

Pioneer in the Last Frontier

Female Trooper Knocked Down Barriers

CAREER TIMELINE

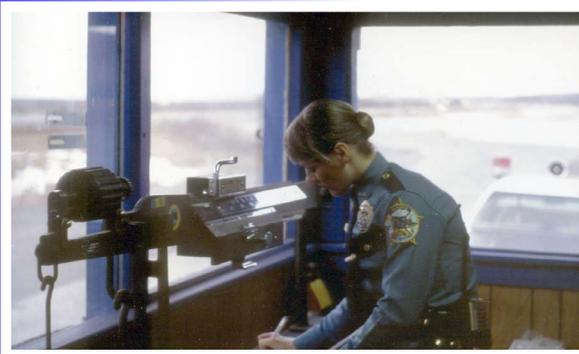
1977 – Worked in Anchorage Judicial Services



Trooper Recruit Dyanne Brown is in the second row, fourth from the left

1978 – Attended the Public Safety Academy

1978 – Transferred to Anchorage Patrol



1980 – Worked in Commercial Vehicle Enforcement

1981 – Worked in the Metro Drug Unit

A handful of women had already worn the uniform by the time Dianne Brown donned the trooper blue in 1978, however, there was still a lot of uncharted territory for female officers in Alaska.

“Women in law enforcement, when I got on, were such an enigma,” she said.

The standard operating procedures manual didn’t address many of the things women took for granted such as what kind of earrings they could wear while in uniform. The duty belt Brown wore when she first became an Alaska State Trooper was not designed for the curves of a woman’s body. The butt of her gun would uncomfortably hug her ribs while wearing the men’s styled “Sam brown belt,” but the curved “Sally brown belt” that was later designed for women allowed some distance between the gun and her body.

Brown, who prefers to spell her first name Dyanne, was not the first woman trooper. That honor goes to Fran Howard, who in 1970 became the first unrestricted service female trooper. Nonetheless, Brown’s trooper career is littered with feats. Not only was she the first female sergeant when she became a supervisor in Anchorage patrol in 1990, she was the earliest female to reach the rank of first sergeant and the first woman promoted to commander of the Statewide Criminal Investigations Unit. Her accomplishments helped pave the way for other women troopers to succeed. Then in 2003, Julia Grimes shattered that proverbial glass ceiling by becoming the Director of Alaska State Troopers.

“Each group of women that come on made it easier for the next group of women to achieve,” Brown said during a Skype interview from her seasonal home in Argentina.

Despite these pioneers and modernization of women in the workplace, there are still only 14 women out of

about 400 Alaska State Troopers and Alaska Wildlife Troopers today. It’s something even Brown doesn’t foresee changing.

“I think it’s such a non-traditional job for a woman, that I don’t think many women want to do the job or some would find it possibly too demanding and difficult,” she said.

Regardless, she’s a strong believer in keeping the standards the same for both men and women in law enforcement.

“I felt that in order for us to be accepted by our peers, the administration and the public, we had to be able to perform the job as competently as the men,” she said. “I also felt that in order for women to perform the job satisfactorily, we had to have the confidence in our abilities, and if the standards were lower, I didn’t think that would be possible.”

In her 21 years of enforcing the law in the Last Frontier, Brown garnered the respect of her co-workers, supervisors and subordinates as someone who took the time to listen and brought a compassionate component to the job that was often lacking in the male-dominated field of law enforcement.

“Most folks in patrol are going 100 miles per hour and didn’t really have time to see the personal side of things,” said Maj. Dennis Casanovas, now a deputy director for Alaska State Troopers. Brown worked for him when she was an Anchorage patrol sergeant, major crimes sergeant and ended her career as his first sergeant at the Statewide Criminal Investigations Unit

“She always took time to learn about the people she was arresting, their families, the victims and their families,” Casanovas said. “She always had that knack in seeking that personal touch to things.”

