there is a possibility that any view the victim may have had of the lights of the other vehicle may have been confused with the lights of the vehicle following him which would have been seen in the rear-view mirror.

The intersection is extremely hazardous under any circumstance and was particularly dangerous under the conditions of darkness, rain, wet pavement, and high speeds. Visibility is limited not only by trees and undergrowth on the northeast section, but also by a rise immediately adjacent to the intersection. Local residents have long considered the intersection to be dangerous, but crash data does not statistically indicate a high risk location.

One of the primary contributors was what was termed during an interview as "tunnel vision", where both agencies set such a high priority in apprehending and returning the escaped prisoner that safety concerns which would normally have been foremost on their minds were reduced to a lesser priority. Each of the drivers was acting on his own initiative under general authority to safely and efficiently return the prisoner by the best practical method. All officers involved in the search appear to have been dedicated to accomplish that end. This is perhaps indicative of the closeness of a small community and the personal dedication of law enforcement officers to protect, not just an unknown public, but a community of close neighbors and friends. Special care must be taken in such a situation to not let emotion override duty, and to not become so personally involved as to lose sight of job safety.

FATAL ACCIDENT CIRCUMSTANCES AND EPIDEMIOLOGY (Wyoming FACE) PROJECT

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), Division of Safety Research (DSR), performs Fatal Accident Circumstances and Epidemiology (Wyoming FACE) investigations when a participating state reports an occupational fatality and requests technical assistance. The goal of these evaluations is to prevent fatal work injuries in the future by studying the working environment, the worker, the task the worker was performing, the tools the worker was using, the energy exchange resulting in fatal injury, and the role of management in controlling how these factors interact.

States participating in this study include: Kentucky, Maryland, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia.

NIOSH Funded/State-based Wyoming FACE Projects providing surveillance and intervention capabilities to show a measurable reduction in workplace fatalities include: Alaska, California, Colorado, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Minnesota, Missouri, Wisconsin and Wyoming.

Additional information regarding this report is available from:

Wyoming Occupational Fatality Analysis Program
522 Hathaway Building - 2300 Capitol Avenue
Cheyenne, WY 82002
(307) 777-5439

Please use information listed on the Contact Sheet on the NIOSH FACE web site to contact In-house FACE program personnel regarding In-house FACE reports and to gain assistance when State-FACE program personnel cannot be reached.