



Montana Trooper

Brave and Tenacious

By Allison Maier of the Helena Independent Record, Reprinted with permission

In a fog-cloaked stockyard off Highway 287, the patrol cars gathered. They lined up by the hundreds, their license plates and uniformed drivers indicating the places from which they'd journeyed.

Some had traveled across Montana; others had arrived after crossing state borders. Together, they drove into Three Forks to attend a somber funeral and honor a fallen brother.

Their route took them past the point where 23 year old Montana Highway Patrol Trooper David DeLaittre lost his life during a traffic stop outside his hometown. DeLaittre was shot, but not before he returned fire, wound-



Stockyard.

PHOTO BY CLARKE SUTPHIN

ing the gunman, who later took his own life.

The location was marked with flowers, flickering candles, and a small Christmas tree topped with an angel. Among the trinkets arranged on its branches were ornaments covered in handwritten sentiments:

*David-Safe in good hands
So Brave
We will miss you*

In DeLaittre's hometown, the fog had lifted to reveal a clear sky. Officers and flags lined the entrance to the Three Forks High School gymnasium as a steady stream of people walked through the doors. Among them were Chris Ross, who used to "bum around" with DeLaittre in shop class, and Betty Wilcox, who remembered the "awesome kid" who used to ride her school bus.

DeLaittre's neighbor, Jamie Kenney, was there as well. She recalled that the

weekend before his death, DeLaittre had cleared the snow off her driveway so her car wouldn't be stuck. Kenney wouldn't have known it was him if someone else hadn't told her.

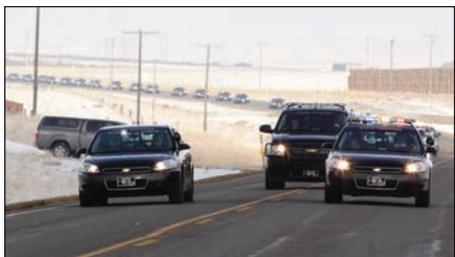
Then there was Jay McCurry, who taught DeLaittre when he was a hard-working student at Three Forks High. The two developed a friendship over the years, often camping, hunting, or setting off on ATVs together.

"He was as close to a son as I ever had," McCurry said.

About 2,500 people crowded into the high school to honor DeLaittre Tuesday afternoon - fellow officers filling up lines of chairs set up on the gym floor, grieving friends, and Three Forks residents taking up the bleachers on either side.

A slideshow of images from DeLaittre's life flashed across screens at the front of the room as music that

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Procession.

PHOTO BY ROGER RICHARDSON



Tree at location of incident.

PHOTO BY ELIZA WILEY



Location of incident.

PHOTO BY CLARKE SUTPHIN





Montana Trooper

continued



Flags at entrance. PHOTO BY ELIZA WILEY

spoke of small towns and memories played in the background. The photos of the little boy dressed in Halloween costumes already resembled the young man who would achieve his lifelong dream of following his father's footsteps and becoming a Highway Patrol trooper.

In turns, DeLaittre's friends, co-workers and teachers described a man who possessed integrity, loyalty, a strong work ethic, and a sometimes mischievous sense of humor. A man who had courage until the end of his life.

"He fought as a warrior, with tenacity and bravery," said Chaplain Warren Hiebert with the Gallatin County Sheriff's Office, his voice breaking.

Hiebert stressed that it was important for the individuals affected by the tragic death to allow themselves to grieve.

"I would not say anything is all right, because it isn't," he said. "Because we hurt, and we will hurt for a long time."

Above all, DeLaittre was recognized as a man who loved his family. He'd kept photos of his two younger sisters, Rebecca and Hannah, on the dashboard of his car and acted as their protector. And he'd always emulated his father, the fourth in a line of law enforcement agents and the man who'd pinned on his Highway Patrol badge two years ago.



Gymnasium. PHOTO BY ELIZA WILEY



Messages on tree.

PHOTO BY ROGER RICHARDSON

Dennis DeLaittre recalled his son's early career in law enforcement. When he was in second grade, David had noted that a car had expired license plates. He'd tagged along on coffee meetings among officers, listening intently to the conversation as he drank root beer, then asking his father follow-up questions about particular cases of interest.

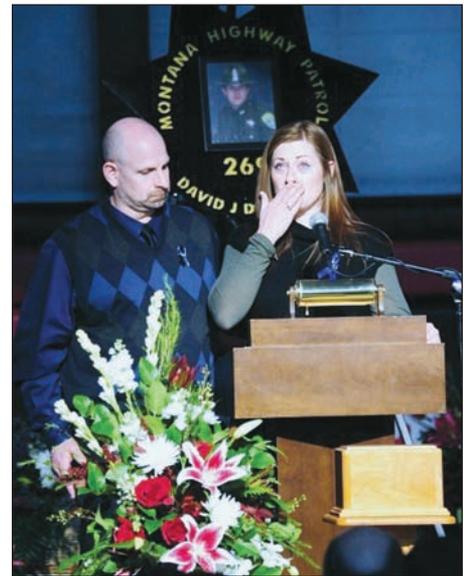
DeLaittre said he wished he'd been able to work side-by-side with David in the Highway Patrol. He wished that David could have continued taking care of his family and that he could have experienced one last helicopter ride.

"We don't always get what we want," he repeated.

And with that, he said his parting words to his boy.

"We - I - won't forget the 23 years I had growing with you," he said. "I love you and miss you."

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Family members speaking.

PHOTO BY ELIZA WILEY



Chaplain Hiebert speaking.

PHOTO BY ROGER RICHARDSON



Dennis DeLaittre speaking.

PHOTO BY ROGER RICHARDSON

