Patrolman Walter Lester Commins | Wyoming Police Department



Age: 40
Served: 2 years
September 16, 1928 to September 16, 1930

OFFICER

Walter was born January 8, 1890 in Akron, Ohio, the oldest of three children born to William Hoover and Anna Elizabeth (Hugill) Commins. Sometime between then and 1896, William moved his family of three to Carthage. Soon there were five. Walter's mother died when he was fifteen years old on August 8, 1905. His father later married Jennie Frank.

On July 16, 1910, while living in Elmwood Place and working as an auto assembler, Walter married Louise Gajus of St. Bernard.

By 1917, they were living with two sons in Carthage and he was working as an inspector at Hess Spring and Axle.

On September 16, 1928, Walter joined the Village of Wyoming Police Department. Two years later, he and his family, now five, were living at 206 Crescent Avenue in Wyoming.

INCIDENT

On his second anniversary on the Department, September 16, 1930, shortly after 9 p.m., Patrolman Commins was doing his rounds. He saw a suspicious Oldsmobile touring car, with a driver in it, parked in front of 121 Elm Street; the residence of Luther L. Doty. At the time, he was conversing with Lida White, a servant at the Blackburn home, which adjoined the Doty home, and advised her that he was going to check out the car.

As he approached the car, the driver blew his horn. Another man came running from across the street, drew a revolver, and pointed it at the officer. Patrolman Commins grabbed the barrel. Miss White heard the man yell, “Let loose of that gun or I’ll kill you.” She then ran into the Blackburn home to telephone for help.

As the two men grappled for the gun, it fired twice. The first bullet went into Patrolman Commins’s groin. The next went into his chest. The man ran to the car and got in and the driver drove off, turning left on Allen Avenue.

Patrolman Commins drew his pistol and fired six shots into the car as it drove away. Henry Castleberry, a butler employed at the Doty residence, came out with another revolver and also fired at the car. Patrolman Commins then walked over to the sidewalk and slowly sank down onto the curb.

Mayor Frank S. Bonham was only blocks away and heard the shots. He came running and was the first Wyoming official on the scene. Patrolman Commins gasped out the story of what had happened, thinking that he had interrupted two burglars. Patrolman James McDonough received Miss White's phone call and also responded. A private ambulance transported Patrolman Commins to General Hospital in Cincinnati.

DEATH

Two hours later, Patrolman Commins died of shock and hemorrhage from the gunshot wound to the chest.

He was survived by his wife of 20 years, Louise (Gajus) Commins and three children, Roy Commins (18), Lester J. Commins (16), and Verna Mae Commins (13). His funeral was held at the Hodapp Funeral Home, 7401 Vine Street on September 19, 1930 and was one of the largest-attended events in Wyoming history. Patrolman Commins was buried on September 19, 1930, in Vine Street Hill Cemetery.

INVESTIGATION

Sheriff William M. Anderson had all of his deputies looking for the murderers the next day. They and some Cincinnati officers were looking for the suspects and/or the touring car.

The Wyoming City Council almost immediately authorized a $2000 reward for information leading to the arrest of the murderers.

On September 19, 1930 Cincinnati Police arrested a suspect, Thomas White (22), and turned him over the Wyoming Police, but he was never charged.

The touring car was found “full of holes” the following day in Hamilton, Ohio. Apparently, the car was stolen because there is no indication that a suspect was developed from it. The case was extensively investigated by the Hamilton County Sheriff’s Office and Cincinnati Police Division.

No one was ever charged in the murder.

POSSIBLE SUSPECT

It is difficult to assert with any certainty the origins of William A. Brown. He certainly lied about parts of his life history. Our best guess is that he was born during 1911 in Illinois and that he was in an orphanage in Lincoln by 1920. It is possible that he was in Chicago during the 1930 Census.

On February 3, 1931, Brown shot and killed Rushville, Indiana Patrolman Walter “Big Tim” Garrison when Patrolman Garrison and the Rushville Chief investigated a car stuck in the mud – which later turned out to be stolen. For a few hours, Brown escaped, but a citizen posse formed, found, and captured the murderer. Brown admitted killing the patrolman and to numerous armed robberies between West Virginia and Indianapolis. He also admitted to trading shots with an Indianapolis Patrolman.

Brown was brought to Cincinnati for questioning in the murder of Patrolman Commins. He confessed to holding up 39 chain stores in the Cincinnati vicinity during October, November, and December and to firing shots at Cincinnati Patrolman Clarence Guy on November 12, 1930 after one of the holdups. He also told Cincinnati Detective Sergeant John Cameron and Detective Lee Flaugher that his real name was McLaughlin and that he was a Cincinnati resident. He did not admit to killing Commins nor to killing an Indiana grocer a few weeks prior to his arrest.

Brown's method of operation – steal a car, rob an establishment, and shoot it out with police if caught – seems to match what occurred in Wyoming, but he was never charged. He pleaded guilty to killing Rushville Patrolman Garrison and was sentenced to life in prison. He died as the oldest prisoner in Indiana during 1994.

EPILOGUE

The citizens of Wyoming raised enough money to pay off the house for Louise Commins and her children.

Both of his sons would later join the Wyoming Police Department. Lester made a career of it, retiring as a Sergeant. Louise died 32 years after the Murder during December 1962 and was buried next to Walter.

Coincidentally, two law enforcement officials were killed in Wyoming; both lived on Crescent Avenue and no suspect was identified in either killing.

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

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