

# Police Officer William J. Loftin | Cincinnati Police Division

50 YEARS AGO



Badge: P465

Age: 36

Served: Almost 9 years

September 25, 1966, to August 26, 1975

“If I should die in the line of duty, I’ll die happy.”

**OFFICER**

Bill was born August 6, 1939 in Newnan, Georgia to Paul and Nellie (Maddox) Loftin. He wanted to be a policeman since he was 7 years old. His mother had always been against the idea. She said, he was always a sweet boy ... and had a deep concern for the welfare of others and was constantly helping people." Paul, Nellie, and Bill's sister, Dianne, moved to Cincinnati in 1955. Bill stayed in Newnan with his grandmother, Mrs. Sallie Maddox, in order to finish attending Central High School. He graduated in 1957, moved to Cincinnati, and attended the University of Cincinnati for two years.

Bill entered the United States Army on October 26, 1960 and served in the Artillery as a Rocket Missile Gunner. He was honorably discharged in 1962 as a Sergeant (E-5).

When he came out of the military and renewed his interest in law enforcement, that rekindled Nellie's fears regarding the dangers of the job. He told her, "Mom, this is just what I want to be. It's right for me ... If I should die in the line of duty, I'll die happy."

Bill joined the Cincinnati Police Division in its 47th Recruit Class on September 25, 1966. He was promoted to Patrolman on December 27, 1966, issued Badge 465, and assigned to District 5 (1012 Ludlow Avenue). On April 16, 1967, he was rotated to District 7 (813 Beecher Street). Patrolman Loftin was rotated again, this time to District 1 (310 Lincoln Park Drive), on January 7, 1968. According to the District 1 Commander, Captain Howard Espelage, he was "a dedicated and dependable worker."

Officer Loftin was transferred to the Regional Enforcement Narcotics Unit on June 18, 1972. By 1974, his supervisor, Sergeant Paul E. Guthrie, described him as "one of the most capable, dependable, loyal, and fearless officers I have had the pleasure to work with." On February 10, 1974, he was assigned

to the Vice Control Section where he earned extremely high efficiency ratings of 91% to 96% and took off so seldom that he had more than 1200 hours (7 months) of unused time on the books. He had, by then, received twelve letters of appreciation and/or commendation in his 8+ years of service, including four from the Police Chief. Another commendation, this one for a failed attempt to revive a child who had drowned in a pool, was sitting on the Chief's desk awaiting his signature.

Officer Loftin also worked security where he lived at the Valley Vista Apartments in College Hil. A religious man, he read from a worn and slightly tattered Bible every day. He was engaged to be married to Janet Walker.

Shortly after 8 p.m. on August 26, 1975 at Criminal Investigation Section, Homicide Detectives ribbed Officer Loftin about his arrest of three naked swimmers that had hit the newspaper the day before. Always affable, Officer Loftin took the kidding as intended and walked away laughing. Little did anyone know that a few hours later, the Homicide Detectives would be investigating his murder.

## **MURDERER**

Cleophus Collins was born May 15, 1923, the fifth child born to Alabama farmers, Peter and Sarah Collins. By 1940, he was married with a daughter and living with his family. By 1950, he was working as a truck washer in Chicago. He eventually moved to Cincinnati and by 1975 had a wife and five children. While in Cincinnati, he had been arrested several times, including for offenses involving weapons and "Shooting with Intent to Kill." Apparently, he was never convicted, because he was able to legally purchase a foreign-made snub-nosed .38 caliber revolver from a Norwood, Ohio gun shop.

## **INCIDENT**

On Tuesday, August 26, 1975 Officers Loftin and Claude Dell, were working undercover, investigating recurring complaints of liquor, drug, and prostitution activity in the area of the Clock Bar at 3450 Burnet Avenue. In the previous eight months, there had been 25 arrests for drugs and/or weapons in the bar, and 636 bags of heroin were confiscated. Eleven more arrests were made in the area with another 39 bags of heroin seized. Two firearms were also seized in the bar. Six hours earlier in the evening, a 21-year-old Cincinnati man was shot in front of a service station in the same block. It was a dangerous area.

About 10:45 p.m., Cleophus Collins entered the bar and told the bartender that he wanted a gun and that he was going to shoot a cop. None was given to him. He walked back out of the bar, to his car, and retrieved something from it, almost certainly his .38 caliber snub-nosed revolver. He then walked back into the bar, then out again.