That consideration translated into patience as a



1982 – Transferred to Juneau where she worked in Patrol, Judicial Services and Investigations



1985 – Promoted to Corporal

field training officer while she was an Anchorage patrol sergeant in 1990.

“She was encouraging and understanding,” said Capt. Barry Wilson, who is now commander of C Detachment. In 1990, he was among the first set of recruits Alaska State Troopers had seen in about four years. As he described it, they were test subjects. “You’re watching people blossoming in their careers or wilting on the vine.”

He worked for Brown throughout the first seven years of his career either as a recruit, a trooper and then as an investigator.

“She was always chipper and in a good mood,” Wilson said. “She gave positive reinforcement to everyone that was there.”

Hans Brinke and Vic Aye were recruits in the next academy class after Wilson and showed up at the Anchorage post for initial field training in 1991. Brown, whom Aye refers to as a “classy lady,” was their initial sergeant.

“I love her to death. She’s awesome,” said Brinke, who is now a captain and commander of B Detachment.

While working patrol in a time before cell phones, Brinke would roll up at a local convenience store and borrow a phone to call Brown for advice on how to handle a situation.

“When giving advice, she was always calm. She listened to what you had to say,” he said. “I never got any feeling whatsoever that she was thinking ‘oh God, I’ve got another phone call from one of these dweebs.’”

THE JOB

Growing up in Seldovia, Brown didn’t dream of becoming a trooper. It’s a career she sort of fell into.

“At the time troopers were starting a real concentrated effort to hire women,” she said. “It was kind of a perfect storm for me.”

It was during the pipeline era, a time when a lot of the men in Alaska were leaving their jobs to work in construction. She first started working with the judicial

services unit in Anchorage for three months before attending the Public Safety Academy in January 1978. She celebrated her 30th birthday at the academy. She was one of five women out of 26 trooper recruits in her academy class. She had actually made more money working in the retail industry prior to becoming a trooper than she did at the beginning of her career in law enforcement. That changed after the union pressed for higher wages and better benefits a few years later.

After graduation that April, she was assigned to the post in Anchorage for her field training. Troopers kept the law and order in Anchorage back then.

“It really kind of reminded me of ‘Hill Street Blues,’” she said referring to the New York City police drama in the 80s. “Anchorage was so busy back then.



Artist and retired trooper George Rodgers asked Dyanne Brown to be a model for a project he was working on for the Alaska Department of Public Safety. The project was four paintings featuring Alaska State Troopers and Fish and Wildlife Protection Troopers. He did a pencil sketch of Brown that ended up on this poster. He gave Brown the pencil sketch once the paintings were finished.

“I treasure it to this day,” she said.



Ray and Dyanne Brown at the Department of Public Safety Awards Banquet in 1991.

1987 – Married Ray Brown

1988 – Transferred to Talkeetna and worked as post supervisor

1990 – Transferred to Anchorage Patrol and was promoted to Sergeant



1992 – Transferred to Major Crimes Unit

We had a lot of area and a lot of troopers.”

There were no computers, no cell phones and “it was a whole different world.”

In 1982 she transferred to Juneau where she worked in patrol and in a training position in investigations with short stints in judicial services. During this time she was promoted to corporal, and more importantly, met her husband, Ray Brown.

Ray was a defense attorney in Juneau. He had originally met her while she worked in judicial services during a trial for a homicide suspect he was defending. Their paths crossed in the courtroom a few times, however, it wasn't until he was preparing to move to Seattle when their interaction took on new meaning. One day while she was training a new recruit on patrol, she stopped Ray to bid him farewell. During the chat, Dyanne and Ray decided to meet for drinks. This, as Ray describes it, led to a dinner date, then to dating and finally to love. He never moved to Seattle and they've been married for more than 25 years. During their marriage, Ray has been a public defender, a prosecutor and a private practice lawyer in Alaska. Both only remember having one case where a conflict of interest surfaced. He quickly recused himself from the case.

