

Washington's Game Wardens, friends and supporters...



I received the email from Washington Fish and Wildlife Officer,



Phil Johnson on Friday November 12th, that a Pennsylvania Game Warden had been shot in the line of duty the night before. I began to pray about whether I was suppose to go knowing that there are only two strong Game Warden Chaplain programs in the Country. I emailed my friend, Maine Warden Service Chaplain, Kate Braestrup, and she replied that she was going to be in San Diego for the week. Sunday night I looked up the Pennsylvania Game Commission web page where it listed Adams County in the South Central Region. I called the number and got a dispatcher on the phone, explaining who I was, and she gave me Wildlife Conservation Officer (WCO) Kevin Mountz's cell number. I left him a message and he called me on Monday morning; he was just heading to a debriefing at their headquarters.

After receiving the approval to make the trip from Dan Klump, I booked the flight on Tuesday, and flew out of Seatac on Wednesday morning arriving in Harrisburg Pennsylvania at 9 PM. I was met at the airport by Kevin Mountz, who is a twenty year veteran Game Warden. He recruited David Grove to be one of his deputies in 2001. Then in 2007 David got assigned to Adams County District after graduating from the forty-nine weeks of WCO training at the Department's School of Conservation. Kevin was his field training officer (FTO).



WCO David Grove badge # J2038 and Radio call 416 (Both retired forever)

As we drove to Breezewood, where I would be staying at the Comfort Inn, Kevin briefed me on the shooting. Investigators were still trying to locate the .45 automatic that the alleged murderer,

Christopher Johnson, said he tossed off a trail in a shoulder holster after he shot the handcuff off his wrist. Johnson is an ex-con who vowed not to go back to jail after being stopped by WCO David Grove after shooting at a deer. He called in the license number and called for backup which was about two minutes away. He told the other officer he would wait for him to arrive before making contact with the driver, but something happened in those seconds. David took control and had Johnson backing up with his hands on his head and got one cuff on him when he spun around pulling a .45 from his shoulder holster. They traded rounds back and forth, Johnson taking cover at front of his truck and David behind his driver's door. David was hit three times; once in the foot, the leg and the arm, and Johnson once in the hip. David was shooting a .357 Sig with fifteen rounds. Apparently when David turned to take cover behind his truck Johnson shot him in the back of the neck. Investigators found fifteen casings from Johnson's eight round .45, and ten from David Grove's sig. Investigators are still piecing this together, but apparently Johnson was able to reload during the gun fight. When the backup officer arrived on the scene he found David lying dead at his patrol vehicle. Officers found a dead deer in the field the following day.

Johnson fled in the truck with his nineteen year-old passenger who pleaded with Johnson to let him out, which he did. Johnson ditched his truck and shot the handcuff off his wrist and walked all night getting a ride the following morning by a passing motorist to a hunting camp that he knew about. Officers were waiting for him to show the following morning when a local PD Officer recognized him riding as a passenger in the vehicle and made the stop, arresting him without incident.

I think every Game Warden in the country cringed when they heard the statement Johnson made to investigators when they asked him if he knew he killed a cop, and he said, "I thought he was a Game Warden." I learned that week about a decision made a couple years ago the Adams County Commissioners, Common Plea Judges, and the District Attorney, by a majority vote, who decided to enact a county ordinance to allow all Adams County local police and State Troopers to carry firearms in the courthouse, except for Game and Fish Officers. Kevin told me this week that at the preliminary hearing for Christopher Johnson the State Troopers took their guns off and left them secured in their vehicles in protest. Apparently the County Officials are rethinking their position and it will be changed.

