

Trooper Russell W. Harper

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Retired Sergeant Jim Lee remembers Trooper Russell W. Harper as being a great friend, and the kind of guy you would want on your permanent “friends list.” Jim described him as one of the most empathetic men he has ever known. Russ would go out of his way to help anyone who needed it. Jim recalls Russ being dedicated to quality contacts and aggressively looking for disabled motorists. “He was one of our really true heroes,” said Jim.

There was one story told in the zone that gave credence to Jim’s observation about disabled motorists. In all fairness to Russ, there’s more than one version to the story. But, this is the one I was told. One of his fellow zone members pulled in behind Russ’ patrol car one night. Russ was parked behind a disabled motorist whose vehicle had the right rear jacked up. The flat, rear wheel lay on the ground behind the car. Russ was leaning on the spare and appeared very tired.

With some reluctance the story began to unfold. The motorist had leaned his spare tire against his rear bumper while he jacked the car up on the right, rear side. After removing the flat tire the motorist discovered the spare tire had rolled down the embankment into a field of tall weeds. Now enters our Trooper Russ Harper. After an unsuccessful search, Russ decides to re-enact the crime. Placing his spare at the motorist’s

bumper, he gives it a little push, and then follows it to see if it would traverse the same path as the run away spare. This part of the story has the most variations. That is, how many times was Russ’ spare sent on this mission? I think several is a fair compromise.

My first interaction with Russ was on the other end of the spectrum. Jim Lee was my FTO and he drove us to U.S. Highway 61 and Bradley Beach Road just south of the Meramec River where our zone was holding a noontime spotcheck. Jim thought it would be good training to work with a different trooper during the spotcheck. Jim escorted me to where Russ was working the traffic. Between motorists, Jim told Russ who I was and that he would be working with me. Russ pointed to a safe place off the roadway and with a stern tone and a piercing look told me he would be with me when he caught up. I knew in that brief instant I did not have to worry about making decisions for a while—just do what I was told.

I really thought that was pretty good deal until a driver with an attitude decided to drive around Russ instead of waiting his turn in line. With the same demeanor he used to direct the newest trooper, the driver was told where to park his vehicle. Russ instructed me to escort the driver to his patrol car until he could talk to him. It was clear that was all he expected me to do. I held the driver’s arm just above the elbow as we walked to Russ’ car.

The driver smelled of alcohol and began talking to himself about not having to take this kind of stuff, and that he was bigger than me, he could whip my [body] if he

wanted to. I was hoping the guy would talk himself out of doing something like that, but as I opened the door of the patrol car it went downhill quick. He pulled his arm forward out of my grip and as he brought it back toward my face, I blocked it and put him into a "full nelson." Russ has not seen any of this yet, but the forty-eleven drinkers in the picture window-sized windows in the dance bar had a ringside seat.

I tried to maintain my hold and hoped the guy would just calm down without me having to talk or do anything else. No such luck. He placed his foot on the running board and pushed up almost breaking my hold. With his foot back on the ground and my hold still in place, his head recoiled forward denting the top of Russ' patrol car roof with his now broken nose. I think it was at this time Russ noticed us. It might have been during the next two repetitive maneuvers with the same ending results. It looked really good to see Russ running in our direction to help control this guy. To my amazement, Russ seemed more concerned with me letting go of the drunk than the drunk. However, by this time the drunk was in no mood to take on a seasoned serious trooper when a little non-speaking one had just broke his nose three times.

On the way to Hillsboro Jail Russ would occasionally give me a piercing look in the rearview mirror that told me he had a lot of questions he was going to ask me later. The only conversation all the way to jail was the drunk talking to himself about how he didn't understand what had happened. It gave me time to think how it must have looked to Russ. He told this brand new kid to just walk a guy over to his car and as he looks up he sees the driver's face being smashed on the top of his patrol car three times. He could not see from his position the drunk's foot pushing back, but he could see a bunch of drinking witnesses in the dance bar windows watching the denting of his patrol car.

Russ and I laughed about that first encounter many times. What that told me about Russ was he was serious about being careful and professional. I never once saw Russ take an unsafe shortcut or do anything less than professional. I knew if I had not been justified in my actions, I was in serious trouble, because Russ would be on the side that was right. One of Russ' greatest qualities was his smile and being able to communicate his sincere desire to help those in need.