Minutes later, in front of the Burnet Fruit Market in the same block, a citizen approached Officers Loftin and Dell as they sat in their undercover vehicle and pointed at Collins, who was close to the car, and advised them that he had a gun. Collins then pulled his revolver and fired a shot in the air. Officer Loftin knew Collins from past dealings and thought their relationship was such that he could talk him down without bloodshed.

There is no indication that Collins had seen the officers yet and he shot another round into the air. The officers, from a few feet away, yelled, "Police Officers! Drop the gun!" Collins wheeled and shot Officer Loftin in the chest and abdomen at point blank range, completely severing his aorta and damaging

his lung, liver, diaphragm, stomach, and spleen. Both officers returned fire – Loftin four shots with his division-issued .38 caliber revolver and Dell six shots with his personally owned .357 Magnum. Collins was struck in his hand and in his abdomen.

Specialist Dell chased Collins to his car. Collins gave his empty revolver to his sister, Leola Blackman, who was standing near his car, and then drove away. Specialist Dell radioed a description of the auto and that it headed south on Melish Avenue.

Concurrently, Officer Loftin crawled back to his car and called over his police radio for assistance, "I'm shot! I'm shot!" Before collapsing, he gave a description of his assailant. Within 30 seconds, Officer Loftin was unconscious from the injury to his aorta.

Officer Loftin was transported to General Hospital. A supervisor initiated an attempt to locate his mother and bring her to the hospital.

District 7 Officers William Robb and Jeffrey Payton located Collins traveling south on Melish Avenue and pulled his car over. They found Collins unarmed and wounded. They took him to General Hospital where he was initially listed in serious condition.

Blackman called her mother and told her to call her nephew, Claude Sorrells, to get Collins's revolver and to get rid of it. Sorrells met Blackman at General Hospital, took the revolver, and after ejecting the empty shells, threw it in a wooded area behind a "tot lot" near Haven Street.

Officer Loftin's revolver was left at the scene. A police confidential and reliable informant, known as William "Red," who had been meeting with the officers, picked up his revolver and

took it to General Hospital where he turned it over to Detective Albert Williamson.

## **DEATH**

Somehow, the news media found the name of the wounded officer and broadcast the shooting. A friend of the Loftin family called Mrs. Loftin and told her. Mrs. Loftin called Police Communications, and she was told that an officer was on the way to take her to the hospital. She rejected the offer and drove herself. When she arrived at the hospital, she looked up at the officer who was escorting her in and asked, "Is my son dead?" The officer quietly replied, "Yes," and she collapsed, sobbing on the floor. She was taken to the Emergency Room for treatment.

Officer Loftin, at the age of 36, had died at 11:15 p.m. on August 26, 1975 becoming the third officer gunned down in little more than a year and the fourth in less than four years.

Officer Loftin was survived by his parents, Paul and Nellie (Maddox) Loftin; grandmother, Sally Maddox; sister, Dianne Loftin; and fiancée, Janet Walker.

A visitation and FOP services were held from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. on the night of August 29, 1975 at the First Baptist Church at 6210 Betts Avenue in West College Hill. On August 30, 1975, at 9:45 a.m., 175 police cars, 66 from out of town from as far away as 200 miles, formed a procession at Cincinnati Police Headquarters. They drove to the church and officers attended the 11:00 a.m. funeral service. From there, they escorted Officer Loftin to his grave in Spring Grove Cemetery. Police Officers James Simon, Lawrence Handorf, David Steinwert, James McCain, Marvin Johnson, and Arthur Manigan served as pallbearers. Police Chief Carl V. Goodin and the five assistant chiefs served as

honorary pallbearers. Chief Goodin presented the triangle-folded American flag to Mrs. Loftin.

## **INVESTIGATION**

The "all hands" investigation began immediately after the shooting. William "Red" was interviewed. Very quickly, detectives identified and located Blackman and interrogated her regarding her tampering with evidence and possible complicity after the fact. By 6:30 a.m. the next morning, August 27, 1975, she assisted Detective Thomas Gardner in locating the murder weapon and the ejected shells nearby. These were transferred to the Crime Lab to match the bullets in Officer Loftin's body.

