

Officer killed on way to burglary

Thursday, February 17, 2005

By Aisha I. Jefferson

Gerald Tritt was elated when he and his childhood friend Charles Haist reunited Saturday after being apart for five years.

"When you hadn't seen somebody like that in a long time, you try to find ways to get together and catch back up, and rebuild the friendship that's been away for a while," said Tritt, of LaGrange.

Tritt and his wife, Dawn, took their 4-year-old twin sons, to visit Haist at his McDonough home. They all went out to dinner, and Tritt and Haist made plans to get together this weekend and renew their childhood friendship.

That day will never come.

Haist, a Henry County Bureau of Police Services officer, wrecked while en route to assist other officers on a burglary call in Stockbridge early Wednesday morning. He died on the way to Henry Medical Center, Henry County Police Lt. Jason Bolton said. Three men were arrested in connection with the burglary and will be arraigned Friday, according to police.

Flags throughout Henry County were being lowered to half-staff as word of Haist's death spread throughout the community. They will remain lowered until after Haist's funeral, Bolton said. Funeral plans were still pending at press time Wednesday.

'He was happy...'

Tritt, 33, said he and Haist, 32, met when they were 2. They grew up together in Forest Park, where Tritt's grandmother was the boys' Sunday school teacher.

Tritt had no idea Saturday's visit would be the last time he and Haist would spend time together.

"I was just waiting for another week to see him," Tritt said.

Haist, who was divorced, had two daughters, 9 and 11, who live in Missouri with their mother. He joined the Henry County Police department two-and-a-half years ago.

"He was where he wanted to be," Tritt said. "He was happy with what he was doing."

Haist's police cruiser and Jackie Johnson's green Dodge pickup collided at about 5:10 a.m. in the eastbound lane of Ga. Highway 20/81 near Interstate 75, said Georgia State Patrol Trooper First Class Larry Schnall.

Haist's cruiser came to rest upside down on the lawn of Taco Bell. Johnson's pickup ended up in the eastbound lanes facing the police cruiser.

Johnson, a Locust Grove resident, suffered some injuries and also was taken to Henry Medical Center, Schnall said. Johnson was discharged later Wednesday, according to Henry Medical Center.

"It doesn't appear there will be any charges forthcoming on him," Schnall said.

Police did not say which direction either vehicle was traveling.

Three men arrested

Henry County Police responded to an alarm call at Premiere Wireless Solutions on Eagle's Landing Parkway in Stockbridge. Upon arriving at the scene, the officers discovered a burglary in progress.

"The suspects attempted to run over at least one of our officers," Bolton said. "Shots were fired, and a short vehicle chase ensued."

Bolton said one of the suspects driving the vehicle struck an officer, who "is not in the hospital." Police officers fired shots but no one was hit.

Stacey Lamar Seaborn, 18, of Atlanta; Bruce Austin, 18, of Riverdale; and Deangelo Terrod Myers, 19, of College Park were arrested in connection with the burglary.

All of the men face burglary and two counts of aggravated assault charges. Myers and Austin also are charged with one count of marijuana possession.

Bolton said the men will face additional charges Friday during a preliminary trial, and police are talking with the district attorney to find out if the men can be held accountable for Haist's death.

The three men are also suspects in a similar robbery that took place prior to Wednesday's chase, according to Bolton.

A number of cell phones and a cash box were recovered in the suspects' vehicle and links them to another burglary that occurred just prior to the Premiere Wireless incident. This burglary occurred at the Nextel store at Tanger Outlet Mall in Locust Grove.

Bolton said Henry County Police are investigating whether the three men were involved in cell phone dealership burglaries in Henry and other counties.

Wednesday morning, the outside of Premiere Wireless Solutions resembled a scene from a police stand-off. The strip mall was surrounded by police tape, while Georgia State Patrol troopers and Henry County Police officers blocked all of the entranceways.

Premiere Wireless Solutions owner Jeff Clough said seven of his 12 wireless phone stores are in Henry County and Wednesday's break-in is the fifth time one of his locations has been burglarized in the past six weeks.

He said burglars usually seek out "high-end expensive" cell phones that cost about \$300 or \$400 each.

"Our other Stockbridge store (on North Henry Boulevard) was burglarized once last week and once three weeks ago," Clough said, adding that newly upgraded alarm systems and new storage vaults make it more difficult for thieves. He said the burglaries have caused more than \$100,000 in damages.

"They sell them to other Nextel customers who have older phones and want new phones," Clough said. "That's really all they can do with them."

Traffic, lives impacted

Lanes in both directions of Ga. Highway 20/81 were shut down after the accident. The westbound lanes opened about 7 a.m., and eastbound lanes reopened about 11 a.m. when the wreck was cleared.

Onlookers gathered in the parking lots of nearby Mrs. Winner's and Wendy's to watch authorities clean up the wreck. McDonough resident Melody Valles was on her way to Mrs. Winner's for breakfast when she noticed the wreckage.

"All the time that I've lived here, I've never seen any (accident) this bad," Valles said, standing outside her car.

McDonough resident Dennis Pierce agreed with Valles.

"And I've been down here since '92," he said.

Schnall said the GSP Specialized Collision and Reconstruction team will return to the scene today for further investigation.

Haist is the second police officer killed in the line of duty in the last two years. Sgt. Jimmy Gilbert, 41, died in a traffic accident May 2 when he rear-ended a truck parked off the northbound lanes of Interstate 75.

Now, Henry County Police are trying to cope with Haist's death.

"It's really hard; it's tough," Bolton said.

Tritt is also trying to cope with the loss of his childhood friend, a man he has known for 30 years. He said Haist occasionally discussed going into law enforcement while they were growing up.

"He had talked about it at times because it was something one of his uncles had done," Tritt said.

Although he is grateful to have reconnected with his friend after so long, Tritt was saddened they did not have more time together last Saturday.

"Unfortunately, we didn't have a whole lot of time then, which is why we had made plans for him to come down (to our home) this weekend," he said.