

An officer's line of duty

Fallen officers remembered on National Peace Officers Memorial Day

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HOBBS NEWS-SUN

Molly Dunaway will always remember the day her father died.

Robert Butler, Dunaway's father, was a Hobbs Police officer who was shot to death in the line of duty in 1951.

Tuesday, National Peace Officers Memorial Day, the Hobbs Police department held a ceremony at Prairie Haven Cemetery to remember Butler.

The stone marking where Robert Butler was buried next to his wife, Osie Butler, looks much like the scores of other gravestones around it, something the Hobbs Police Department would like to change.

Maj. Donnie Smith, of the Hobbs Police Department, said the department would like to add something to the stone to indicate that a fallen comrade is buried there.

As part of the ceremony an honor guard composed of officers from the Hobbs Police Department, the State Police and the Lea County Sheriff's Department placed a wreath on Butler's grave.

One of those officers said Tuesday's event was a chance to remember the sacrifices all officers make.

"I believe we should honor them and remember them for their sacrifices," said Deputy Patrick O'Rielly. "As law enforcement ... we're sworn to protect the lives and property of the people that we serve, even if it means giving our own lives."

Police Department spokesman Capt. Donnie Graham said days like National Peace Officers Memorial Day often cause police officers to think about the dangers of their work.

"I think it's something they're always thinking about," Graham said. "But days like this bring out the reality. We've been really fortunate in Lea County ... that we have not had another officer killed in the line of duty."

In the 50 years since Butler's death, no other Hobbs police officer has died in the line of duty. However, Graham said, others have been shot or shot at.

"But we've been very lucky that we haven't had an officer killed," Graham said.

Butler's routine that day was much like it always was. He walked the length of Broadway Street in Hobbs checking the parking meters, and rousting the occasional drunk.

Graham says no matter how routine their work becomes, they must be vigilant.

"A lot of times you just don't know," Graham said. "That's why you have to be ready on any call whether it's a traffic stop, a family fight or an alarm call. No matter what kind of call we get, we have to be prepared and ready for anything."

Hailing a taxi for drunks

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and sending them home was routine for Butler. Dunaway says her father had done that probably a hundred times.

"The jail at that time was too small to hold them, so he would get them a cab," Dunaway said.

On July 7, 1951, at about 3:15 p.m., Butler ran into the Parks brothers. The pair had just headed out of the 109 Club where they had been drinking and "popping yellow jackets all day," Dunaway said.

Butler had stopped to speak with the owner of the K.C. Store on Broadway, when he saw the two brothers staggering toward him. He stopped them and told them to get off the street.

The brothers attacked Butler, and eventually wrestled his service revolver away from him. Butler fled inside the store, but Speight Parks followed him inside where he shot him three times.

The Parks brothers fled into the street. Gene Parks was captured almost instantly, but Speight Parks hijacked a car and attempted to escape. He would eventually steal and wreck four cars and was attempting to steal a fifth

when officers caught up with him.

According to an interview at the time of the arrest, officers asked Gene Parks if they meant to kill Butler, to which Parks replied, "You're damned right we did. I'm glad the old S.O.B. is dead."

Both brothers were tried for murder. Gene Parks was acquitted and Speight Parks received two consecutive life terms.

"The whole state, all the police, were just livid that he got off that easy and that they acquitted the brother," Dunaway said.

Speight Parks, however, didn't spend much time in prison. He was stabbed to death by another inmate six months after beginning his sentence.

Although not mentioned specifically at Tuesday's service, another Lea County peace officer has given his life.

Jim Clifton, a Lea County Sheriff's deputy, was shot and killed in a shootout with a suspected bank robber Feb. 24, 1992, near the community of Crossroads.

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Police Chaplain Dean Mathis presides over a local ceremony for National Peace Officers Memorial Day at Prairie Haven Cemetery.