## **JUSTICE**

Sergeant Paul Morgan, Acting Homicide Squad Commander, on August 27th, announced that Collins was charged with Aggravated Murder with a 'police officer' specification and that Hamilton County Prosecutor Simon L. Leis intended to take the case directly to the grand jury.

But that night, Collins's condition took a downturn. He was listed as being in critical and reported to be near death.

Two days later, on August 29, 1975, the Hamilton County Grand Jury indicted Collins on charges of Aggravated Murder and Attempt Aggravated Murder, both with Police Officer specifications. By statute, conviction for the Aggravated Murder charge would result in a sentence of death. The cases were "rolled" to Judge William A. McClain.

Collins remained in critical condition until September 1, 1975

when he was listed in serious condition. The next day, on September 2nd, Judge McClain appointed noted attorney Bernard J. Gilday, Jr. and John West to defend Collins. His condition was upgraded again to fair condition on September 17th. More than a month after the murder, Collins was released from the hospital on September 29th and taken to the Hamilton County Jail and held there without bond.

On October 1, 1975, Collins pleaded Not Guilty at his arraignment. Bond was set for \$400,000 which is more than \$2 million in 2025 dollars. Judge McClain set a trial date on November 24, 1975.

On November 7, 1975, the Jury Commission began the process of empaneling a jury by notifying 75 citizens to appear on the 24th. During testimony on December 1, 1975, Leola Blackman testified that she did not hear the officers announce themselves as police officers, while three other witnesses who frequented the Clock Bar testified that they did. Blackman and Sorrells did testify to their tampering with the firearm, linking it to Collins.

On December 4, 1975, Collins took the stand in his own defense. He testified that the undercover officers were not dressed like policemen and that he thought they were coming to rip him off. He said that he last shot the weapon on July 4th and did not fire the weapon into the air that evening, nor did he try to draw the officers into an ambush.

The jury was given the case at about noon on December 5, 1975, and after ten hours they were sequestered at 10 p.m. They returned to the courthouse at 8:25 a.m. the next morning, and at 11 a.m., after a total of almost 12½ hours, came to the courtroom with a Guilty verdict.

On February 18, 1976, after a long hearing during which

attorneys Gilday and West brought in two psychiatrists to testify regarding Collins's sanity, Judge McClain found no evidence to circumvent the mandatory penalty and sentenced Collins to die in the electric chair on June 6, 1976. Gilday and West agreed to represent Collins in an appeal.

On March 16, 1977, a three-judge appellate court remanded the case back to the Court of Common Pleas because Judge McClain had not instructed the jury with regard to self-defense. On June 24, 1977, after meeting with attorneys Gilday and West, one of the prosecution witnesses slightly changed her story. However, William "Red," who had been talking to the two detectives when Collins fired his revolver into the air, testified with great detail the sequence of events. Other manipulations were attempted by the defense, but the jury, in slightly less time than the first jury, on June 29th, came back with the same verdict. On September 22, 1977, Collins was again sentenced to death.

On July 3, 1978, seven justices of the United States Supreme Court struck down Ohio's Death Penalty because it did not, in their opinion, allow sufficient evidence to be introduced into the hearing with regard to the mandatory sentence of death in Aggravated Murder cases. Even though attorneys Gilday and West were not restricted in entering such evidence at the two death penalty hearings, Collins's sentence was commuted to Life Imprisonment. Ohio did not have a Life Imprisonment Without Possibility of Parole option at the time, so Collins was given the possibility of parole.

Collins came up for parole several times, including in 1988, 1990, and 1995 and a few times thereafter. Each time, numerous citizens wrote letters to the parole board, and he was never released. Shortly after another failed parole hearing, Collins died of natural causes on August 18, 2007 at the age of 84 and

was cremated.

## **EPILOGUE**

On November 13, 1975, ten weeks after Officer Loftin's murder, the Clock Bar closed.

