

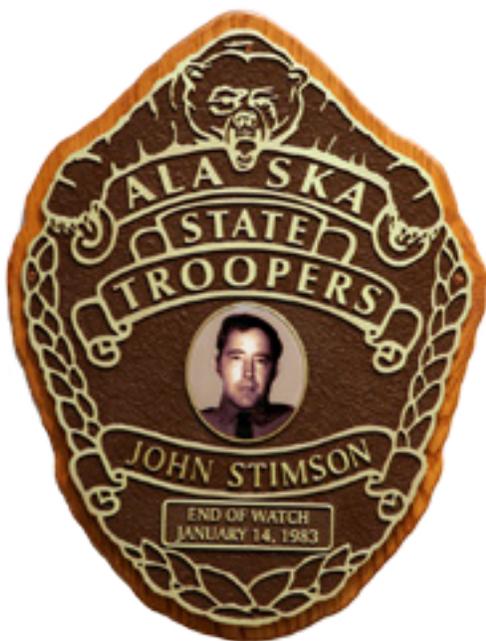
# 30 Years. *Not Forgotten.*

Article by: Megan A. Peters

Three decades have passed following the fateful day when a helicopter carrying pilot Gary Wilttrout and Trooper John David Stimson fell from the snowy skies near Cordova, Alaska. Stimson and Wilttrout, who had never met before boarding the helicopter, were on a rescue mission to pick up a pilot forced down earlier in the day by the blizzard that was flinging them into peril.

Wilttrout came to while still strapped into his seat and in a lot of pain from a broken back. The Bell 206B rested on its left side with its front windshield knocked out, leaving nothing but a gaping hole. Snow and biting wind blew in around Stimson as he unsuccessfully tried to use his body to cover the opening. The inside of the helicopter didn't provide any protection from the elements so Stimson helped Wilttrout out of his seatbelt and out of the Helicopter. The two nestled down against its belly and the helicopter served as a windbreak. Stimson zipped up Wilttrout's parka and made him as comfortable as possible. The broken aircraft wasn't much of a shelter but it was all they had to cloak them from the blizzard.

"I was in a lot of pain and kept passing out, but I remember talking about our families, although I don't remember all that was said," Wilttrout, now 65, recalled. "We talked about the fact there was a God and that maybe our time was running out. We had both been in life and death situations before and I don't remember either one of us being scared. I remember John crawled back to the front of the helicopter to look for the survival gear and



John Stimson's son, Shawn, (left) and his wife, Patricia, (middle) were presented the American flag during his funeral in 1983. John survived the initial crash but died from exposure after not being able to access the survival gear in wreckage. Photo courtesy of Shawn Stimson



**Gary Wilttrout has logged more than 20,000 hours since the fatal helicopter crash in 1983. He went back to flying as soon as he was medically cleared.**

Photo courtesy of the Wilttrout Family

when he came back he said he couldn't find it and that the helicopter was full of snow."

Several times throughout the night Stimson brushed the snow off of them and asked if Wilttrout was okay. When morning came Wilttrout discovered that Stimson perished from exposure to the elements.

"I remember realizing that it was day; I could see light through the snow. I brushed the snow away from my face and called out to John and when I looked to my left he was sitting there beside me. He wasn't as covered up with snow as I was and I could see by his face he had passed away."

Wilttrout was rescued about 24 hours after crashing. He had crushed vertebrae in his lower back and his right foot -- which was the only part of him peeking through the snow during the night -- was practically frozen. He spent a few months in a body cast recovering. Recalling the wreck, Wilttrout credits his survival to his parka, the insulation the snow provided and the care Trooper Stimson afforded.

"I know I have lived with the 'why me', or better yet, 'why not me,'" Wilttrout said. "Why does God take some and not others under the same circumstance? I know I am blessed and thankful for my family and friends."

Stimson's death was a tragedy that would strike any law enforcement agency hard. He served the Department of Public Safety as a Fish and Wildlife Protection Officer, which would be the equivalent of an Alaska Wildlife Trooper today, for more than 11 years. The Troopers had only lost five others at the time of Stimson's death. In all, DPS has suffered 13 line of duty deaths, six of those deaths were due to aircraft crashes. These tragedies have a profound effect on the victims' families, fellow troopers and the small communities the troopers serve.

Shawn Stimson, John's only child, was 17, just out of the U.S. Navy boot camp and at his first duty station when he received word of the accident. He has since moved home to Cordova where he is raising his fam-

**In Stimson's honor, the largest Patrol Vessel in the Troopers' fleet proudly wears his name. It was on Police Memorial Day in 1997 when the Commissioner of Public Safety called Shawn Stimson to ask if the boat could be named after his father. That same day Stimson's son, JohnDavid, was born.**



ily. While the wreck claimed his father, it reinforced Trooper Stimson's honorable character.

"I always pictured Dad as a cross between Dirty Harry and Andy Griffith. He was about as fair as anybody could be," said the younger Stimson. "I have an immense amount of pride. If I am ever in the same type of position, I hope I am man enough to help others."

But the pride doesn't come without pain; he still feels the loss.

"What do they say? That time heals all wounds?" asked Stimson. "I don't think that is true. The frequency is less, but there is always something. It is little things like putting a wheel bearing on the car. When I was a kid my dad taught me to do that and now whenever I do that I think of it."

Wiltout agrees. "I have reflighted that flight over and over again thousands upon thousands of times. Not a day goes by that I am not reminded about it by my back and foot. But I don't focus on it as much now-a-days. So many other things have happened since then."

Since the crash, Wiltout has also added more than 20,000 hours of flight time to his log books. He is currently in Victoria, Australia flying in support of wild-fire fighting missions.

"I have flown in several countries doing a number of things," said Wiltout. "The firefighting has been a big part of my life and I like to hope that I am 'paying it forward' for John in my efforts to save lives, homes and people's property."



## We Remember...

DENNIS FINBAR CRONIN

Homicide  
FEBRUARY 18, 1974

LARRY ROBERT CARR

Aircraft accident  
DECEMBER 11, 1974

FRANK STUART RODMAN

Aircraft accident  
DECEMBER 11, 1974

C. W. "WALT" ZAHN

Heart attack  
OCTOBER 26, 1978

ROLAND EDGAR CHEVALIER, Jr.

Homicide  
APRIL 3, 1982

JOHN DAVID STIMSON

Aircraft accident/Exposure  
JANUARY 14, 1983

TROY LYNN DUNCAN

Homicide  
MAY 19, 1984

ROBERT L. BITTICK

Aircraft accident  
OCTOBER 11, 1994

C. E. SWACKHAMMER

Aircraft accident  
OCTOBER 11, 1994

BRUCE ALAN HECK

Homicide  
JANUARY 10, 1997

DAVID CALVIN CHURCHILL

Heart attack  
SEPTEMBER 16, 1998

JAMES ARTHUR MOEN, Sr.

Aircraft accident  
JUNE 25, 2001

HANS PETER LOTHAR ROELLE

Homicide  
NOVEMBER 24, 2001