Patrolman Aaron Charles Laubach | Hamilton Police Department



Age: 35
Served: 7¾ years
April 5, 1930 to January 27, 1938

OFFICER

Aaron was born about April 5, 1902, in Hamilton, Ohio, the second child born to Rudolph George “Rudy” and Louise Fredericka (Ranke) Laubach.

In 1900, Rudy was a bartender. By 1910, he was working as a traveling liquor salesman and his family of five were living at 1221 East Campbell Avenue. It was probably apparent that Prohibition was on its way. Regardless of the reason, by 1918, Rudy was working as a Butler County Deputy Sheriff. On May 1, 1920, he announced his candidacy for Sheriff as a Democrat. He

was elected and served as such through December 1924.

By 1920, Aaron was working as a mechanic in a car shop. On June 2, 1922, he and friend, Robert Karsh, set out in a flivver coupe (slang at the time for a small, inexpensive, and old car) on a long trip touring the western United States, including Colorado, Washington, and California. We have no evidence of his success or failure other than he was back in Hamilton in 1923 living at 123 Court Street. He worked as a mechanic until 1929 and lived with his family at 1841 Pleasant Avenue. He continued to live there after his father's death in 1928, with his mom and four younger brothers.

On January 25, 1930, Aaron took a Civil Service examination, along with 34 other men, for the position of Hamilton City Patrolman. He scored high enough to be appointed on April 5, 1930. His appointment was announced by Police Chief J. C. Calhoun on April 16, 1930. That night he was already making newspaper headlines for the apprehension of a fugitive. In the next seven years, his name would appear in newspapers 79 times, almost always for arrests.

On June 2, 1931, a truck loaded with $7000 of bonded whiskey (almost $175,000 in 2024 dollars) outran Cincinnati policemen in a running shootout, but was captured near LeSourdsville, along with its driver by Patrolman Laubach. The driver was turned over to federal authorities.

On September 24, 1932, 40 policemen graduated from the first Cincinnati Police School opened to all police officers within the Cincinnati Regional Police Association, which comprised of four counties in Ohio and two in Kentucky. Fourteen graduates were from the Hamilton Police Department, including Patrolmen Laubach, Arthur Sponsel, and Earl Grubb. Within five years, all three would be shot dead.

Patrolman Laubach, at 34, married Johnnie Marie Fowler, also of Hamilton, on December 25, 1936, in Davidson, Tennessee. In 1938, they were living at 918 Pleasant Street.

MURDERERS

John William Cline

Cline was born April 25, 1913 in Middletown, Ohio. In 1920, he and his family were living in West Middletown. In 1930, they were living in Madison, Ohio, and he was working in a grocery store.

Around 1932, he befriended Julius R. Naeglen who, at the time, was being sued by his wife, Lillian, for divorce and child support. On August 16, 1932, Naeglen drove up to his wife as she walked on the sidewalk, talked to her while she stood outside his car, then killed her with five shots to her chest and abdomen from a .38 caliber revolver. Somehow, Cline came into possession of the firearm and would later claim that he found it in a barn but admitted that he was very good friends of Naeglen. It was never discerned whether Cline assisted Naeglen in anyway, but if he did, he kept Naeglen’s location a secret until his death.

In July 1934, Cline married Wanda Francis. In 1937, they and their daughter were living in Middletown. By 1938, they were living in West Elkton, Preble County and he was sometimes working as a part time crane operator at the Rolling Mill Company in Middletown. Reportedly, he had never been caught violating any law.

Chester L. Francis, Jr.

Francis was born June 30, 1918 in Middletown. By 1930, his

family had moved to Gratis, Preble County. His sister, Wanda, married Cline in 1934. By 1935, he was married and in August his wife gave birth to a daughter. By 1938, he was an unemployed truck driver, estranged from his wife, and wanted on an outstanding warrant for nonsupport.

Cline and Francis, with little to no money coming in through honest work, in the very beginning of 1938, decided to take money from others, by deadly force if necessary. Together, they robbed three gas stations in the Hamilton area, including on January 15th, Pater's Gas Station at Grand Boulevard and East Avenue. Cline entered the gas stations, showed a semiautomatic pistol, and demanded cash. He then fled in a car with Francis driving. In the three robberies, they reaped about $250. $182 of that came from the Pater's robbery. So, on January 27, 1938, they decided to hit that station again.

INCIDENT

Because of three robberies, Patrolman Laubach was assigned to a plain clothes stake-out in Pater's Gas Station on January 27, 1938. Patrolman Laubach had just arrived at the station at about 7:15 p.m. and went to take up a surveillance position behind a stove when Cline entered immediately behind him. Cline almost certainly did not know that the man dressed in plain clothing was a police officer.