After the murderous deaths in the previous 35 months of Detective [Howard Smith](#), Patrolman [David Cole](#), Sergeant [Charles Handorf](#), and now Police Officer William Loftin, the first politician to express concern, about 18 hours after his death, was Mayor Theodore M. Berry. It was not a concern for Officer Loftin, his family, nor his Police Department. It was another in a series of attacks on gun-owner rights. City Manager William Donaldson expressed a desire for more infringing gun laws and opined that "[Collins] simply had too much to drink" and "if he had not been able to buy a handgun, all we might have had were "a couple of bloody noses." Even Police Chief Carl V. Goodin concerned himself with this trivial matter expressing the idea that there should be a mandatory sentence for carrying firearms concealed. Soon after the funeral, Steven Reece, Berry's assistant, and City Council candidate, continued the chant asking the City Manager to convene a community-wide program to battle crime and "tell us what additional laws we need." On September 9, 1975 Councilman Charles P. Taft called for a registration of firearms owners. Councilman Mann called for mandatory sentencing of anyone using or carrying a firearm.

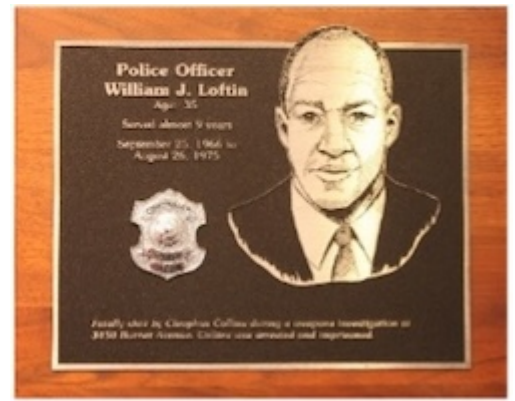
Rank and file, however, were concerned with the recent deaths and they took action that forever changed the tactical responses of law enforcement officers in the country. Training Section Sergeant Eugene Ferrara and others designed and established a Police Officer Survival training program, and it soon received national attention. One aspect, the move to include shooting

from within arm's reach in firearms training, was groundbreaking in the mid-1970s. It is now common in almost all law enforcement officer firearms training across the country and is required training for all Ohio law enforcement officers for Ohio Peace Officer Training Council certification. The Division's Police Officer Survival program was used as a model for the national Street Survival Program.

Conversely, City Council continued their apathy. On October 2, 1976, they laid off 54 Police Cadets, widely seen as the cream of the crop of future police officers. The next day, they promoted the remaining 42 Police Cadets to Police Officer, and on October 4th laid them off, terminating the nationally renowned Police Cadet program. In November 1976, Council discontinued funding intra- and inter-department shooting competition and stopped providing ammunition to officers to practice their shooting skills while off duty. On December 6, 1976, they laid off another 94 Police Officers. In April 1977, they closed the Target Range, effectively eliminating all off-duty practice unless officers joined private ranges at their own expense. It would take the shooting deaths of three more officers before Council would hire back, on April 1, 1979, the last of 124 officers that they laid off. No new officers were hired before 1980, and the Target Range was not reopened until 1982. The Cadet Program, as it was in 1976, and pistol competition were never reestablished.

Paul Loftin died on May 27, 1983, having never seen his son's killer fully pay for his crime.

During 1995, Cincinnati Police Captain Christopher M. Robertson, Training Section Commander, Lieutenant Stephen R. Kramer, Assistant Planning Section Commander, and Sergeant Thomas Waller, Recruiting Unit, noted a 1950 Cincinnati ordinance calling for the retirement of badges of officers who died in the line of duty and petitioned Police Chief Michael C. Snowden to retire Badge 465, which he did. At the same time, they requisitioned plaques for all Cincinnati officers who died in the line of duty after 1950 and erected a memorial at the Cincinnati Police Academy.



Officer Loftin's mother, Nellie Loftin, died on October 25, 1996. In 1977, she informed an Enquirer reporter that she did not favor the death penalty for her son's murderer, that she was a Christian who believed in not returning evil for evil. She did, however, hope that Collins stayed in prison for the rest of his life. While she did not live to see it, both wishes were granted.

In 2009, Police Officer Loftin's badge and identification card were donated to the Greater Cincinnati Police Museum and are on display there as part of their Memorial Wall.

On June 20, 2018, 43 years after his death, Cincinnati City Council added an honorary street sign at Clay and Fourteenth Street, "William J. Loftin Way." Officer Loftin's sister, Dianne, was involved in the ceremonies.

If you have information, artifacts, archives, or images regarding this officer or incident, please contact the Greater Cincinnati Police Museum at [Memorial@Police-Museum.org](mailto:Memorial@Police-Museum.org).

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