As a lawyer, Ray knew more than the average person about his wife's job. However, there still were times, especially at the Talkeetna post, she'd get called out in the middle of the night to deal with someone armed with a gun. She would tell her husband not to worry, even though she knew he'd still fret about her.

“My husband is an amazing person,” she said. “Because of his personality, it all worked out.”

It was her 1-1/2 years in the drug unit in the early 80s that thrust her into the most hazardous settings.

“We were dealing with some really bad people,” Brown said. “We were put into some dangerous situations. I remember going into some party houses in Fairview with hookers and trying to score drugs and everybody had a gun. Thinking back now – that was crazy.”

The attractive blonde would dress up in a white tank-top, with white satin jeans and white high-heeled cowboy boots. A clunky, cumbersome wire was taped to her body under her tank top and often burned her skin.

“First of all, try as I might, I don't think I ever looked like a hooker,” she said, laughing. She even worked undercover in Nome bars, posing as the girlfriend of another narcotics trooper. They worked from 8 p.m. to 5 a.m. It was a depressing job that ranks second only to death notifications as the worst duty she had as a trooper.

Fortunately, while her career often put her in harm's way, she managed to avoid some of the more life-threatening positions some troopers are thrown into. Nonetheless, no career in law enforcement is without its physical moments. Brown remembers getting into a wrestling match with a 15-year-old burglar early in her career. She got one handcuff on him when her radio was knocked off and fell down a flight of steps during the struggle, preventing her from calling for back-up. The 5-foot-6-inch, petite trooper managed to pin him down and squeeze his privates to try to subdue him.

“He didn't miss a beat,” she said. “He was so hyped up on drugs.”

The man who reported the burglary showed up and helped sit on the teen. Only after another trooper arrived did they manage to take the boy into custody. She still has the scar on her hand from the scuffle.

Another scare came while working undercover. She and a couple of other drug investigators were at a small basement apartment for a “buy and bust” when a large pit bull lunged at them. One of her fellow troopers shot the dog in the head, stunning the dog but not killing it. The shot reverberated through the tiny cement room.

“Our adrenaline was pumping so hard. I don't remember hearing that bullet, but my ears rang for days afterwards,” she said.

To make up for her small stature and lack of strength, Brown made sure she kept in shape and jumped at any chance for additional self-defense training. She admits to not being a “crack shot” and getting bruised by the



Supervisors on the AST Director's Staff in 1994. In front from left to right is Sgt. Bob Sanders, First Sgt. Dyanne Brown; back row from left to right is First Sgt. Joe D'amico, Lt. Jay Yakopatz and Lt. Ted Bachman.

1994 – Promoted to First Sergeant and transferred to AST Director's Office



1994 – Attended Southern Police Institute

shotgun on more than one trip to the shooting range, but she was determined to learn how to handle the gun.

"I always felt that I tried to work harder than anybody because I was a woman and I was small and I realized my limitations," she said. "I still feel that training is one of the most important things as a law enforcement officer. I never think you can have enough training."

Brown worked a wide gamut of assignments, but commercial vehicles enforcement is what she considers her "feel good job." In this role she dealt with powerful trucking companies, some who were trying to transport heavy loads.

"Most of the trucking companies were very good," she said. "But it always gave me such satisfaction (catching) an overweight, large 18-wheeler, traveling between Fairbanks and Anchorage, knowing it was overweight and was trying to get away with it."

Since the fines were high for this infraction, it was a painful lesson that was likely corrected. "I felt that the state was doing something to keep the roads safe."

In the end, the diversity of the job was what Brown liked best about being a trooper. No two days were the same and at the beginning of a shift, she never knew what kind of day she would have. She especially relishes her days as an investigations supervisor.

"I think I liked it because if you're talking about a homicide, those first 24 hours are so important," she said. For the first 24 to 36 hours, "everything has to be done immediately."

