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Chief Ralph Painter Honored at Memorial Service

On Friday, January 14, 2011, fallen Rainier Police Chief Ralph Painter was memorialized in a Ceremony of Honor at the Chiles Center on the campus of the University of Portland.

It was a day of tearful farewells, of pomp and ceremony, of kind words of remembrance, and of ritual.

First responders and police officers from

around the region, the country, and Canada attended the ceremony, including officers from as far away as Chicago and several Canadian Mounted Police. A

procession of first responder vehicles, which began in

Longview and traveled through Rainier to Portland and the site of the memorial service, was reported to include about 500 vehicles. Citizens lined the highway to pay their respects to the fallen Chief.

St. Helens Police Lieutenant Terry Moss served as Master of Ceremonies and Officer Kevin Tinter served as Ceremonial Commander of the Multi-Agency Honor Guard. The Portland Police Bureau Highland Guard provided bagpipes and drums.

Approximately 4,000 people attended the ceremony, almost half of them men and women in various blue, grey, tan, brown, green and even red agency uniforms.

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Oregon Governor John Kitzhaber and U.S. Senator Ron Wyden were among the dignitaries in attendance.

Painter was killed in the line of duty on January 5, 2011, during an altercation with suspect Daniel Butts, 21, of Kalama, Washington. Butts was injured during a shootout with police and remains in custody at Columbia County Jail on charges of aggravated murder. Authorities state that Painter was killed by a single gunshot to the head from his own service weapon. Rainier, a small community with a population of 1700 and a police force of just five officers, along with the rest of rural Columbia County, was shocked and saddened by this tragedy.

The last death of a police officer in the line of duty in Columbia County was in 1971, when Vernonia Police Chief Raymond Garcia was shot during a traffic stop.

Painter was remembered during the ceremony by colleagues and family as a husband, a father, a civil servant, a hero, and above all else, as a friend.

Ralph Painter was born on July 17, 1955, in Sacramento, California,

earned an Associates Degree from Clackamas County Community College. Painter began what had been a life-long desire to work in law enforcement by joining the St. Helens Police Reserves in 1983. He then joined the police department in the City of Rainier in 1988 as a patrol officer. He was promoted to Sergeant in 1999, and then to Chief in 2006. He also served on the Rainier City Council. He was known as a skilled carpenter, played drums in a rock band, and loved sports, camping and the outdoors. He was the father of five grown children: Julie, Angie, Jeremy (a police officer in St. Helens), Jennifer and Ryan. He was the husband to his second wife, Amy, described as the love of his life, and father to a seven-year-old son, Riley. He is also survived by his mother, Cathy Painter, twelve grandchildren and three siblings.



The changing of the Honor Guard during the Memorial Service for Rainier Police Chief Ralph Painter. Photo by Randy Sanders, flickr.com/photos/sandersphotoart/

Little was said during the ceremony about how Painter was killed, although Columbia County Sheriff Jeff Dickerson's remarks included some strong reminders. "In the first week of this new year Chief Painter was the third police officer in our nation to die in the line of duty. Since that time, a fourth officer has ended his watch. Last year, that number was 162-- more than three per week. And why? Because it is the risk we take in a free society where law officers are intentionally limited in their ability to respond to threats. In America, we put noble men and women on that thin blue line between lawlessness and our freedoms and we authorize them to defend us... but they cannot defend themselves with force without a reasonable belief that that force is absolutely necessary. It puts us in danger because action is always faster than reaction."

Painter's nephew, Ben Musgrove, spoke for the family and told a story of a woman who approached him during the past week and shared a story about her brother who was arrested by Chief Painter on an outstanding warrant. While transporting the man to the St. Helens jail, Painter asked if the man had eaten dinner. His reply was no, and Painter stopped and bought the man a meal. "Upon hearing of Ralph's passing, this woman's brother wept," recounted Musgrove. Musgrove went on to describe Painter as a

compassionate, genuine and caring man who treated everyone with respect and left an impression on all he met.

The final Ceremonial Honors included a Bell Salute, Flag Presentations by Mayor Cole to widow Amy and mother Cathy, the playing of Taps, "Amazing Grace" performed by the Highland Guard, the closing prayer, and the recessional including Chief Painter's casket.

Before those final ceremonies, a tearful Lt. Terry Moss had some final remarks. "Like you, I've struggled, and tried to find a reason, tried to understand. But I can't. So I look to Ralph and I wonder what he would make of all this. I know he would look at these darkened days and he would see some bright light. I know he would say to hold your head up and continue to serve."

As part of the closing Ceremonial Honors, the following message was played over the intercom from the Columbia County 9-1-1 Emergency Dispatch, known as C-COM: "C-COM to #900-- status check? C-COM-- negative contact with #900. C-COM to all units-- taking Chief Ralph Painter out of service as #900 for the last time. Gone but never forgotten."



Police vehicles from all over the region took part in a procession prior to the Memorial Service at the University of Portland and filled the neighborhood surrounding the campus.

and moved with his family to St. Helens in the 1960's. He graduated from St. Helens High School in 1974 and

Painter was recognized during the ceremony as someone who always had a kind word and was willing to help. He was also a noted jokester and prankster with a great sense of humor. Lt. Moss noted the time he believes it was Painter who put tabasco sauce in his coffee when he had to step away for a moment from a morning meeting.

So it was no surprise when the musical choice began during the ceremony following Pastor Steve Martin's solemn Remembrance-- Norman Greenbaum's 1969 psychedelic hit, "Spirit in the Sky" with loud, distorted guitar riffs and solos, raucous drums and a pertinent message-- "When I die and they lay me to rest, Gonna go to the place that's the best."

Rainier Mayor Jerry Cole spoke about his friend and colleague. "It is my solemn duty to convey the sentiments of the people of Rainier on this day when we remember Ralph Painter as our Police Chief and my long time friend," said Cole. "Much has been said about Ralph's humor, his musical ability, his love of the outdoors, his dedication to his profession-- to those who worked with him and those he served. I also want to remind everyone here today about his most important attribute-- the size of his heart, and how he shared himself with his large family and many, many friends."



Ceremonial Commander of the Multi-Agency Honor Guard, Kevin Tinter



An impromptu memorial formed on the steps at the Rainier City Hall to honor their fallen Chief.