

BEHIND THE BADGE

End of Watch



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Officer Robert E. Sparks End of Watch: March 8, 1968



Robert "Pistol" Sparks was born and raised on a 42-acre farm in central Halifax County. The middle child of his father's first marriage, Robert had three brothers and three sisters. Robert grew up working on the family farm and spending time at the pond down the road from home.

In high school, Robert was a member of the 4-H club, and his sister Jean Sparks-Branham still smiles from ear to ear when she describes the cow that Robert looked after as part of his 4H responsibilities. Robert was also a member of the Aurelian Springs High School football team. He graduated in 1959.

After high school, Robert became interested in the local volunteer fire department. He became a founding member of the Darlington Volunteer Fire Department, where a plaque bearing his name still hangs to this day. Second only to the fire department were his love of cars and his desire to become a North Carolina State Highway Patrolman.

One of Robert's younger brothers, Dennis Sparks, recalled that Robert had a blue 1959 Ford that he insisted be plain because he wanted to fix it up himself. "He loved to work on that car," said Lois Sparks Mills, Robert's widow.

In 1963, Robert's dream of being a Highway Patrolman was sidelined by the draft. Robert volunteered for the United States Air Force. He was initially stationed at White Sands, New Mexico and then was shipped out to Vietnam where he was an ordnance specialist in Da Nang.

Robert came home from Vietnam in the fall of 1967, just three weeks prior to the Tet Offensive. Dennis remembered being so proud of his brother the day he saw him step off the plane in his dress blues.

Upon his return home and his discharge from the Air Force, Robert applied for the North Carolina Highway Patrol only to find out that he was a half-inch too short. He applied to some other law-enforcement agencies before joining the RPD on September 11, 1967.

A short time later, Robert joined the Motorcycle Unit. He was so proud of his Harley-Davidson Electra Glide that he built a shed in the back yard of his home on Wake Forest Road in which to store the bike.

On March 8, 1968, Robert was on Ridge Road conducting traffic enforcement and pulled out to stop a vehicle that was speeding. While leaning into a curve, the running board struck the pavement, causing the motorcycle to spin out of control. Robert's helmet was thrown off and he suffered severe head injuries as a result of the impact. He died a few hours after the crash.

Robert was survived by his wife, Lois; a three-year-old daughter, Susan; three sisters: Jean Branham, Anne Smith, and Sandra Robinson; and three brothers: Dennis Sparks, Larry Sparks, and Gary Sparks.

Original text contributed by Lieutenant D.S. Gillespie and Detective D.C. Moore