



Graduation from the Academy.



Terry and Gary on their wedding day.



Rest Area Shooting Follow Up

Trooper Gary Horner Recovering from Multiple Gunshot Wounds



At the time of the shooting, Gary Horner had been a Virginia State Trooper for nearly five years.

CHARLES CITY -- The knock on the door woke Terry Horner out of a sound sleep. Squinting at the clock on her nightstand, she saw the time. 1:09 a.m., Sunday, Nov. 24.

"I was looking for something to put on so I could answer the door. Gary was working midnights. We live at a marina, and I thought it was a hotel guest trying to register. We do not have a doorbell so whoever it was began pounding on the door, harder and harder."

As she reached the front door, she looked out the window and saw two men in uniform standing on the other side.

"I recognized Scott Brubaker, a deputy who is a friend of ours. The other man was Gary's sergeant, Sgt. Blydenburg, whom I had not met."

Panic set in as she opened the door. "I remember asking them what they wanted. Inside, all I wanted to do was cry and run away."

As a million thoughts raced through her mind, she recalled asking over and over, "Where's Gary?"

Together for 10 years, Terry and Gary were still newlyweds, having celebrated their third wedding anniversary the month before.

"The sergeant told me that Gary had been involved in an incident and that he'd been shot. That's all they knew at the time. I almost fell off my chair. I screamed and collapsed," she said, tears filling her eyes as she relived the horrors of that night.

"Scott told me that all they knew right then was that Gary was alive right after the shooting."

Terry was bundled into the police car and the trio raced from the couple's rural home in Charles City toward Virginia Commonwealth University's Medical College of Virginia (MCV), nearly an hour away in Richmond.

"On the way, we drove past the rest area where it had happened. There were so many police and rescue vehicles all over the place, with their lights flashing. I was so scared."

She was told that the person who shot Gary was being checked on.

After what seemed an interminable amount of time, they reached MCV. Terry was ushered inside, past a sea of uniforms and media. She was ushered to a private waiting area upstairs.

"We learned then that Gary had been shot at least five times. Even though I knew now that he was still alive, I wanted to actually see him before he went into surgery. I needed him to tell me himself that he was alive and ok."

She found out that he was already in surgery; however, she was allowed in to see him when he went in recovery.

"He was sitting up in bed. He looked so gray. It really scared me to see him looking so gray. He had a bandage on his arm and over his right ear. I could see it had blood around it. He had a tube down his throat. I touched his hand so he would know I was there." ►



Gary poses by the trooper statue.

Looking back

At the time of the shooting, Gary Horner had been a Virginia State Trooper for nearly five years. Horner, 28, joined the Department in 1998 and has been assigned to the State Police Area 3 West Point Office (New Kent, Charles City, King and Queen, and King William counties) since graduating from the 98th Basic Session.

He and Terry had recently moved to New York to be near their families after Terry was offered a job back home. The job wasn't what they had thought, so the couple decided to move back to Virginia. Gary rejoined the Department and Terry found another job. They had been back nearly three weeks when Gary was shot.

"It's difficult to imagine something like this happening in New Kent. I mean, it's such a quiet area for the most part. When I heard that Gary had been shot, I thought 'Things like this just do not happen here.'"

Gary said most of the shooting incidents occur during hunting season.

As sprawl heads toward the area from Richmond, the number of incidents in the area is growing, he said.

On the evening he was shot, Gary recalls kissing Terry goodbye as he headed out to work.

"He was scheduled to work 10 p.m.-6 a.m. I remember because he told me he'd be home at 6 a.m. and we could go have breakfast together."

He was the only trooper on duty that night.

As he left home, he worked a motor vehicle accident near their house. He then drove on to make a check on the interstate.

"We're required to make two interstate runs per shift," he explained.

He remembered writing a ticket for reckless driving shortly before he headed toward the county line between New Kent and James City County.

As he passed the rest area in New Kent, he pulled in to make a routine check of the facility and grounds. Troopers are supposed to check the rest areas in their area at least two or three times per shift.

"I pulled in to the rest area. There were quite a few trucks and cars in the parking lot."

It was after midnight.

Gary remembers scanning the parking lot. As he drove by the wooded section that used to be part of the picnic facility, he saw what appeared to be a person lying on the ground in the dimly lit area.

"That area's closed and there's a fence around it. There is a shed down there that troopers use as an office - it has a desk and a chair and that's about it."

His first thought was not of danger, but of concern for the person who might be sick or injured. It was a rather chilly night - about 32 degrees -- defi-

nitely not the kind of night to spend sleeping outside. People are not even supposed to sleep in their vehicles at a rest area, let alone camp.

"I didn't know what the problem was. I was afraid he might freeze to death. I pulled the car into a parking spot. I told the dispatcher that I was on a rest area check. I got out and walked down the steps. As I got closer, I could see that he wasn't moving."

Though the man was in the middle of the sparsely wooded area, he was camped out in a clearing that left little room for cover for the young trooper.

"I'm the kind of person who tries to look at all the possibilities of what could happen so I'm prepared for whatever comes along. When I'm driving, I'm scanning the road in front and behind me, watching the other vehicles in case I need to switch lanes in a hurry. So, as I approached this individual, I'm concerned about him, but I'm also trying to make note of my surroundings in case I need protection."