The following morning Kevin picked me up early, and I rode with him as he did the preliminary work on a deer investigation. Then we drove seventy miles southeast to Waynesboro where we attended a multi agency briefing on the memorial service. I met some of the administrators for the Pennsylvania Game Commission Enforcement Division. Then we drove to David Grove's family home where we had lunch with his Mom, Dad and Sister. Kevin Mountz is very close with David's family; he recruited David to be a

Deputy Game Warden when David was just twenty-one years-old. There are about one hundred full time WCO's, and each officer has a number of volunteer deputies. [\(Click here to see to the volunteer deputy link\)](#) They must complete an intense training and must retire at age seventy. They can receive per diem when they volunteer, but it just barely pays their expenses. David Grove served as a deputy until 2006 when he passed the civil service test to become a WCO. He graduated from the Wildlife Conservation School getting the assignment to Adams County at Gettysburg. During a cadet's field training they live with their FTO.

David was described by his family and friends as the person everybody waited for to show up so the party could start. He loved everyone and had the ability to make you feel special. He had an infectious laugh and loved to tease. There was no doubt about David's faith which was also infectious. Kevin called him "Davey Boy" and David called Kevin "Big Boy". They were in constant competition over "Jack lighters" which Pennsylvania has no shortage of. The term comes from the 1700's when the settlers used to float canoes along the rivers and creeks to search for deer at night time along the stream banks. They fixed a torch mounted on a pole in the middle of the canoe which lit up the banks and enabled them to shoot the deer. They called it "Jack lighting". Here in Washington there weren't many people here except Native Americans in the 1700's, and I am sure they probably didn't have to jack light to kill deer.

That afternoon we had a meeting with the Fulton County District Attorney to discuss a search warrant. That evening we worked on a stakeout looking for the suspect who is an ex-felon who would have a gun in his trunk along with blood and hair evidence.

Friday morning Kevin picked me up with his new cadet fresh out of the WCO training school, Matt Chiwego. We drove to Waynesboro for viewing at a funeral home. I was able to gather the family outside of the family home and prayed for them. At the viewing Kevin, Matt and I stood at the casket from 1:00 to 8:30 PM along with his Mom, Dad, Sister, and David's Fiancé, and greeted the line of police and Game Wardens from the surrounding states of New York, Virginia, West Virginia, Ohio, Maryland, Maine, New Jersey, Connecticut only to name some, but I saw officers from all over including California and Idaho. The Pennsylvania Game Wardens make an imposing presence with their hundreds of deputies.

On Saturday we worked the opening day of the modern rifle bear season. We walked into a reported bait sight, but Kevin concluded it was from deer season. It is illegal to bait deer there as well, and we took a hike and found an illegal tree stand that had been baited. It is illegal to pound nails in trees on

State Forest or Game Lands. We also located ground blinds that were baited with a salt block and mineral cakes. There were literally hundreds of hunters that we saw and dozens of vehicles parked along the forest roads. Hunters must wear their licenses displayed. The late buck season was set to begin the following week and he planned to come back. Pennsylvania deer hunters are allowed to kill a buck and a doe with a doe permit. This year they sold about 780,000 doe permits state wide.

They have a check station in Fulton County run by their Game Biologists and the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR). We stopped by in the afternoon and they had checked about thirty bears and by that evening they had checked sixty-seven. At one point during the day there were over a hundred people crowded around to watch the bears get weighed in. That evening we worked a night patrol. By state statute it is legal to spotlight deer until 11PM as long as you don't have a gun in the vehicle. The problem for WCO's is there is no probable cause to stop a "Jack Lighter" since it is a legal activity. It is illegal to shine buildings or linger on livestock, so they can make a stop if that happens and check for weapons. Their patrol vehicles are all black with black grills. We contacted a land owner who was sitting in the brush along the side of the road with his cell phone. Kevin says the guy does it all the time and calls him quite regular.



Kevin and I at the check station



Kevin Mountz his new patrol vehicle

We had sat about an hour when one of his deputies called and had a spotlihter shoot in front of him. He tried to make a stop and the violator made a run of it. We came from the other end of the road they were on and had them boxed between us. We turned around on this narrow one lane paved road when we got close and let them come up behind us. We had them stopped but they turned around on us. They are not required to have a front plate in Pennsylvania so when they blew by the deputy he was unable to get a plate. We tried to catch them at *confidential* 😊 speeds, but were pretty sure they turned their lights off and took a side road since the moon was full.

