

THE LOWDOWN

Sheriff Charles S. Blackwood

The United States recognizes National Police Week annually; on May 13 the names of officers, deputies, and other law enforcement agents who died in the line of duty during the previous year are read aloud at a candlelight vigil on the National Mall in Washington, DC. At the vigil, organizers also honor historical line-of-duty deaths. This year, we commemorated the service of Deputy Duncan Joseph Nichols, whose sacrifice had not previously been recognized on the national level. Nichols died in 1904, 58 years before President John F. Kennedy signed the yearly observance of Peace Officer's Memorial Day into law.

Nichols' death also came 80 years prior to the founding of the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund (NLEOMF) in 1984. This nonprofit organization built and maintains the national memorial to fallen officers. I shared the facts and circumstances of Deputy Nichols' death with the Fund in July 2021, and it notified us of his acceptance last August. The National Memorial bears the names of 23,229 officers who have made the ultimate sacrifice. The total includes 619 new names; the 472 officers killed in the line of duty in 2021 and 147 people, like Deputy Nichols, whose death has only recently been verified and recognized.

In brief, James Knapp Horner, 58, shot Deputy Nichols in the arm on September 9, 1904 as Nichols attempted to serve a warrant on Knapp for allegedly whipping his daughter-in-law. Nichols bled to death from a severed artery before he could make it home to his family. A posse captured Horner three days later, shooting him in the side during his arrest. Horner's wounds were not fatal and did not require hospitalization. Convicted of second degree murder in 1905, a court sentenced him to 12 years in prison.

Deputy Nichols had a wife and four daughters. The youngest was just a few weeks past her third birthday at the time of her father's death. His wife of almost 20 years, Pattie, never remarried. She died in 1942, living almost 38 years as a widow. Nichols' parents and nine siblings also survived him. As I sit here, more than a century later, I find the gravity of his loss difficult to comprehend. As Sheriff, I fear little as much as the line-of-duty death of one of my employees. I hope they understand that ensuring Nichols received this long-overdue acknowledgement is one small way I signal that I fully

recognize the magnitude of their willingness to serve and sacrifice for this community every day.

Representatives of my office traveled to Washington, DC this month to attend the vigil and view the addition of Nichols' name to the monument. They attended with William "Bryan" Sykes, his wife Kandi, Wiley Arnold Sykes, and his wife Jean. The Sykes brothers are two of Nichols' great grandsons; they are the grandsons of his daughter Lida May, who was five when her father died.

Although no one alive ever met Deputy Nichols, the events of the weekend were nonetheless emotional. At the law enforcement museum, the group viewed a wall on which photos of the newly recognized officers were displayed. Something about seeing Nichols' face in such a formal display brought the loss of him into the room. Most survivors were there to grieve a much more recent death, including a boy of about 10, dressed in a perfectly tailored Sullivan County, TN sheriff's deputy uniform, paying tribute to his father. The freshness of his grief merged with our knowledge of the pain long-dead residents of Orange County once endured. Someday, over a century in the future, the 10-year old's grandchildren might be in Washington, DC honoring a man they never met.

The memorial wall sits across the street from the museum. Row after row of names carved into limestone create a permanent record of service and sacrifice. You have to see it to understand the beauty and the solemnity; I hope you find the opportunity to do so someday.

Every year at the candlelight vigil honoring the line-of-duty deaths from the prior year and historical deaths such as Deputy Nichols, thousands of people listen to the names read into the night. A bell tolls after each state's list of names concludes. Speeches and musical tributes add dimension to the ceremony which culminates with thousands of candles piercing the darkness – the light a symbol of the personal love of immediate survivors and the enduring gratitude of the rest of us, who live protected by the thin blue line.

If you are interested in learning more or donating to the NLEOMF, please go to <https://nleomf.org/>. Thank you.