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Chaplain honored by Police Department



Only they won't be called that anymore.

"For all of his countless and many times thankless hours of true heroism, the Placerville Police Department Officer of the Year award from this time forward will be known as the "Tim Thompson Beyond the Call of Duty Award," Nielsen told the crowd, which burst into applause and stood to give an ovation.

Thompson later told the Democrat he was "shocked" by the fact that he was chosen for such an honor.

"I was speechless," Thompson said, perhaps forgetting the fact that he was profuse in his appreciation after receiving the honor.

"A reserve officer never gets that honor, and a chaplain Never."

Thompson is too modest, those who know him and his work would agree.

When someone dies or suffers other tragedy, who wants to be the person who breaks the news to the family Thompson never hesitates to step up, as Chief Nielsen pointed out.

"In recent years El Dorado County law enforcement has experienced several tragic and unforeseen incidents that have resulted in personal and family hardships, emotional turmoil and sadly the loss of life - both within the community and within the law enforcement family," Nielsen began.

"In law enforcement we're expected to be strong, we're expected to help, not ask for help. Thankfully, in El Dorado County we have one of our own available 24/7 - He is one we can trust and one who truly understands," said Nielsen.

Thompson has been a police chaplain since 1985, beginning that stretch of his career in Sacramento. He came to El Dorado County in 1993, where he serves the Placerville Police Department, El Dorado County Sheriff's Department, the California Highway Patrol local office, Folsom Police Department, El Dorado County Jail and Marshall Hospital.

How does one person who deals with so much death and tragedy not become at least jaded, and even depressed, in that line of work

"Faith," Thompson said simply.

He found that faith during the war in Vietnam, where he served in combat. Thompson said there definitely is truth to the old saying that "you never find an atheist in a foxhole."

"A lot of guys tell me they lost their soul in Vietnam. I found mine there," said Thompson, who leads the Sierra Law Enforcement Chaplaincy, a non-profit group. Thompson is the only sworn peace officer among the dozen chaplains there, however.

Thompson became a sworn officer because "if I'm going to minister to (law enforcement officers) I gotta know what they do."

Thompson at least once a week goes on a ride-along with peace officers, people he said he greatly admires.

"There isn't another group of people I'd rather be working with," he said. "These are people who put on a uniform and are protecting our freedoms. They are told to 'suck it up' when things go badly, and that comes back to bite them.

When police Chaplain Tim Thompson heard his name being announced as the recipient of this year's Officer of the Year by Placerville Police Chief George Nielsen, Thompson said he thought the chief was joking.

"I saw two plaques up there and I thought, there must be a tie between (two other PD officers)," Thompson, 62, told the Mountain Democrat.

But the reason there were two plaques instead of one became clear as the evening at the El Dorado County Veterans Building unfolded last week. Not only was Thompson given a plaque for being Officer of the Year, but Nielsen explained to the packed crowd of law enforcement families and members of the American Legion, sponsors of the annual appreciation dinner, that a perpetual plaque from now on will carry the names of the Officer of the Year.

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Thompson pointed out that nationally, some 100 peace officers are killed in the line of duty. But some 500 of them end up committing suicide.

The suicide Dec. 9, 2008, of local sheriff's deputy Melissa Meekma saddened Thompson beyond words, he said. He had met with the young deputy "at least once a week" following an incident in 2007 in which she, along with two fellow officers, was wounded. Meekma suffered depression and Thompson tried to help her. He eventually would find himself conducting her funeral service.

Thompson manages to roll with the punches, however, and he said the fact that he is married to a psychotherapist helps. He and Barbara have been married for 37 years.

Thompson, who also was an Army chaplain who has seen active duty in operations Desert Shield, Desert Storm and the Global War on Terrorism, said the worst part of his job is seeing those he is trying to help, in pain.

"Seeing the terror of officers when they have been exposed to what I call 'peacetime combat,' that's the worst," he said. " They are putting their lives on the line to protect us.

"At times like that, I tell them, 'There's no bullet proof vest or body armor to protect the soul.'"

Those wishing to help out the Sierra Law Enforcement Chaplaincy may send donations to PO Box 1979, Placerville 95667.

E-mail Pat Lakey at plakey@mtdemocrat.net or call (530) 344-5066.

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