As he entered the filling station, he pulled a Savage .32 caliber pistol on the manager, Claude May, and Patrolman Laubach. He announced, "This is a stickup. I want the dough." After May gave him the contents of the register, Cline told him, "I want the cash under the counter." As Cline leaned down to get the cash, Laubach maneuvered for a better position and pulled

his service revolver. The robber yelled, “No you don’t!” and fired three rounds at Patrolman Laubach. Laubach returned two shots at Cline. All three rounds hit Patrolman Laubach in the chest, left arm, and head. May could not tell who fired first, but it is reasonable to assume that Cline shot first and Patrolman Laubach fired back until he was shot in the head.

Cline then took his cash in hand, about $50, and ran to his light-colored sedan, where Francis was waiting, and escaped toward Middletown. All totaled, Cline and Francis took $300 in the four robberies.

The two drove into Indiana, then to Eaton, Ohio where they met up with their wives and then the four hid out in West Elkton for a couple of weeks.

DEATH

Patrolman Laubach died within five minutes at 7:20 p.m. from shock and hemorrhage from bullet wounds of the skull and brain, chest and lungs, and left arm. He was the second Hamilton Patrolman killed in the line of duty within nine months.

Patrolman Laubach was survived by his wife of thirteen months, Johnnie Marie (Fowler) Laubach; mother, Louise Laubach; and siblings Theresa Laubach, Robert Laubach, John Laubach, Russel Laubach, and Jackie Laubach.

Services were held at 2:30 p.m. on Monday, January 31, 1938 at Elmer Proeschel funeral home. The pallbearers were all men who joined the Police Department with Patrolman Laubach: Patrolmen Reginald Stone, Crabill Regan, Chester Schick, Adrian Stricker, Hershell Seward, and Arthur Leibrach. Honorary pallbearers were Patrolmen William Blair, Ernest Dunivan, Paul Klingler, Charles

Nugent, George VanLieu, Levi Justice, Joseph Koons, and Allan Lindsay. Burial followed immediately at Greenwood Cemetery.

INVESTIGATION

Immediately after the shooting, Dayton Police were detailed to surveil Germantown Street, West Third Street, Broadway at the Miami River, and Patterson Boulevard due to the sighting of a vehicle traveling at a high rate of speed about 8:25 p.m.

In another direction, an Ohio State Highway Patrolman attempted a pull over a light-colored sedan that was speeding in the area of Springfield, Ohio. The driver, 17-year-old Francis Dillon of Dayton, took the trooper on a long, high-speed pursuit and wrecked the car near Donnelsville. The car was found to be stolen with a .38 caliber bullet hole in the body. Inside was found pistol ammunition and a bloodied bullet pouch. The youth escaped but left a trail of blood. Police Chief John C. Calhoun, Detective Sergeant Hershel Haines, and Clark County and Springfield officers converged on Donnelsville early on the 28th but the man whom they were looking for was not there. Two hours later, the suspect was traced to a cemetery. Several shots were fired, but he escaped under a bridge and was lost. Soon, however, he was captured and interrogated but cleared of the Laubach murder.

Also on the 28th, another possible suspect was seen boarding a truck headed toward Indiana from Springfield. A manhunt ensued with law enforcement officers in Indiana and Ohio participating, to no avail.

Finally, on the 28th, eight-year-old Billy Hunt went fishing, and as he walked along a creek in Wayne County near Richmond,

Indiana, found a Savage .32 caliber pistol on the bank under a bridge. He took the firearm home to his father, Charles Hunt, who called the Richmond Police Department. It was clear there was little concern that it was used in any crime as Charles Hunt still had the gun weeks later.

By Saturday, January 29th, the Hamilton Police investigators had run out of clues and leads. Rumors leading to Springfield, Dayton, and even a man killed on railroad tracks near Kenton Station, Kentucky, proved fruitless. The Butler County Commission convened in a rare Saturday session and authorized a $500 reward for information leading to the apprehension the murderer(s).

On Monday, January 31, 1938, three New York youths were caught with two revolvers in another stolen car in Aurora, Indiana. They were interrogated and exonerated of the murder.

By the next Friday, February 4, 1938, the rewards for apprehension of the killer had swelled to $915 (more than $20,000 in today's dollars). The Police Mutual Aid Society, of which Bertillon Sergeant Joseph C. McFall was President, held a special meeting and voted to offer a $300 reward. Robert H. Pater, manager of the service station at which Patrolman Laubach was killed, added $100. Oscar Miller, Dictator of the Loyal Order of the Moose, of which Sheriff Laubach was once Dictator, added $15.

Tommy Gray, apparent confidant of one or more of the Cline, Francis, and wives' group, tipped off the Dayton Police Department as to their identity and the fact that the two were going to rob a filling station in West Alexandria. On Saturday, February 19, 1938, two Dayton detectives and Hamilton Detectives Oscar Decker and Robert Dinwiddle staked out the filling station. Cline and Francis arrived, and Cline went inside. Both

were apprehended without incident. Cline had concealed on his person the revolver with which Julius Naeglen killed his wife.

