

In Memoriam

Every cop knows that police work is inherently dangerous. Police officers have lost their lives while performing their duty in large cities and small towns. Every law enforcement officer knows the risks they are undertaking when they accept the job. Yet they take the job anyway. It is this type of courage that sets them apart from the rest.

On average, 150 officers make the ultimate sacrifice in America every year. Rhode Island has seen its share of these tragedies.

Chief of Police John Bigbee 1908



In November of 1908, a small fire broke out in a barn at the Farm of George Cahoone which was located near present day Cranston Street and Gansett Avenue. Chief Bigbee lived nearby on Cranston Street and near his home was a small shed which housed a hose reel for fighting fires. When the chief was notified of the fire, he and his son Richard pulled the hose reel from the shed and brought it to the scene of the fire. In pushing the reel down the street a chain on it snapped and struck the chief in his lower leg causing a small laceration. The wound became infected and the chief developed what was termed

“blood poisoning”. Antibiotics didn’t exist in 1908, and the chief lingered for several weeks as he fought the infection. Unfortunately he died at home several weeks later on December 11, 1908.

Chief Bigbee was Cranston’s first Chief of Police, having been elected to the position in 1886.

Patrolman H. Ralph Johnson 1930



On the night of August 12, 1930, motorcycle officer Henry Ralph Johnson pulled over to talk with two friends, Harvey Dwight and Barry Leonard, who were sitting in a car on Arnold Avenue at Narragansett Boulevard. While speaking with them, he noticed a man come out from between two houses.

In the 1920’s, Edgewood was a neighborhood where wealthy Providence executives lived thus making it a prime target for burglars. None of the men had seen the stranger before so Officer Johnson decided to walk over to question him. The man said he was from Providence and was in the area “calling on his girl”, but was unable to state her name or where she lived. When Officer Johnson attempted to take the man into custody, the suddenly pulled a gun and shot the officer point blank in the abdomen.

Although seriously wounded, the patrolman managed to draw his service revolver and return fire but missed his assailant. The shooter, later identified as Daniel J. Dennis, ran down Narragansett Boulevard towards Pawtuxet and disappeared.

As the officer collapsed in the street, he called to Harvey Dwight to get help. As Mr. Dwight ran to find a house with a telephone, Barry Leonard dragged the patrolman to his

car and hauled him into the back seat after which he raced to St. Joseph's Hospital in Providence.

Within minutes officers from Cranston and Providence were converging on the area while the state police set up roadblocks on the main roads. Within three hours of the shooting, Cranston officers, Captain Henry (Clay) Debow, and Patrolman Michael Buzzard, spotted Dennis hiding near Pawtuxet Cove. As Dennis began to run from the officers, Patrolman McElroy fired a shot but missed. Dennis then jumped over a wall injuring his leg and was captured. (One account states that Dennis was found "hiding" up to his neck in the water of Pawtuxet Cove.)

The gun used to shoot the officer was never recovered and is presumed to be at the bottom of the cove to this day.

Surgeons operated on Patrolman Johnson but hypostatic pneumonia set in and he died on August 14, 1930.

Officer Johnson was known as "Mike" to his friends and family. He was born October 17, 1898, and he was 32 years old at the time of his death. He left behind a wife Grace, and a son Owen. He is buried in Pocasset Cemetery on Dyer Avenue.

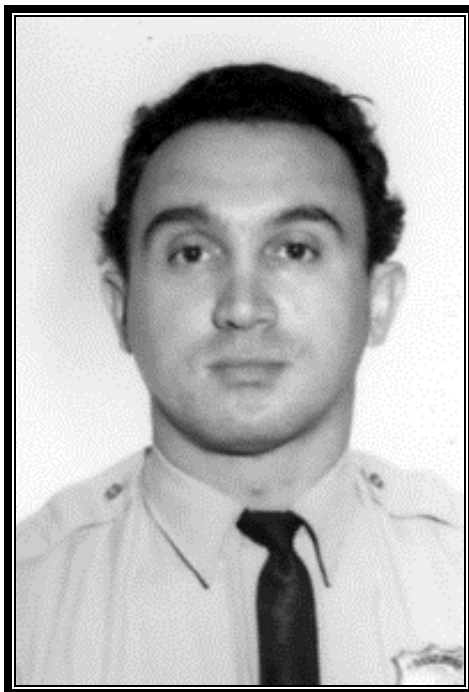
Daniel Dennis was convicted of murder on December 6, 1930, and was given life in the Adult Correctional Institution where he died in August of 1952.

Ironically, Officer Johnson had been shot once before in 1928 when he interrupted a burglary on Strathmore Road.

While checking the home of a couple who were away on vacation he discovered three men ransacking the house. In 1928, policemen didn't have portable radios, so he hurried across the street and told neighbors to call the police station and send help. As he ran back towards the house, the three men rushed out and one began shooting. A bullet struck Johnson in the chin. The jawbone deflected the round down the officers neck and out through his shoulder. Officer Johnson managed to fire off four shots at the fleeing burglars who escaped in a car parked on the next street.

Officer Johnson's life hung in the balance for a few days before he recovered. The three men were never caught.

**Sergeant Walter Busby
1979**



On February 12, 1979, Sergeant Busby and two patrolmen responded to 36 Vervena Street in Knightsville for a report of a possible drug overdose. When they arrived, they encountered a 31-year-old man on the second floor who was threatening to kill himself.

The man had been drinking heavily and had taken a large dose of pills. When he saw the officers, he picked up a bottle and threatened to attack them with it if anyone came near him. Finally one of the officers was able to grab the bottle at which time a struggle ensued. After the man was handcuffed, he continued to struggle, and had to be physically carried down the stairs to the first floor. As they were attempting to carry the man through the door, Sergeant Busby suddenly collapsed and stopped breathing.

Those at the scene tried to revive him and transported him to St. Joseph Hospital where he was pronounced dead on arrival. The cause of death was determined to be a heart attack.