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Officer dies in flaming car crushed in High Five area 'I can't believe he's dead, because he was such a good guy'

Dallas police: Drunken driver was speeding through work zone

By **ROBERT THARP, TONY HARTZEL** Staff Writers
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An off-duty Dallas police officer working traffic control in an overnight freeway construction zone died in his flaming patrol car early Wednesday after being struck by what police called a speeding drunken driver.

Officer Patrick Metzler, 31, was at the wheel of a police cruiser that was slammed into from behind just after 1 a.m. in the closed right lane in the High Five construction area where Central Expressway intersects with LBJ Freeway.

Officer Metzler, an eight-year veteran, died of smoke inhalation and burns, the Dallas County medical examiner said, after the back half of his car was crushed and the vehicle exploded in flames on the expressway's right shoulder. Some of his colleagues from a gang unit witnessed the crash but were powerless to save the officer, police said.

The fatality raised questions as to whether two other factors contributed to the officer's death - lane-closing procedures used at overnight freeway construction sites and the gas tank on the Ford **Crown Victoria** squad car, a popular law enforcement model criticized as prone to catch fire in high-speed, rear-end crashes.

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Jeffrey Goddard, 23, the driver of a 1994 Jeep Wrangler that hit the officer's vehicle, was arrested for investigation of intoxication manslaughter and remained hospitalized Wednesday for treatment of a broken hip.

A test showed that Mr. Goddard's blood-alcohol level was more than three times the legal limit of 0.08 percent, police commanders said.

Mr. Goddard, who was released from state prison seven months ago after serving a one-year sentence for possession of a controlled substance, was under police guard at the hospital.

A passenger in the Jeep wasn't seriously injured, won't face criminal charges and has not been publicly identified. The passenger told police that the two had been drinking at an Old East Dallas bar.

Witnesses said Mr. Goddard was speeding on northbound Central and weaving across lanes as he approached the construction site just north of the Forest Lane exit.

He may have been racing a motorcycle that passed the construction site and did not stop after the accident, witnesses told police.

Police Chief Terrell Bolton said it appeared the Jeep's speed and the driver's impaired condition overwhelmed any other factors.

Before the medical examiner's finding Wednesday afternoon that Officer Metzler survived the initial impact, Chief Bolton said that the fire appeared secondary because the police car was "crushed like an accordion."

Wednesday's crash happened as construction crews worked to reopen a lane that had been closed for several hours to install new pavement markings on Central Expressway.

Crews had picked up traffic cones blocking the right lane, driving in reverse to where the closure began. A truck was preparing to tow away a lighted-arrow board that marked the lane closure. Three police cars accompanied the construction workers.

With his roof-mounted lights flashing, Officer Metzler was in the first vehicle in front of the truck, but it was unclear Wednesday how close he was to the truck, whether all the cones had been picked up and whether the officer was backing up when he was hit.

Police said the speeding red Jeep swerved around the sign truck and into the path of the patrol car.

Some of Officer Metzler's partners, who were also working off

duty at the construction site, saw the flames engulf the car.

The officers are part of a small, tight-knit police gang unit. Deputy Chief Alfredo Saldana, who oversees the unit and the youth division, said Officer Metzler was a hard worker who quickly made himself useful after joining the team about 18 months ago.

"He had a reputation for being very friendly," Chief Saldana said. "He was liked by everyone in the division. He didn't have much time in the gang unit, but he had a knack for it."

His former patrol partner, Officer Esteban Montenegro, said the 6-foot, 220-pound Metzler had imposing brawn but a kind heart. "He was hardworking and loyal to his friends," Officer Montenegro said. "I can't believe he's dead, because he was such a good guy."

Officer Metzler enjoyed taking fishing trips with friends, as well as gambling trips to Las Vegas, Officer Montenegro said.

Officer Metzler, who lived in the Deep Ellum area of Dallas, is survived by his parents and three siblings. His father is a retired military officer, and a brother is a police officer in Colorado.

As North Texas roads become more congested, the Texas Department of Transportation and highway construction contractors have shifted more of their work to overnight hours. On Tuesday, for example, the High Five project was one of six with overnight work.

Motorists have come to expect work at night, said department spokesman Mark Ball.

Road work by floodlight began about 10 years ago in North Texas when crews rebuilt Interstate 30 near Fair Park.

"If we do work at night, we impose on fewer people," Mr. Ball said.

The state has encouraged nighttime construction on the High Five with monetary penalties for daytime work.

A nighttime single-lane closure costs \$50 an hour; the fee leaps to \$22,500 an hour during peak commute times. The incentives are based partly on estimates of workers' lost productivity while sitting in traffic.

"We work at night to relieve some aggravation during the day to motorists," said Vicky Waddy, a spokeswoman for H.B. Zachry Corp. of San Antonio, which has the contract to build the \$260 million High Five interchange.

On Oct. 17, an officer in his car was struck from behind on LBJ

Freeway while working at night at the same construction site.

"A lot of people think that nights are more dangerous, but we have a lot of incidents during the day," said Pete Garza, the state's High Five project manager.

The contractor plans to review its safety procedures, and may halt night work until next week to help its shaken employees, Ms. Waddy said.

Work crews prefer to have off-duty officers with them overnight as an extra layer of security, Mr. Garza said. Police cars typically park near closed freeway ramps and can quickly pursue motorists who drive past barriers and into closed lanes.

This was the first traffic-related death of a Dallas officer in more than two years. Senior Cpl. Harold Baird Jr. died in August 2000 after a vehicle hit his speeding squad car and it crashed into a utility pole.

Of the 30 officers who have died in the line of duty in Dallas since 1980, 14 have been killed in traffic-related incidents.

Staff writer Mark Wrolstad contributed to this report.

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PATRICK METZLER

Age: 31

Time with Dallas police: Eight years

Assignment: Gang unit

Awards: 44 internal and external commendations, including awards for leadership and initiative, investigations and outstanding efforts

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