Both admitted to their participation in the murder of Patrolman Laubuch and holdups of other filling stations. Cline admitted shooting Patrolman Laubach and Francis admitted driving the getaway car. Francis also asserted that when Cline got back into his car, he said, “I had to shoot a man.” Cline offered that the pistol used in the murder was disposed of in a creek near Richmond, Indiana, shortly after the slaying. There was no remorse whatsoever. Their confessions were anything but stressed, even jesting with reporters about it.

Detectives Oscar Decker and Robert Dinwiddle returned the pair to Hamilton. Police Chief J. C. Calhoun told the press that 1st Degree Murder charges would be filed.

When Charles Hunt found out on February 22, 1938, that the alleged slayers reported throwing the murder weapon off a bridge near Richmond, he immediately turned the pistol that Billy found over to the Richmond Police Department. The next afternoon, Richmond Chief of Detectives Ellis Ducket, along with Detectives Lucas Rohe and J. C. Vallandingham, transported the pistol to Hamilton, confident that the bullets would match. They also questioned the pair regarding some filling station robberies in Indiana, but there was no admission to those. Ballistics did match the gun to Patrolman Laubach’s murder.

JUSTICE

Butler County Prosecutor Paul A. Baden convened a special session of the Butler County Grand Jury on Wednesday, February 23, 1938. That afternoon they returned indictments First Degree Murder while perpetrating a Robbery for both. The statute

included a possible mandatory death sentence.

On Saturday, February 26, 1938, sans attorneys at their arraignment in front of Common Pleas Court Judge P. P. Boli, both pleaded “Not Guilty.” Judge Boli said that he would select attorneys for the men on Monday the 28th. On Wednesday, March 2nd, Judge Boli set a tentative trial date of March 21, 1938.

John William Cline

On the night of Tuesday, March 15, 1938, three alienists, T. A. Albert Ratliff, Walter Roehl, and M. F. Verecker, examined Cline as he prepared to pled insanity at his trial. They would later at his trial opine that he was sane.

On March 21, 1938, as scheduled, jury selection for Cline’s trial began in Judge Boli’s courtroom. Jury selection took about four hours and was finished at 3 p.m. Attorney’s Clinton Egbert and George Cummins pleaded Cline insane from the effects of a head injury when he was a child.

The prosecution presented its case within one day, resting on Wednesday morning, March 23, 1938. A subpoena for Tommy Gray, the tipster in Dayton, was issued, but he eluded the processers and was not on hand to testify.

As the defense prepared to present its case, Judge Boli had to first rule on his sanity. Ten of Cline’s associates, including his father, testified that he was insane. The judge declared him sane. Shortly after noon on Friday the 25th, the case was in the hands of the jury. The jury returned that evening after deliberating 6½ hours at 9:07 p.m. with a Guilty verdict, without mercy.

His attorneys immediately made a motion for a new trial. After appeals, all the way to the Governor, and subsequent rejections,

Cline was executed on February 1, 1939, little more than a year after murdering Patrolman Laubach. He approached the chair like he was taking a stroll in the park – no remorse. He was electrocuted and pronounced dead at 8:09 p.m.

Chester L. Francis, Jr.

Prior to the trial date, in a surprise move, Francis pleaded guilty before Judge Boli on March 18, 1938. In accordance with statutes at the time, Judge Boli immediately petitioned the Ohio Supreme Court to name a three-judge panel to hear testimony and decide on sentencing. Without extenuating circumstances, Francis would be sentenced to death.

In his hearing on March 29th, after a full day of testimony, the three-judge panel, Judges Boli, M. O. Burns, and Hugh Gilmore, sentenced him to Life Imprisonment.

On April 11, 1963, Governor James A. Rhodes commuted his sentence. He went free after serving 25 years. In answering reporters' questions, he had obvious feelings about being confined for 25 years and getting back to his life as a truck driver – but none for the widow or family of Patrolman Laubach.

EPILOGUE

Marie Laubach never remarried and died 46 years later, on January 23, 1984. She is buried with her husband.

Chester Francis, the man who helped make her a 46-year widow, outlived her. After prison, he went back to driving trucks and was hired by and retired from the Moraine Material Company. He remarried and his second wife bore him a son. He died of cancer on August 31, 1984, in West Alexandria, Ohio and his obituary

lists survivors as his wife, son, mother, siblings, 21 grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren.

Julius Naeglen was never found and prosecuted for the murder of his wife, Lillian.

If you know of any information, archives, artifacts, or images regarding this officer or incident, please contact the Greater Cincinnati Police Museum at Memorial@Police-Museum.org.

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