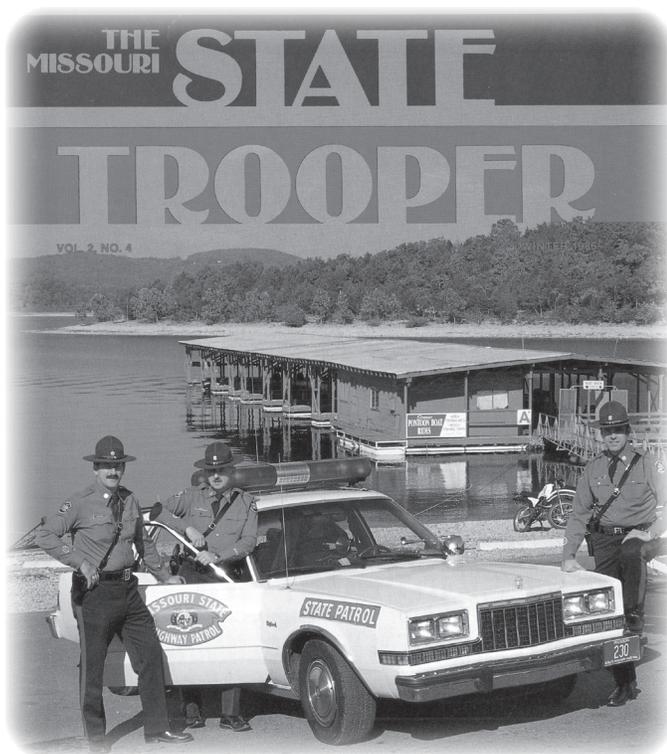
Russ transferred to Troop D, Springfield, and eventually worked with Trooper Allen Hines. He said Russ was a person who really cared about the men he worked with. He was very active in helping the Troopers Association get started, and when he talked about it, he didn't put down the Patrol, rather emphasized the positive things we could do with the association. Russ talked about lobbying and having numbers to contact people who could help the people on the lower end of the rank structure. Some felt he came on strong, but he could see what was to be, and he had a passion for that success.

Russ was an excellent road officer. "Russ taught me some things no one else had ever bothered to teach me: How to look for where a license was issued and where the dealer emblem was from. If they didn't match and the occupants were of questionable character, it bore further checking. He was always the one in his zone who would try to help new troopers. He did not treat them like they were the 'new guys,'" said Allen.

Allen talked about how Russ had purchased an older house he was very proud of. He had done quite a bit of work on the house when some of the older wiring shorted out and caught fire. There was a fairly large amount of damage and as it was being repaired he would take people over and show them all the work being done. (As I recall, he was doing some of the work

himself.) It was going to be a real showplace. He was proud to be restoring an older house to something people in the neighborhood would be proud of. Unfortunately, just weeks before they were to move back into the house Russ was killed. Gayla, his wife, still lives in the house.

Russ was proud of his sons Russ, Brad, and Nick, and his children by choice, Lynlee, Gayla's daughter, and Robert, their exchange student from the Netherlands. Lynlee describes Russ as unexpectedly funny and generous especially with his time. Lynlee's youth group from church preferred to have their parties at Russ and Gayla's home ... Even their 10-year reunion party, because that is where they had their fun. That is where they felt loved and welcomed. Robert, who lived with them for a year simply says, "Russell was my dad."



Tpr. Russell W. Harper (center) was a strong supporter of the Missouri State Troopers Association. He is seen here on the cover of a 1986 MOSTA magazine with Tpr. Jerry Walter and Tpr. Allen Hines.

Allen concluded his thoughts about Russ by saying, "One of the things I remember most is how he talked about Gayla. He adored her and you could tell when he talked about her she was his true love. She worked at Troop D and it was really neat to see the way they were around each other. It was obvious she felt the same way about Russ. They were a blended family that really cared about each other."

Russ reminds me of the quote credited to John Paul Jones, first admiral to the U.S. Navy, "*I wish to have no connection with any ship that does not sail fast, for I intend to go in harm's way.*" Russ intended to do his job at the highest level of professionalism possible and loved doing it. He succeeded.