Kevin had information about a kid who had outrun the cops about a month prior and had reports that he poached in the past. He lived within five miles of this incident so we drove to his house. It was one

in the morning and all the lights in the house were off until we drove by and we saw them come out on the porch. We were looking for a Ford Aerostar which was not at the house. We drove to the end of the road and waited for the deputy to make contact. Surprisingly the two guys walked down to our location and played cool with us. Kevin told the one kid he knew he had outrun the cops about a month ago and he said, "Maybe." Kevin asked if he outran them in his van, and he answered, "Who could outrun the cops in a minivan?" Kevin said, "I didn't say anything about a minivan, do you drive a minivan?" And he said, "No way, I drive a station wagon." We were pretty sure they hid the vehicle and got a ride home from a friend. Kevin dropped me off at my hotel at 2:30 AM.

They held David's memorial service on Sunday because the hunting season is closed on Sundays. My jaw almost hit the floor when I heard that. I guess it's been like that since 1911. I told them it was probably enacted to try to keep the pastors in the pulpit. Kevin was one of the pallbearers and as the officers filed into the high school auditorium I stood by one of the doors with the Pennsylvania Game Wardens. After everyone was seated the hearse arrived with the family. Kevin told me he wanted me to greet them and be their escort to the front row of the auditorium and sit with them during the service. I was humbled and honored by the Pennsylvania Game Commission and how they embraced me as their chaplain, and they were so touched by the gesture of the Washington Game Warden Association.



Kevin spoke on behalf of the Pennsylvania Game Commission eulogizing his colleague and friend. I had given him a Bible passage which he used in his talk. At the conclusion of the service they dismissed the officers by department and they assembled outside in ranks. The family waited until everyone was dismissed and the pallbearers carried the casket out to the Hearse. I escorted the family behind the casket to the waiting cars and then Kevin and I took our place in the lead patrol vehicle for the procession. Driving through town the streets were lined with members of the public holding flags and showing their respect for our fallen Game Warden.



[\(Click here to see a slide show\)](#)

Arriving at the cemetery Kevin and I stood waiting for the hundreds of vehicles to arrive and talking with the pastors who conducted the service. When it started we stood next to the family who was seated in front of the casket. They did a 21 gun salute and the radio last call. They retired his call number 416, and his badge number forever. There has not been a Pennsylvania Wildlife Conservation officer killed in the line of duty for ninety-five years.

Thanks again to the WGA for allowing me to represent you in Pennsylvania. To show their appreciation their administration sent me home with enough Game Commission patches for every one of our officers. For me it was like stepping back to the early 70's when the Enforcement Commissions were limited, Fisheries and Game were separate Departments. There were very few tribal issues. The Regional Supervisory WCO's aren't sergeants, and the Regional Manager, who administers all programs in the region, wears a uniform.

I told Kevin that in those five days I had a new brother and he agreed. But I did qualify it that even though he was my brother now, I still wasn't going to forget the 2005 super bowl between the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Seattle Seahawks. He just smiled and said, "What's your point." He said we could stop at the Pittsburgh memorabilia store if I wanted, and I asked him if they sold those black and white striped shirts in there.

Kevin called me on Tuesday morning to tell me that they got the guy on Monday with the rifle in his trunk and he had just killed a deer the night before. He sang like a bird knowing he was facing twenty-four months back in prison, and copped out to several deer and gave up all the players. He and Matt had also arrested a good spotlighter the night before. This week he got the guys in the tree stand hunting over bait. South Central Pennsylvania...in the words of our F & W Officer, Dustin Prater, "A Game Warden's Paradise".



Truly Yours in His name, Chaplain Mike Neil