"You go without sleeping, you go without eating ... You're multi-tasking and as a supervisor, you're multi-tasking in overload," she said. "You're making sure your investigators have all the resources they need in order to have a successful conclusion to the case."

While there were other cases that investigators invested a lot of time in solving, Bonnie Craig's homicide stands out because of the publicity it generated. She was in the courtroom during closing arguments in May of 2011 when Kenneth Dion's defense attorney tried to convince a jury that troopers had botched the

investigation. She felt vindicated for her investigations team that, despite what some people suggested throughout the years, investigators always believed Bonnie's killer was a stranger.

"The way it worked out in the end was a real tribute to the major crimes unit, especially Mike Marrs and all the guys who spent all those hours to solve that case," she said. "It was a very, very good, hardworking unit ... The people that worked in the major crimes section were so talented. I felt that I had the best people working there."

TRAILBLAZING TROOPER

Brown said people weren't really surprised to see a woman in a trooper uniform until she got to Talkeetna in 1988. This post assignment was as close to a Bush assignment as she got in her career.

"It was amazing the looks I got from a lot of these men with the wolf hats," Brown said. Even then, the uniform commanded some respect, even from unruly, drunk men.

"Because of my small stature, because I'm a woman, whenever I got called out in the middle of the night I always wore my uniform because I felt it really made a difference. I really liked the way that people respected the troopers. I liked the way that when you had the uniform on, people just treated you differently," she said. "People trusted you. It was a nice feeling."

Before meeting Ray, Brown recalls that life as a single woman working as an Alaska State Trooper could be very lonely. "I found that the loneliness affected me," she said.

While there weren't many other women that wore the uniform, they still turned to each other for support.

"When I was on, there were some wonderful women troopers and Fish and Wildlife officers," Brown said. "It was nice when we could get together and swap notes."

Throughout it all, Brown found a way to use her strengths to excel in a job dominated by men.

"She never played the gender card. She always would do her job standing on her two feet next to



1994 – Promoted to Commander of the Statewide Criminal Investigations Unit



Dyanne Brown stands in front of Aconcagua, which at 22,837 feet, is the tallest mountain in the Americas. The mountain is located in the region of Mendoza, Argentina where Dyanne lives three months out of the year.

July 1, 1998 – Retired

anyone,” Casanovas said.

He said there was one other thing that set Brown apart from her co-workers.

“She could get called out in the middle of the night or spend nights in remote communities investigating a case, but the minute she stepped into public, she looked as though she had a full night’s sleep and spent whatever time necessary to have her game face on for the day,” Casanovas said. It’s also something she received a fair amount of teasing for.

“We’d tell her, ‘I look like heck, and you look like you got a full night’s sleep,’” despite the contrary, he said. “She always looked professional.”

Then, when Brown was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1998, understandably, her priorities changed. After 21 years, she set aside the uniform and a dream of becoming a lieutenant to face the toughest battle of her life. She’s been cancer free for almost 15 years.

Much like her career with Alaska State Troopers, retirement has been good to Brown. She spends part of the year in Alaska where she still has family and three months in Mendoza, Argentina where she and Ray are getting ready to celebrate Easter in South America’s fall season. She occasionally attends Fraternal Order of



Twenty-one years after Vic Aye, on left, and Hans Brinke, on right, were Dyanne Brown’s recruits, the three of them chat at a Fraternal Order of Alaska State Troopers function in Anchorage.

Alaska State Trooper functions in Alaska, but otherwise, she is relishing her retirement after a trailblazing career.

“I had a really, really good career with the troopers. I was so blessed and fortunate. I realize that I didn’t do it just by myself,” she said, giving former commissioners Art English, Harold Sydnam and Capt. Bob Clontz, plus other supervisors and co-workers credit for help and guidance along the way. “I owe a huge debt of gratitude in them for trusting me and believing in me.” 🍷



Dyanne and Ray Brown stand before a stainless steel tank that holds a premium chardonnay that the couple is having made at a winery in Argentina.