

Middletown 963

Recently, retired Captain Dan Carlson read *Dover 962*, an account of my experiences as a young trooper while assigned to SP Dover Plains in 1967. Dan had been stationed at Dover Plains as a trooper in 1971 and '72 and as the station commander in 1979 and '80. He mentioned that his shield number, 963, was one above that of the Dover Plains station commander, Herbie Stahn, shield 962. Sergeant Stahn had told him "at some length" of the fellow who had previously had shield 963, but Dan had forgotten the details.

As it happened, I knew the answer. Shield 963 was first issued to Sergeant J. L. "Jack" Stein, who had been my station commander when I arrived at SP Middletown in 1967.

Prior to 1962, state police shields, which were then silver in color, were issued by each troop. The shields, which were octagonal, bore a letter designating the troop at the "ten o'clock" position and a number at the "two o'clock position"

For instance, the shield number of the Troop K Commander was "K1". If a member was transferred to another troop, he turned in his old shield when he left his old troop and when he got to his new troop he received a shield - maybe new, probably not - with the letter designating that troop followed by a number. Although it was conceivable that the numerical digits of the new shield might be the same as his old one, it wasn't likely.

When it came time to replace the old shields with the new gold ones, Division sent the new ones out to the troops in consecutively numbered batches where they were issued alphabetically by rank, hence Sergeants Stahn and Stein were 962 and 963.

When I was transferred from SP Dover Plains to SP Middletown in May or June of 1967 Middletown was the westernmost post of Troop K. Troop F was still fourteen months off and most of us, at least at my level, were oblivious to the upcoming change.

There were two NCOs at the Middletown Barracks, Sergeant J. L. “Jack” Stein and Corporal Harry Hayes. The rank of corporal had been abolished by Superintendent Arthur Cornelius and no further tests for the rank would be given, but those still holding the rank remained as corporals until they passed the sergeants’ test or retired. Or, I guess, got busted, although I have no knowledge of that happening to any of the few remaining corporals.

Harry Hayes subsequently passed the sergeants’ test and was transferred to SP Newburgh before retiring.

Both NCOs were easy guys to work for.

(Reportedly Superintendent Cornelius, the first superintendent from outside the job, abolished “corporal” because no one had ever heard of that rank being used by a police department. Then he came up with “zone sergeant”. ???)

Although the use of motorcycles had been discontinued early in 1967, Jack’s ability as a state police motorcycle rider was legendary in Orange County. We young troopers often heard stories about his skills not only from other members, but also from civilians.

I remember a few. An ambulance driver recalled being headed north on Old Route 17 north of Middletown when he was passed by a speeder. Shortly afterward Jack also passed him on a motorcycle in pursuit of the speeder. As they approached the fork where Route 302 splits off to the right, a dip in the road prevented Jack from seeing whether the violator had taken 302 or continued north on 17, so Jack sprung up from the foot pegs and stood on the motorcycle’s seat, leaning into the wind, still doing 70 or 75 miles per hour. When he spotted the speeder in the dip he dropped back onto the seat. The bike wobbled a bit and Jack then continued on to apprehend the motorist.

Another event occurred in the City of Middletown. Jack was once again northbound on Old Route 17 on the bike when a box truck blew a red light right into Jack’s path. There was no room to brake.

Jack laid the bike down, slid completely under the truck between the front and rear wheels and still had enough momentum on the other side to bring the bike back up on its wheels. He executed a U turn, chased the truck down and issued a ticket.

When Jack got married, he and his wife Mary owned a horse farm in Chester adjacent to the new four lane Route 17, "The Quickway". Jack made a path from a vantage point in his pasture angling down toward the northbound lanes. When he spotted a speeder he would let it go by, then ride the bike down to the shoulder. He would catch up to the vehicle in the violator's blind spot - right side rearview mirrors were pretty rare in those days. When he had closed up behind the vehicle he would slide over to the driver's side and pull up to the driver's door. In those days air conditioning was unknown, so the car windows were usually open in the summertime. Jack would tap the driver on the left shoulder and tell him to pull over. How he avoided being struck by the startled motorist was a miracle.

Another thing Jack was noted for was having his troop car hit by a train. Jack was stopped for a crossing signal where the old Erie Railroad crossed Ryerson Road in New Hampton. Apparently there were no gates, just a signal. As Jack was waiting for a long southbound freight to pass a train came from the opposite direction and hit the front of Jack's troop car, tossing the car and Jack into an adjacent field.

Not surprisingly, the radio no longer worked. Jack, who was uninjured, picked up his briefcase and began walking toward the Middletown Barracks, which was at that time just south of the City of Middletown on Old 17.

