

Trooper Ralph C. Tatoian

Badge #1140
EOW ... April 20, 2005

This is a short story about a great friend. I think it will get the point across, but it doesn't do justice to the young kid who was a son that became a trooper, a man, a husband, and a father in a very short period of time.

I first met my new recruit in January 1996. I picked him up at his apartment complex for his first day on the job. As we drove to Troop C Headquarters, I was trying to answer all of his questions, when I finally got the chance to ask him one. He looked at me, smiled and said with a big grin, "Go ahead, sir!"

I then asked, "How old are you?"

This big kid, who looked like he was 18, with a baby face, huge dimples, and a contagious smile, quickly looked at me and said, "23 and a half sir. Why?" I just shook my head and grinned, but had nothing else to say at that time.

This new recruit was Trooper Ralph C. Tatoian. He was very proud to be a member of the Missouri State Highway Patrol. Ralph was young and inexperienced, as were most of his other zone members. Rapidly, as the years passed and the zone matured, Ralph and the others would feed off each other's accomplishments and failures to better themselves and the zone operations.

Ralph was beginning to realize one of his dreams: He was becoming a well-rounded officer and man who really loved his job. In fact, on several occasions, I personally knew he had the opportunity to go to better paying jobs. However, Ralph would not leave. He simply stated, "I love this job. I don't want to do anything else." Ralph also loved to fish and hunt. He loved a group of friends he grew up with, affectionately known as the "Baden Boys." Above all, his true love was his family.

Ralph's family included his wife, Deborah; his children: Samantha, Little Ralph, and Maxwell; his mother, Mary Ann; his father, Big Ralph; his sister, Sandy; and Deborah's family. All were very dear to him. During the course of the day, when the opportunity would arise, Ralph talked about them often. He often thought of them and always carried them in his heart. Ralph touched every life he encountered, including mine. It seemed like every time you saw Ralph he was smiling. He was a practical joker of sorts, using his wit and words to give others trouble. He gave everyone "trouble" except me. As a matter of fact, Ralph seemed to enjoy it when I gave him trouble. It was almost as if he purposefully provided me the opportunities to do so.

When former member Tony Webster was assigned to Troop C, he and Ralph were together all of the time. We used to call them Crockett and Tubbs (from the early 1980s television show "Miami Vice"). We couldn't decide which was which.

He collected guns and knives and would say, "Don't tell Andy" ... "Don't tell Deborah"



The Tatoian family: Ralph Jr., Max, Deborah, Ralph, and Samantha.

... then, he made sure they were kept in safe places.

But, as I said before, his family was everything to Ralph. He volunteered in Ralph Jr.'s Cub Scout pack and den and was a teacher to daughter Sam. He enjoyed hunting and fishing, and was passing this along to his children. As a matter of fact, Sam got her first deer in the fall 2005. "Big Ralph," her grandpa, took her hunting. When Max was born with his father's dimples and hair, Ralph couldn't have been more pleased. Ralph loved his children and liked being with them. I have no doubt he would have continued teaching them about life and sharing his favorite pastimes with them. He loved them as a father should.

Ralph is gone now, and he will be truly missed. But, he will never be forgotten.

To all his friends and co-workers, as Ralph would say, "See ya later, Buddy!"

(This article by Sergeant Andy J. Ley, Troop C, first appeared in the May/June 2005 issue of the Patrol News. Lt. Ley retired in 2013.)

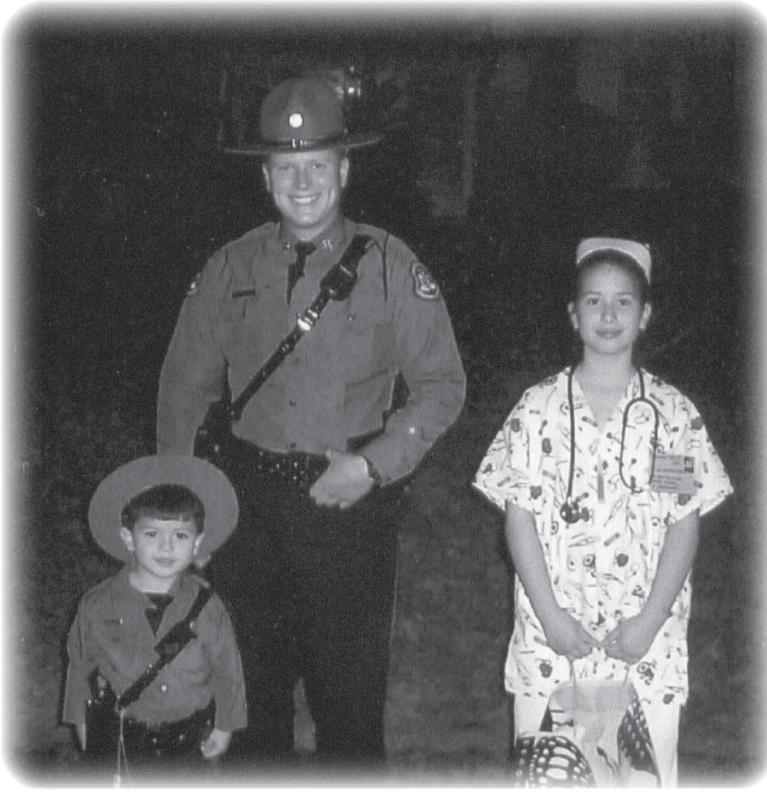
All of us on the Highway Patrol have memories and experiences engrained in

our brain; experiences we will keep with us until the day we are no longer on this Earth. Some of us will never forget the long six months we spent at the Academy in Jefferson City. For others, it may be that once-in-a-lifetime traffic stop that produced one of the largest seizures on record. For the members of the Troop C SERT (Special Emergency Response Team), Wednesday, April 20, 2005, will be the day that will never be forgotten.

