

THE LOWDOWN

Sheriff Charles S. Blackwood

May is a beautiful month. Spring is well underway, and it is no longer cold. Although it is warm enough to open the swimming pool, it is not yet too hot to enjoy being anywhere else outdoors. I am also a big fan of Mother's Day, and the excitement and high hopes of graduation season.

May is also a serious month, and I have been especially aware of that this year. On May 2, law enforcement members and the families of fallen officers from across the state gathered in Cary to honor those who died in the line of duty during the last year. As the Sheriff of Orange County and as the president of the North Carolina Sheriffs' Association, I had the solemn duty of "Roll Call" during which I read aloud eleven people's names. Other speakers also paid tribute to the fallen, and several praised the families of the officers, gratefully acknowledging their sacrifice.

These ceremonies are important, and they are difficult. Intended as a time to reflect, remember, and honor our dead in the comfort and company of others, these services are quite emotional for the loved ones who attend. The ceremonies bring back memories of the worst time of their lives - that period of shock, pain, and disorientation when they first processed the news of the death. I was pleased, therefore, that Attorney General Josh Stein, the host of the event, took time to share a few special moments of reflection with each of the families of the fallen before the service. He reminded survivors we will not forget their loved ones. As Cary Police Chief Terry Sult said, "This is an opportunity for us to share with you our hearts, our support, and embrace you as a part of the family of the shield."

In addition to honoring the fallen officers and their families, these services reassure current members of the law enforcement profession that if they ever make the ultimate sacrifice, we will actively and permanently remember them.

Last year, we had the opportunity to exemplify this commitment. In 1904, Orange County Deputy Duncan Joseph Nichols died in the line of duty. At the time of his death, no process existed to annually or nationally honor those killed in such a manner.

The United States began recognizing Peace Officer Memorial Day in 1962 after a proclamation by President John F. Kennedy. Others founded the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund (NLEOMF) in 1984, the nonprofit that built

and now maintains the national memorial to fallen officers. I shared the facts and circumstances of Deputy Nichol's death with the NLEOMF in July 2021, and in 2022, they carved his name into the limestone of the national memorial in time for Peace Officer Memorial Day. The monument now bears almost 24,000 names, and knowing Nichols' name is there is very satisfying. Although we always honored him locally, I am pleased that our commitment to him was enduring enough after more than a century to formalize it nationally.

I'd also like to share my thoughts about the recent death of Chapel Hill Police Officer Mike Mineer, who served as a Guardian of the Hill for 19 years. All law enforcement officers in Orange County work to support and look out for one another. Our work connects us in a way we do not need to articulate to each other and we find difficult to explain to someone else. The news of his death hit us hard. We respected Mike as a seasoned law enforcement officer and a committed and loving family man. We wish his loved ones and coworkers strength and comfort as they adjust to life without him. Although he did not die in the line of duty, it feels appropriate that he died in May. I know I will always think of him when I honor the service of other departed peace officers.

Finally, I'd like to mention Memorial Day, which we recognized two days ago. Unofficially kicking off the start of summer, it is another solemn May occurrence in which we recognize, honor, and mourn U.S. military personnel who died while serving in the armed forces. Although I found nothing that officially specifies a link between honoring military and law enforcement deaths in the same month, the connection feels deeply relevant and intentional. The formal opportunity to recognize those who gave their lives in the service of our county is another reason May is meaningful to me.