Trooper Andy Lustyik happened to be returning to the barracks when he encountered Jack walking along the shoulder carrying his briefcase. Andy recalled thinking "This can't be good." Andy also related that the subsequent investigation located a couple who had stopped at the same rail crossing. Just before the freight train passed by they saw a state police car approaching from the opposite direction, slowing for the train. The freight train was quite long and when it finally passed they noticed the troop car was no longer there. They had no knowledge of a second train passing in the

opposite direction and just assumed the trooper had become tired of waiting and gone a different way. The troop car had been thrown so far they didn't notice it.

Captain Carlson mentioned in his reply that Dover Plains Trooper Jerry O'Hearn had once tried to throw a coke bottle over the roof of his troop car, only to break the roof light lens of the revolving roof light. This reminded me of a similar event. When I first arrived at Middletown I, as the most junior trooper, was given a series of chores around the station. One day Sergeant Stein deemed that I would be allowed to go out on patrol for a few hours. My assigned vehicle was parked in the downstairs garage. I opened the garage door, then went through the usual check of emergency equipment and regular and emergency lighting. There were two brands of roof lights used by the state police at that time, *Federal Sign and Signal* and *Dietz*. The Federal models were of much better quality and had a rounded glass dome. The *Dietz* lights were more squat with a clear plastic dome.

The troop car I was to take had a *Dietz* light. When I flipped the switch, it lit up, but didn't rotate. I had encountered a similar problem in Dover (maybe O'Hearn had gotten to that one too.) I knew that if you gave the roof light a sharp rap with the heel of your hand, it often came back to life. Instead of coming to life, the plastic dome broke into pieces.

I went upstairs and told Sergeant Stein that I hadn't even made it out of the driveway before breaking his car. When he found out the extent of the damage was he was greatly relieved. Apparently there was a way around this without sending a File 3.

Jack asked how it had happened and I told him I hit it with my hand. He said "I don't believe you." That put me in an odd situation since that's exactly what had happened, so I said "What would you believe?" Jack replied "I'd believe you didn't open the garage door high enough and drove into it" to which I replied "OK, I didn't open the garage door high enough and drove into it."

Sergeant Stahn produced a new, or at least whole, lens from somewhere and the problem was solved.

Jack had been in the Navy in World War Two and had remained in the reserves where he rose to the rank of Lieutenant Commander. Every year when he returned from his two weeks of active duty he would be full of piss and vinegar and determined to get the barracks and the automotive fleet into tiptop condition. One year he decided that both ends of the 50' rope carried in each troop car should have "eyes" in the end. For a couple of days all of us who knew how to splice sat around the squad room with marlin spikes weaving loops.

Another year Jack decided that the interiors of the troop car trunks were a mess - which they were - and needed serious attention. On a nice sunny day we assembled in the parking lot and pulled each trunk apart. My assignment was to actually climb into each trunk after it had been emptied and swab it out with a mop and bucket. As I was finishing up one car the sergeant picked up the emergency box off the ground and dropped it into the trunk. The dry-powder fire extinguisher went off. My uniform trousers were white from the knees down. Jack, who was more or less at eye level when it discharged, looked like Marcel Marceau. By the time he could see again I was industriously working on a different car.

When Troop F stood up in August 1968 Sergeant Stein was replaced as the station commander of the new barracks patrol and instead assigned as the night desk sergeant. Soon thereafter he decided to pull the pin. Jack got the last laugh. When Jack had remained in the reserves after the war, Division advised him that they couldn't prevent him from doing so, but that he would have to use vacation days to attend the annual two week active duty stints. When Jack retired he sued the Division to get his time back and Division quickly rolled over and payed him for about a year's worth of vacation at his final salary rate, which was considerable higher than what he had made in the early years. It gave his retirement a nice boost.

There's an epilogue to this story. Thirty years later both Jack and my father-in-law, Jim Olley, were widowers. Each of them eventually moved into an assisted living facility where each had a private bedroom and bath. Although they hadn't known each other previously they shared a common kitchenette, dining area and sitting area. There were two spaces on the doors of each such suite for the occupants to display their names. Jack quickly replaced the issued name plate with an old desk

nameplate which read "LCDR J. L. Stein USNR". A few days later Jim Olley's issued name plate was replaced with similar old desk nameplate "MAJ James Olley USAR". Which nameplate was displayed above the other probably had a great deal to do with which occupant had last entered the room, but they otherwise got on quite well.

As a public service Jack would wander around the parking lot of the facility with a hand full of Post It notes and a pen. One day my wife came out to find a note on the windshield reading "Peg, don't forget your inspection expires this month."