

SHEDDING LIGHT on a Conservation Officer's Job



“But officer, you were supposed to be off!”

by Cpl. Jeff Sweeney

Early in my career, I was teaching hunter education at one of the junior high schools in Mason County. At that time, the certification for hunter education was five hours in-class instruction. I was teaching in a regular classroom with a teacher present during the entire class. As the week went on I was asked a lot of questions about the laws and how we were able to get information to catch people. I answered all the questions as best I could without giving away any secrets that I had been taught by veteran conservation officers. The teacher asked me who took care of wildlife law enforcement in my area when I was teaching a class. I told her that the other work would have to wait until after the

class was over. I further told her that the good side to teaching at the schools was that I got the weekend off because of being at the school all week.

This particular class lasted until Friday, the first day of March. During the week I received a complaint about someone spotlighting and shooting deer. In addition, I was informed that a college intern from West Virginia State College (now University) would be riding with me starting Saturday, March 2. As the week went on I received another complaint of spotlighting in the same area. I called the intern and made arrangements for him to ride with me on patrol that Saturday night. I finished out my week at the school on Friday. Due to the classes, I had taken the previous weekend off because of the

structure of our work week which begins on Saturday.

I was excited about going to work that Saturday because I was going to have my own intern. I had worked with other interns, but never had one assigned specifically to me. I scheduled work for night time because of the complaints on spotlighting deer. After I met my intern, we went to McDonalds to get to know each other. My intern was about to graduate from college. When he told me what he did for a living, I told him I thought he was crazy. He thought being a game warden was a dream job, and I thought he already had the dream job. I won't say what the job was, but he was already wearing a brown uniform, driving a brown truck.

After eating supper, we went to the area of the complaint. We backed up next to a round bale of hay about 20 feet off the road. I told my intern that I would show him just how boring the job could be waiting on a spotlihter in March. Up to this time, I had never worked spotlighting complaints after December. Within minutes after arriving, we walked the path to the road and back.

Before we could get comfortable in our seats, we had business. A truck had stopped directly beside us, no more than 20 feet away. I thought they saw us. Then the passenger stuck his gun out the window toward us, but quickly positioned himself on the door of the truck with the gun on the cab of the truck. The driver shined a high-powered spotlight into the field across from where we were sitting. I couldn't start my vehicle because we were too close and I didn't want to give up my hiding spot. As the driver pulled into the field across the road, he drove toward the back of the field. I took this opportunity to start my vehicle and move without my lights on. When I got to the edge of the field at the road, my vehicle got in a bind and I started spinning. I turned on my lights. They saw us and started fleeing in the other direction.

I then put the vehicle in four-wheel drive and activated my lights and siren. The chase was on! I told the intern to put on his seatbelt and then told him to buckle mine also as I handed it to him. We were chasing a white Chevy truck with a lift kit and a black full-sized rollbar. I got on the radio and called for assistance from the Sheriff's Department. We gave the description of the suspect's vehicle and continued on the chase for approximately two miles. The road was gravel and we were using every bit of it. We couldn't get close enough to read the license plate. At the two-mile mark, about 1/2-mile from the paved road, we entered a sharp left-hand curve. As we started through the curve I noticed that there was no gravel, just fresh dirt. The dirt caused

us to spin out and we faced off with the road bank. As I reached for the gear shift to put the vehicle in reverse, the vehicle rolled over onto its top. The lights and siren were still on and we were hanging upside down in our seats. Thank God for seatbelts. The intern, an army veteran, got loose and helped me out of the vehicle.

I was disoriented after the crash and couldn't remember which way we were traveling. A man came to check on us and we were able to call on the radio to report the direction the suspect vehicle was traveling. I advised the dispatcher that there was an accident and that we needed an officer to take a report. I never told him that I was the accident that needed to be investigated. When the deputy arrived, he realized that I was injured and had had a bad evening up to that point, so he took the opportunity to tell me that another deputy had stopped the suspect several miles away. The deputy took us to the location and I personally put the cuffs on the suspects, impounded their truck, confiscated their guns and put them in a cruiser and had them transported to the jail. The dispatcher called another conservation officer from Putnam County and my supervisor.

My supervisor and the other conservation officer met us at the jail. I filled out a complaint for a warrant and turned the case over to my supervisor. I was taken to the hospital with a separated shoulder, treated and released, but not before the spotlighters got out of jail on bond. The intern was not injured, but I was off work about three weeks. The intern requested to finish his time after I came back to work. He finished his time during the spring turkey season that year and we were successful at working a bait site with the help of the Putnam County conservation officer. The intern, however, never came to work as a conservation officer.

Both spotlighters pleaded guilty. They were fined and put in jail for 10 days. Their license privileges to hunt in West Virginia were revoked for two years. The spotlighters were brothers. One of them had been charged with a second offense. With the second offense charge, we confiscated the rifle and sold it at auction. The rest of the property and truck were returned.

The other spotlihter was married to the teacher who questioned who did my job during the week I taught the hunter education classes. I suppose she thought I would be off that weekend instead of the weekend before the class started.

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