Success:

- To laugh often and much;**
- To win the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children;**
- To earn the appreciation of honest critics and endure the betrayal of false friends;**
- To appreciate beauty, to find the best in others;**
- To leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch or a redeemed social condition;**
- To know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived.**
- This is to have succeeded.**

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

(Ret. Lt. Ed N. Moses wrote this article in 2005. Ret. Sgt. Allen D. Hines and Ret. Sgt. Jim C. Lee assisted.)

Russell was my friend. We didn't work the road as zone members, and Russ never worked undercover with me. But, we spent many a spell talking about things. I will try to give you the Russ I knew. I do not exactly remember the very first time I met Russell Harper. I had been assigned to Troop D, Springfield, upon graduation from the

Patrol Academy in Rolla, in '69. I was assigned to the Springfield local zone and I was pretty much trying to remember where the gas pump and bathrooms were located. Russ worked Troop C, St. Louis County, Jefferson County, and then later (Troop D) Springfield. It was during my undercover assignment I remember hearing Russ's name being brought up during raids and arrests. I was told he would be a "good man" to have on the raids. Every man knew you didn't have to look around to see if Russ was there when doors were kicked in or guns were drawn. He proved to be exactly what I was told he was ... a real, "dyed in the wool," no-nonsense, totally dedicated Missouri state trooper.

Russ and I talked about motorcycles, guns, and how to solve the problems of the universe, but mostly we talked about how to improve our Highway Patrol. As anyone who was there in the beginning knows, the forming of the Missouri State Trooper's Association became a real project. Russ wanted to make things better, not tear anything down or publicly criticize the Patrol.

We could discuss things and folks among ourselves, but guys like Russ Harper and Lloyd Vitt knew the changes needed to be from inside and as private as we could make them. Now, don't get me wrong ... if an issue came up that Russ disagreed with or knew was not the "path" to take, he was a bear! He loved the Patrol and if you would have cut him, he would have bled blue. He wanted things to be better and more professional with the Patrol. He did not want a union or a "problem organization" to form ... he wanted an association that could voice opinions and make changes to make our jobs and lives better.



Lloyd Vitt, Russ Harper, Jim Simpson, and Allen Hines, all MOSTA supporters, enjoy each other's company at a MOSTA function.

The only thing that Russ Harper loved more than his job and the Highway Patrol was his wife, Gayla; his daughter, Lynlee; and his sons, Russ, Nick, and Brad. Gayla was Russ's reason for being. The house that Gayla lives in now was one she had played in when she was a little girl. Her friend's daddy, a doctor, owned the house and the land around it. It was a fairly good-sized ranch. Horseback riding and romping around the place were Gayla's favorite pastime. She mentioned to Russ one time about the house and how many great memories she had in and around that old, brick home. Russ bought the home for her as a "wedding gift."

Russ Harper was a "trooper's trooper!" He was a "good cop." He did more than his share in every endeavor he ever undertook. He was what the Patrol Academy wanted all of us to be. No one was more professional and no one loved the Patrol more than Russ Harper. He was an expert shot, an expert high-speed driver (before the days of for-

mal emergency driving training), relentless in his efforts to “catch the bad guys,” and dedicated to “protect the helpless.” Russ disliked bullies of any age and would not tolerate rudeness or crudeness around him or his family. Russ Harper would have been a credit to any law enforcement agency in this country, but he was a Missouri State Highway Patrol trooper. He was a trooper in every sense of the word. Those who did not know Russell Harper should have ... Those of us who did, miss him.

(Ret. Sgt. Lee Porter wrote this article in 2005.)

Trooper Russell W. “Russ” Harper, 45, was shot and killed on February 8, 1987, after he pulled over a pickup truck for a traffic violation east of U.S. Highway 65 and U.S. Highway 60 near Farm Route 189. Before

Tpr. Harper could stop his patrol car off the roadway, a man emerged from the truck and fired several rounds through the patrol car’s windshield. Tpr. Harper was survived by his wife, Gayla; his sons, Russ, Brad, and Nick; and his stepdaughter, Lynlee.

On October 15, 2004, a portion of U.S. Highway 60, east of Springfield, MO, was re-named the Trooper Russell Harper Memorial Highway. Trooper Russell W. Harper was the 14th member of the Patrol to make the Ultimate Sacrifice.



Mrs. Gayla Harper lovingly touches her husband’s name at the Missouri Law Enforcement Memorial after the annual service remembering Missouri’s fallen heroes.