

LOOSE SEMI WHEELS POSE HIGHWAY DANGER

Officer was 6th U.S. fatality in '07 from dislodged tires



KELLY WILKINSON / The Star

FAMILY MOURNS: Debbie Elliott (left), sister of Shelbyville police officer Gary Henderson, and other family members placed flowers on his patrol car outside the Shelby County Criminal Justice Center on Thursday. Henderson was killed while on duty.

Shelbyville sergeant was a 'well-liked cop'



By Meagan Ingerson
meagan.ingerson@indystar.com
SHELBYVILLE, Ind. —

Sgt. Gary Henderson was the first police officer to die in the line of duty here, a loss so stunning that even a man he once arrested turned out to mourn Thursday.

Shelbyville police officer Gary Henderson, who was killed in a freak accident on I-74, had been on the force for 29 years. He held nearly every position in the department, his chief recalled. Henderson, 51, leaves a wife and son.

Henderson was a "well-liked cop," said Ronald Leclercq, a Shelbyville resident arrested by Henderson on a misdemeanor charge.

"He was very nice to me, very respectful," Leclercq said. "It was his job, and he was just doing what he had to. He was a good guy."

Leclercq knelt before a squad-car-turned-memorial outside the Police Department on Thursday, then made the sign of the cross before

See Well-liked, Page A11

TRUCK ACCIDENTS

In a study of semitrailer truck crashes that killed or hurt at least one person from 2001 to 2003, federal researchers found:

87 percent resulted from driver mistakes, including driving while fatigued or taking prescription drugs, driving too fast or being unfamiliar with the road.

10 percent resulted from mechanical problems such as brake failure, cargo shifting or loss of a wheel.

2 percent resulted from road and weather conditions, slightly less than from alcohol and illegal drug use.

Source: Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration



WHEELS GOT LOOSE: The tires came off this semi Wednesday, striking and killing Shelbyville Police Sgt. Gary Henderson.

Officials don't know what caused wheels to separate

By Meagan Ingerson
meagan.ingerson@indystar.com

Shelbyville Police Sgt. Gary Henderson was at least the sixth person to be killed on the nation's highways this year by wheels broken loose from semitrailer trucks.

Investigators haven't determined what caused a double wheel to separate from the rear of a passing semi Wednesday night, but the hurtling debris struck Henderson with enough force to kill him instantly as he worked on the shoulder of I-74. He had been helping another officer on a traffic stop.

◆ **I-70 traffic:** Four states study truck-only lanes. **A10**

In March, a loose wheel struck a van full of college students heading to Florida for spring break, killing two. In May, a wheel hit and killed a driver in Seattle. A New Jersey transportation worker died in June as he mowed grass beside a highway. And in July, a woman driving home from work in Austin, Texas, died when a wheel hit her car.

"Is it something that doesn't happen? No, we've seen it before," 1st Sgt. David Bursten of the Indiana State Police said. "What's unusual were the circumstances. Everyone had to be in the wrong place at the wrong time to result in a death."

Wednesday night, the wheels broke free from the rear passenger side of a truck driven by Michal Prerovsky, Berwyn, Ill. Prerovsky was passing the officers in the left lane.

See Wheels, Page A10

“There were no skid marks. He (semi driver) didn’t even realize the wheels had dislodged.”

Shelbyville Police Chief Bill Elliott

Wheels

◆ Illinois-based truck driver was cooperating with the police.

From A1

Two other Shelbyville officers and a Shelby County Sheriff’s Department deputy were also at the scene investigating a suspected stolen car. No one else was injured in the accident.

“Luckily, if you can say that, everyone else just walked back to their vehicles,” Shelbyville Police Chief Bill Elliott said.

Prerovsky didn’t know he’d lost the wheels and kept driving until officers pulled him over, according to a police report.

“There were no skid marks,” Elliott said. “He didn’t even realize the wheels had dislodged.”

Prerovsky was cooperating with investigators, who said they expected to let him continue on his way after the day’s questioning. According to a report from the Shelby County Sheriff’s Department, his truck was carrying packing peanuts to Kentucky.