On April 20, 2005, at approximately 4:45 a.m., Trooper Ralph C. Tatoian was killed in a tragic car crash on Interstate 44 at the St. Louis County-Franklin County line. Earlier that morning, at 2:30 a.m., Troop C SERT received a page informing us we were being activated and we were to stage in a church parking lot in Leslie, MO. Members of the Special Emergency Response Team arrived one by one, that is, everyone but badge #1140—Ralph.

One of the team members made a comment, "Where is Ralph?"

Several minutes later, we were huddled around one of the patrol cars listening to Troop C traffic. "10-50 involving a patrol car on eastbound I-44 near Pacific." Seconds



Tpr. Ralph Tatoian, Ralph Jr. and Samantha, all “in uniform.”

later, “Patrol car struck the rear of a tractor/trailer unit and the truck is continuing traveling west on I-44 with the patrol car stuck underneath.”

Several minutes later, Lieutenant Bob Wolf pulled into the dimly lit church parking and said, “Huddle up, men.”

We gathered around, hoping and praying he was going to brief us on the mission and not give us any bad news. It was not to be, “Guys, Ralph was involved in a car crash responding to the call out. He is J-4.”

This is the moment that will be engrained in my memory—as well as everyone else standing around Lt. Wolf on that cool, damp morning in a dark church parking lot in Leslie, MO. *How ironic*, I remember thinking. Ralph would always talk about his farm and all the good times he had on it. His farm was in Leslie, MO.

Ralph C. Tatoian. The name alone still brings tears to my eyes every time I hear it. I would like to relate an experience I shared with Ralph on a SERT operation. Several years ago, Troop C SERT was sent to East Prairie, MO. We were given the task of arresting a subject who shot at an officer and then barricaded himself in his house. Ralph and I were teamed up (snipers) and given the assignment to put eyes on the front of the house and relay information back to the command post. Once we reached the house, several hours later, we set up on the fringes of a freshly plowed field. It was about 1 a.m. when we called the command post and informed them we were in position. For the next five hours, Ralph and I fought off mosquitoes the size of dragonflies and every other spider and flying insect known to man. As the sun began to rise, Ralph and I were

informed we needed to move to a different area—a cornfield directly across from the house. We packed our gear and walked away from the house for approximately one-half mile before crossing the two-lane blacktop road. (We were told by Sergeant (now retired) Franke C. Autry, in only the way Franke could say it, “If you are seen, you are fired.”)

After walking at least a half-mile in the opposite direction, Ralph and I ran across the road and into a cornfield. The corn was tall and dried out, most likely just days from being harvested. We worked our way through the cornfield until we made it to the edge of the field, where we were less than a hundred yards from the front of the subject’s house. It had been almost 24 hours since either of us had slept. We were tired,

thirsty, and insect-bitten. I informed Ralph I would take first watch and that he could go several yards into the cornfield and do what he could to get some rest, "I will see you in 20 minutes," I told him, "Do not be late."

It was close to 100 degrees and the sun was high in the sky. I was hot, thirsty, and crabby. Ralph smiled, pulled out two sticks of red licorice and said, "You old guys sure do get cranky."

That being said, Ralph slithered like a snake, zigzagging through the cornfield, until I could no longer hear him. As the sweat dripped into my eyes, making it hard to see through the optics of my rifle, I looked at my watch and realized Ralph had been gone for almost half an hour. I waited. No Ralph. Forty-five minutes passed. Still, no Ralph. An hour later, I heard him crawling to my location.

"How are you doing?" Ralph said to me.

Agitated and aggravated, I said, "Where have you been? Twenty minutes, not 60 minutes!"

Ralph looked at me with that famous smile and said, "Take an hour, Al. I am good."

I slithered back from behind my rifle, turned around, and followed Ralph's tracks back into the cornfield where he had spent the last hour. Before I knew it, I was in a large clearing in the middle of a cornfield. Ralph had made the clearing by cutting down cornstalks with his knife. Ralph tied four of the cut-down cornstalks onto the outside stalks of the clearing. He then used the remainder of the stalks and laid them over the square to make a roof of sorts. The cornstalk roof was about four feet from the ground and offered a large area of much-needed shade. After getting a break from the hot sun, I rejoined Ralph.

Ralph said, "So what do you think of the 'condo' I made for you?"

I told Ralph I was sorry for being grumpy and thanked him for the shade.

With a big smile on his face, Ralph said, "Us young guys have to take care of you old guys."

Several times during the past few years, Ralph would bring up the "condo" in the cornfield.

The Patrol lost one of its best on April 20, 2005. Ralph loved the Patrol and loved being on the SERT team even more. Ralph, buddy, you will be missed, but you will never be forgotten.

(This article by Cpl. Al P. Nothum, Troop C, originally appeared in the May/June 2005 Patrol News. Sgt. Nothum is currently a Troop C public information and education officer. SERT was renamed SWAT in 2006.)

Trooper Ralph C. Tatoian, 32, was killed in a traffic crash on April 20, 2005, on westbound Interstate 44 in Pacific, MO. Tpr. Tatoian was responding as a member of the Troop C Special Emergency Response Team to a manhunt in Franklin County when his patrol car struck the rear of a tractor-trailer. The tractor-trailer was stopped due to a previous traffic crash. Tpr. Tatoian was survived by his wife, Deborah, and three children, Samantha, Ralph, and Maxwell.

On November 9, 2006, a two-mile portion of Interstate 44 in Franklin County beginning at the U.S. Highway 50 intersection and heading east was dedicated as the "Trooper Ralph Tatoian Memorial Highway."

Tpr. Tatoian was the 25th member of the Missouri State Highway Patrol to make the Ultimate Sacrifice.