

Policing in Rural America

Keep this handbook by your side in your patrol car and be sure to recite this prayer each day before you begin your shift.

A Police Officer's Prayer

Lord I ask for courage—
Courage to face and conquer my own fears
Courage to take me where others will not go ...

I ask for strength—
Strength of body to protect others
And strength of spirit to lead others ...

I ask for dedication—
Dedication to my job, to do it well
Dedication to my community, to keep it safe ...

Give me, Lord, concern—
For those who trust me
And compassion for those who need me ...

And please, Lord, through it all,
Be at my side.

Author Unknown

Policing in Rural America

*A Handbook for the Rural
Law Enforcement Officer*

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Preface

Most Americans have the mistaken impression that the responsibility for law enforcement in our country is entrusted to very large agencies. In reality, most of the 18,000 police department and sheriff's offices throughout the United States do not have more than twenty-five sworn officers. While we in the profession have often been taught that patrol is the backbone of policing, I would argue that the real "backbone of policing" in America involves those men and women who are employed in these small agencies. These officers frequently handle calls without benefit of backup and may be required to cover hundreds of road miles on a single shift. Even state troopers employed by a large state enforcement agency who are stationed in a rural area can find themselves in similar situations.

My first day in the police academy nearly three decades ago provided me with a sobering introduction to the realities of police work. Cop shows on television tend to use cities like New York or Los Angeles as the setting for their dramas leading the viewer to assume that the dangers for police officers are predominantly confined to our large urban areas. The truth of the matter is that a police officer can lose his or her life in the line of duty in the city as well as in the country, in a small agency as well as in a larger agency, and in an urban setting as well as in a rural setting.

When we new recruits were seated in the classroom on that first day, our training coordinator introduced himself to us. He was a strong looking ex-cop with a booming voice. But that morning he displayed a rather solemn demeanor. We had all heard the news reports and read the newspaper accounts of the local police officer from a small rural community who had just been shot and killed two days earlier. What many of us were unaware of was that this officer had just graduated from our academy two months earlier. The training coordinator pointed to a seat in the left front section of the classroom. "That's where Leonard sat," he told us. I'm embarrassed to say that for a fleeting moment I was glad I hadn't chosen that seat—some kind of bad omen or something.

Officer Leonard Miller happened to be sitting in his patrol vehicle in a shopping center parking lot in the early morning hours on a Thursday midnight to eight shift. From my experience, 4:00 a.m. on a Thursday is not a very ac-

tive time for a law enforcement officer, particularly in a small rural community. Patrolman Miller was most likely watching the traffic light at the intersection and just waiting for his shift to end. A vehicle sped through that intersection but Miller, seeing no violation, took notice but did not give chase. Then the vehicle sped past the officer several more times repeatedly honking the horn as if the operator was goading Miller into stopping his vehicle. Miller then chased the vehicle and stopped it. When Miller approached the vehicle, he was shot twice with a .38 caliber handgun. Little did Officer Miller know what the occupants of that vehicle had been involved in over the past few days. The media dubbed the story the “kill for thrill” case. Four people were killed, including Officer Miller, over an eight day period of time—all of whom happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Two 21 year old men were captured later in the day that Officer Miller was killed. To this day, now both middle-aged, these two men sit on Pennsylvania’s death row awaiting execution and exhausting every appeal possible. Their names are not worth mentioning.

So that was the first lesson for our class of nearly thirty recruits of all ages, all shapes and sizes, and including one female (somewhat uncommon for the time). Most of us were working part-time in a small town or rural police agency—some like me, hoping the experience and training would be a stepping stone to a full-time job and others, with no interest in leaving their “day job,” just wanting to serve their communities. Whatever our reasons for wanting to become police officers, we knew the seriousness of our choice of this profession. Leonard had taught us that lesson and we dedicated our academy in his honor for making the ultimate sacrifice.

Unfortunately, our academy would end very much as it had begun. Chief Gregory Adams taught us several subjects in our police academy. Chief Adams impressed us with his professional demeanor and his knowledge of the law. We could tell that he was a diligent patrol officer—not one to drive around with the blinders on and simply wait for a radio call. He had left a position in the Metropolitan Police Department in Washington, DC to accept the position of chief in a small rural community. Possibly Greg thought he would be safer there and his wife and two young sons wouldn’t worry so much when he went on duty. One month after our class graduated, Greg was killed in the line of duty following a traffic stop. Just as in the case of Leonard Miller, what one might believe is a routine traffic stop escalated into a cop’s killing. The investigation led to the identification of Donald Eugene Webb as the assailant. Webb has never been found and he remained on the *FBI’s Ten Most Wanted* list longer than any other suspect in the Bureau’s history. Only recently has the FBI decided to remove Webb from the list, possibly assuming he may be deceased. Maybe it’s my suspicious “cop” nature, but it seems hard to believe that the FBI could never find this cop killer.

The majority of law enforcement in this country is done in small town and rural America by police agencies with limited manpower and resources. This book is dedicated to those brave men and women like Leonard Miller and Gregory Adams who put the uniform on for little pay and sometimes little gratitude from those whom they serve.

The book is meant to be a reader-friendly reference guide for those of you considering a career in police work and a refresher for those of you currently on the job. It contains numerous illustrations and quotes from police officers and sheriff's deputies from all across the country—officers who face the same challenges as you do every day. I hope you enjoy it and I recommend you read it at least once each year as a constant reminder. Good luck and be careful.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to all of those who assisted me during the development and writing of this handbook. I would especially like to thank all of the officers and deputies who took the time to answer my questions about their careers as rural law enforcement officers. In particular, I would like to thank:

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Chief Ed Kruse of the Upper Burrell Township, Pennsylvania Police Department

Sheriff Keith Lovin of the Cherokee County, North Carolina Sheriff's Office

Sheriff Matt Murray of the Curry County, New Mexico Sheriff's Office

Chief Douglas Bowman of the Texico, New Mexico Police Department

Finally, I would like to dedicate this book to my family—my wife, Julie, and to our three sons. Julie, you are the rock upon which all four of us guys have come to depend on so much. Matt is the opera singer in the family, who is living in New York City and beginning his career. I'm confident you'll be singing at the MET someday just like your great uncle did. Chris, the youngest of the three boys, is a college senior and criminology major. Maybe you'll be the son to carry on the family tradition and have a career in the field of law enforcement. And, Billy is my soldier. Billy suffered a brain injury on his second tour of duty in Iraq while I was writing this book. We hope and pray you will come back to us "Army Strong" sometime very soon. I love you all very much.

About the Author

Chris Capsambelis has over 25 years of experience in the fields of law enforcement and law enforcement education. Currently, Chris is an Associate Professor of Criminology at the University of Tampa. For ten years, he directed police training academies in Pennsylvania and Florida. Prior to training law enforcement officers, he was a police officer himself in a small city outside of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and retired from the department at the rank of sergeant after ten years of service.

In addition to his teaching at the university, Chris provides promotional testing services to Sheriff Offices and Police Departments throughout central and south Florida. He has done extensive research in law enforcement officer selection, training, and promotion. He can be reached at ccapsambelis@ut.edu.