A full accident report would not be available for a few days, said Lt. David Fishers, spokesman for the Sheriff’s Department. He described the incident as “pretty complicated.”

“What we did notice is there was no grease on that hub,” Elliott said of the detached double wheel.

KeVin Roberts, director of safety and membership at the Indiana Motor Truck Association, said an ungreased hub could cause a semi’s wheel to detach.

“If there’s no grease there, then the

wheel locks up, and that’s what causes a failure there,” he said, adding that he was unfamiliar with the specifics of the Shelbyville accident.

Prerovsky told police the trailer was an old piece of equipment, though he did not know the year and model, according to police reports. Elliott said the truck was last inspected in August.

Mechanical failure contributes to about 10 percent of serious accidents involving semis, according to a 2006 study by the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration.

Tire or wheel failure is one of the top three problems associated with such mechanical failures, the report stated, along with braking problems and a shift of cargo.

Wheel separation may also occur due to assembly errors, corrosion or poor installation and maintenance, according to a 1995 report from the Ontario Ministry of Transportation in Canada.

“Anything man-made is subject to failure,” said Bursten, the state trooper. “Do we know if this was poor maintenance? Not at this time.”

Prerovsky told police he worked for Chicago-based trucking company Zone Express, Elliott said.

The phone number listed for the firm by the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, however, was disconnected, with no other listings for the company in the Chicago area.

Bursten could not say how many times the State Police’s 90 motor carrier inspectors have pulled over trucks with wheel problems.

★ Star reporters Tim Evans and Kevin O’Neal contributed to this story.

Call Star reporter Meagan Ingerson at (317) 444-6304.

STAYING SAFE

Research by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety found that about a third of all pedestrians killed alongside the nation’s freeways were working on or around a car or had stopped because of an accident. About 75 percent of those deaths happened at night.

To stay safe if you have to pull over on the side of the freeway, the American Automobile Association advises:

- ◆ Get out of moving traffic.
- ◆ Never try to cross a freeway on foot.
- ◆ Always watch approaching traffic after you’ve stopped.
- ◆ Always wear your seat belt when waiting for help in your car.
- ◆ If you have a cell phone, call 911 and tell the 911 operator your location immediately.
- ◆ Don’t try to fix your car. It is dangerous to work under the hood, under your car or next to your car near fast-moving traffic.
- ◆ Leave pets in the car. Animals are much safer in the car.

Source: AAA

Well-liked

◆ Relatives say Henderson was a loving family man.

From A1

reading messages left by other mourners.

Henderson, 51, had only 20 minutes left on his shift when he was killed by a 350-pound double wheel that broke free from a passing truck. He was on the shoulder of I-74, helping a Shelby County sheriff's deputy by taking pictures of a suspected stolen car the deputy had stopped.

A 29-year veteran of the Shelbyville force, Henderson had started out as a parking enforcement officer and had held virtually every post in the department, from dispatcher to chief detective.

"The only rank he hadn't held in the department was chief of police," said Bill Elliott, who is the chief.

Funeral arrangements are pending. Flags flew at half-staff, and small black banners clung to patrol car antennas Thursday.

Relatives and friends came to

place flowers on Henderson's cruiser, parked outside the Police Department. The windshield was draped with black fabric, and flowers and notes were left under the windshield wipers.

They described Henderson, who was married with one son, as a loving family man. His 27-year-old son, Kyle, also worked in the department, as a jailer.

"They were very close," said his sister, Debbie Elliott, who is not related to the police chief. "Kyle was his life."

Elliott came to place flowers on the car with her sister Lori Spurgin and Henderson's aunt, Judy Cheatham.

They described Henderson as an avid fisherman and golfer, with a love for country music and a playful personality.

"He was a great guy," Debbie Elliott said. "He loved to tease and torment."

And, she said, her brother was passionate about his job.

"He just told his wife the other night that he was so happy being a police officer," she said. "He wasn't going to (retire) for a while."

★ Call Star reporter Meagan Ingerson at (317) 444-6304.