

50-Year Class Reunion Held in Lewiston

By Kenneth Hoefner, Captain (M.H.P. Retired)

The Montana Highway Patrol Recruit Class of 1958 gathered in Lewistown, Montana, on August 22, 2008, to commemorate the beginning of their careers fifty years ago with the Patrol. In attendance were Larry Eckhardt, Jim Girdler, Ken Hoefner, Jack Kenyon, Dan Magone, Walt Miller, Harvey Olson, Leonard Rice, Jack Shields and Ralph Snodgrass and their wives. They appear older now, but have clear memories of their most memorable experiences on the job. It is amazing how harrowing these encounters can be at the time and yet how humorous some become after the fact. And yes, after a good meal, the stories of the past flowed freely and

colorfully. Perhaps a little come upmanship may have been at work here too. You might say that in some measure you could sense the brushing aside of the hazards that were faced and replaced with a giggle at how well things turned out.

Our class was not unusual for the time, but it was unique for many reasons. Thirty two men were selected from a field of more than five hundred applicants to fill the ranks of the 1958 class. Two candidates withdrew just before classes began and too late to replace them. Selection was in three parts; first was a multiple part written test, then an intensive sweaty oral interview, and finally a physical examination at the Galen State Hospital.

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Left to right. Standing: Harvey Olson, Larry Eckhardt, Jack Shields, Jack Kenyon, Leonard Rice, Ken Hoefner. Seated: Jim Girdler, Dan Magone, Walt Miller, Ralph Snodgrass.

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Classes began on July 7, 1958, at Fort Harrison in Helena, Montana. Class members were housed in four man "Officers" quarters. This may sound plush today, but in reality it was nothing more than a tar paper hut with 2x4s exposed inside with a coal stove for heat, except there was no coal available to us. Living was rather primitive, and necessary facilities were fifty yards across the field.

Classes concluded on August 30, 1958. The final formal activity was the interview to receive the good news-bad news of grades and class standing. The class standing established the order in which an individual would be called to work. After that was the letdown of returning home to wait for the call to report for duty.

That call began on September 11, 1958, when ten eager new Patrolmen reported to their Captains to begin their new careers with the Montana Highway Patrol. The final member of the class came on board in 1961, after a not so subtle choice was suggested, as only Captain Kerr could so aptly put it. At that time, all thirty members of the class were now in uniform and had settled into new careers and communities. Oh yes, offenders quickly learned there was a new bear on the prowl and a new strategy in play to catch them. We just thought if we worked hard at it, the highways might just be a little safer place to drive.

Unfortunately, for whatever reason, the first resignation was in after just 2 years 2 months and 2 days. More would leave in the years to come, but the most to leave in any one year was 1978. Retirement and greener pastures looked good and their time was in so it was time to leave. Twenty of the class retired with 20 or more years of service. The Class of 1958 service ran from 2 years 2 months and 2 days to 32 years and 19 days when the last of the class retired. Impressive is the combined service to Montana of these thirty men. Their time adds up to 540 years 9 months and 11 days.

Historically, we felt we were a special group of Patrolmen. We entered the job while some original Patrolmen were still working. We were trained by an elite group of dedicat-

ed and knowledgeable men from within the ranks of the Patrol. They were there in the areas we worked to guide and shape us as Patrolmen. Thirteen in this class earned twenty four promotions. At retirement, there were 5 Captains, 2 Lieutenants, and 6 Sergeants. The remainder chose to remain in positions in which they felt most comfortable or because they had become rooted in the communities they served. All of these men were dedicated to the work they enjoyed and the public they served.

We became a part of a brotherhood that looked after one another. We lifted each other up when one another was down, and we discouraged and guided each other over familiar rough spots along the way. In the years between 1958 and 1990, no member of this class was lost to the hazards that are encountered on a daily basis.

Many, however, were scarred emotionally and physically by what they saw and encountered during their service. Eight of our numbers have died of natural causes in recent years and others are now experiencing declining health.

One question remains; did we reach the youthful goals and ambitions we had set for ourselves when we first started? Some were fulfilled, and some were beyond our reach. Most agree, however, that an honest effort was made to reach the goals set by the Patrol. We trained those who followed in time tested management practices we knew to be successful to improve how the Montana Highway Patrol would function in the future. We may not have reached all of those early goals, and we may have stubbed our toes here and there, but the Class of 1958 did in fact leave its mark on the Montana Highway Patrol.

Perhaps in conclusion we should note that in 1958 the sworn officers of the Montana Highway Patrol were all male. That practice continued until 1979, when our first female officer was sworn and began her service. Since then, many more practices and terminologies have changed. The term patrolman or patrolmen are used here as it was appropriate during the tenure of most of this class. □

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