

Death of Bill Claassen

02-14-2014 by Harry Zirkelbach

In the years following WWII the population of Denver grew to house almost one of three living in Colorado, 415,786 of 1,324,089. 31.2% of all Colorodans lived in Denver. That ratio would decrease in all following Census years.

WW II created many Denver employment opportunities. Military personnel stationed at Buckley Army Air Field, Lowry Air Corps Training Base with many training schools, Fitzsimmons Army Hospital caring for the injured, went on to other military assignments. Impressed with community, friendliness, men returned at Wars end, often remaining to settle, establish a family.

In the first six years of the 4th decade of the 20th Century, the city grew because of the War. At the same time, city municipal employment stagnated. This included the Denver Police Department.

In 1947 voters elected 35 year old Quigg Newton Mayor. Youth, vigor, WW II experience, swept out a three term incumbent. Newton assembled young men and women in all levels of local government.

In the Denver Police Department. Herb Forsyth became Chief of Police. His assigned goal, a modern Denver Police Department.

A competent Police Academy was strengthened. Classes of 25 to 30 were graduated several time each year. The class of 25 that began October 1, 1950 brought the ratio of Police to residents to 1.4 to 1000, well below the national average. Denver's ratio is now 2.81.

That Monday began a three week training; then working five months with those 580 veterans; returning for refresher training one final week. These men became friends those four weeks together.

In every group there are standouts; in rare cases, a leader standing out in any census. One such new Officer was Bill Claassen, a tall, slightly build, strong, Navy veteran. His unique characteristic, he was double jointed.

In practicing arrests, officers were taught to subdue the violent by pinning their arms behind the back, adding handcuffs. Bill Claassen could be held, one arm pinned behind his back, and instantly spin around. A lesson never to be forgotten.

Bill Claassen, married, lived in east Denver , and patrolled East Denver streets all of his short Police life.

On the night of Feb 11, 1953, Car 52, Officers Bingham and Claassen responded to a silent alarm at a closed Pharmacy 3100 Downing.

On arrival at the store, Claassen left the Cruiser and went to the front door which was secure.

Bingham drove to the back of the store, found that door also secure. Almost immediately, Bingham hears shots fired, yells for Claassen, hears nothing. Suddenly the rear door where Bingham is standing is thrust open; an armed man races past., ignores Bingham's call, STOP. Bingham fires. At the third shot the man falls.

Bingham rushed to him, sees he is near death if not dead.

In addition to shouting for Claassen, Bingham runs to the front of the store, finds his partner, Bill Claassen lying outside the front door, also apparently dead.

Neither had survived this face to face exchange of shots.

From the autopsy that followed, it was surmised that the burglar hearing the rear door rattled by Office Bingham, sought to escape thru the front door. On opening that door he was face to face with Bill Claassen. Their simultaneously shots struck one another in the chest. Claassen fatally wounded; the burglar mortally wounded somehow ran back through the store, past Officer Bingham only to die from Claassen's shots seconds earlier.

Bill Claassen was a Denver Police Officer 29 months; became the 47th Police Officer killed on duty in Denver. His name is etched on the plaque with the others who died defending the people of Denver.

This mystery.

*Had any other patrol car responded,
would that Patrolman not driving
have suffered the same fate?*

*All Officer's wives ask the same confidence
eroding question of their husband.*

The William (Bill) Claassen name accompanies one fellow 10-01-1950 classmate. This is Paul Major, the 52nd killed, Jan 24 1965. Two of the 25 who became Policemen that Oct 1950 were slain serving Denver.

The 450 Denver Police Department Patrol Officers the night of Feb 2, 1953 were simply lucky they had not stood in Claassen's shoes. There was nothing Bill Claassen, or any other responder could have done differently that night to save his life. And with family the next day throughout the city each faced the same truth.

The mug shot of Claassen on the front page of the Denver Post and News could easily have been their Policeman. In quiet moments following, more than a few families considered merit vs risk; and a few women tearfully, reasonably, urging their Policeman to leave Police work immediately.

It is a tribute to those serving, none did.

Bill Claassen had served in WWII, joined the Navy Reserve later, serving at Buckley Naval Air Station on weekends in a VA (Fighter) Squadron. He had continued once a month week-end training at the time of death.

After joining the Police Department Bill Claassen and his wife bought a new house in east Denver. He had thoughtfully bought a home loan insurance policy. On his death, the substantial balance on the loan was paid for from that insurance.

An aside.

On being hired, and periodically, photographs are taken of each Policeman, used in an identification card carried when off-duty.

These pictures are taken by the same Crime Lab Photographers whose one duty is to take "mug shots" of all arrested.

Bill Claassen, like so many clear skin, dark hair, clear eyes, tended to be When in fact from his there is a hint of suspicion absolutely level lips, that



slender tall young men with handsome. photo available to the Press in the non-smiling eyes, Policemen are not that

different from those they arrest. Hmm.

Still, 61 years later, Bill stirs my soul when I view him, unemotionally looking into me.