As Gary neared the darkened shape, he realized it was indeed a man in a sleeping bag. He was lying there, not moving.

"I was taking care to be quiet, moving cautiously down the asphalt path. Though he pretended to be sleeping, I believe he was lying in wait for me."

The man's head suddenly snapped back, and he looked up at Horner.

"I identified myself as a state trooper and asked him why he was in the rest area. He said he was a poor man who had no place to stay."

Gary told him he was welcome to stay inside his car at the rest area as long as he wanted, but he could not camp out in the woods.

"I told him to go ahead and gather his stuff up. By that time, his hands were outside the bag and he was lying on his side, propped up on one arm. I asked him again to start packing, and he still did not move. I asked him if he had any ID."

Cautious of the potential danger, Gary said his concern grew when the man failed to act on his request to move.

"I started backing away and told him I needed to see his hands."

Suddenly, Gary said, the man's hands dove into his sleeping bag and he said, "I've got some ID for you right here."

He reared out of the bag and, as his hands came up out of the cover, he began shooting at the state trooper.

The first shot grazed the right side of Gary's head and ripped part of his ear loose from his head. The next shot was in his chest. Thankfully the bulletproof vest took the impact of that shot. Another shot severed his tie. He was shot in the small bowel portion of his stomach. As he turned to dive for cover, a bullet ripped into his lower back, shattering small pieces of bones and damaging nerves running into his leg.

"I felt that one (in the back) immediately. I had so much adrenaline pumping that I guess I didn't feel the pain from the other wounds, but that one really hurt."

He said crazy thoughts ran through his mind as he was under attack.

"I remember thinking that getting shot felt just like Forrest Gump said it did. He said it felt like the bullet just jumped up and bit him."

He said he felt like someone had set his back on fire.

Crouching behind a small cluster of trees, Gary began shooting back at his unknown assailant, whom he described as having an expression of "pure evil" on his face when the gunfire started.

"I fired back at the area where I saw the muzzle fire flash. It got quiet, and I thought maybe he was down. Then I saw him doing a belly crawl, military style, to get in position to fire again."

As his training automatically kicked in, Gary said he realized he did not know how many rounds he had fired. He emptied the chamber and "tactically" reloaded.

"I'm on the radio with Richmond. I hear the leaves rustling. He was doing a low crawl and heading for a position

of cover between a tree and a trash can."

As he watched the man, Gary also tried to take stock of his injuries. He knew that he'd been hit several times. The worst pain he felt was in his lower back. The excruciating pain radiated down his left leg.

Suddenly he saw the leaves shaking and the muzzle of the assailant's gun turning toward him.

"I had my gun in my right hand. As I raised my arm to fire, I felt a stinging pain. He shot me in the forearm. I was leaning around a tree, and I shot at the muzzle flash. I shot until he stopped firing back."

Gary had left the radio on and it fell when he returned fire. When the bullets stopped, he calmly picked it back up and told the horrified dispatcher exactly what happened.

"I got back on the radio. The dispatcher said something to me. I think she was trying to keep me from going into shock. I told her I needed a rescue squad and Med-flite."

Fortunately, Gary had already radioed deputies from New Kent County that he would be checking on a suspicious individual when he pulled into the rest stop. When the "Shots fired" call went out, the deputies were only a couple of minutes away and were able to race to the scene.

Ironically, the people in the rest area did not report hearing anything as the gun battle waged around them. There was a man resting in his truck about 20 yards from the scene. He had no idea what had happened, Gary said.

From start to finish, the entire altercation lasted about seven minutes.

The ambulance, a volunteer crew from Providence Forge, arrived on the scene within two minutes. Gary said he knew some of the volunteers, including the parents of a deputy who was a friend of his.



"Everybody knows everybody in New Kent. The deputy's mother told me that she wouldn't let anything happen to me or her son would be so mad."

As the EMTs bundled him in to the back, they told the anxious trooper to stop talking and relax.

"I was afraid to relax. I was afraid I would die. I knew I was bleeding and that whatever made my leg go numb wasn't good. I could feel the blood running down my leg. I knew I'd been shot in the stomach and the right arm. I had also been shot in the head and my right ear was hanging by a thread, but I didn't even realize that!"

Foremost in his mind was letting Terry know that he was alive.

"I kept asking them to let me call my wife. I asked if anyone had a cell phone. They kept telling me I had to wait." ▶

In retrospect, it's a good thing he did not contact her, he said ruefully. She could have been a danger to herself and others on the road trying to get to the hospital.

This was not the first time Gary had been injured in the line of duty. The previous year, he was involved in an accident during a pursuit that totaled his police car.

Terry said, "He called me and was very calm. He told me he had been injured and that he was okay."

Gary said he was thinking of doing the same thing this time so she wouldn't be frightened. "I figured as long as she heard my voice, she'd know I was okay ... I just remember during the ambulance trip saying over and over again, 'Look what I've put my poor wife through.'"

Horner was transported by ambulance to VCU's MCV Hospitals in Richmond.

As the rescue personnel attempted to strap him onto the backboard to load into the ambulance, Gary said he knew they had to move fast. He told them he would hold on to the board if they would go ahead and put him in the vehicle.

When the EMTs removed his vest, Gary saw the gaping wound in his stomach.

"When I saw that, my heart sank."

The ambulance drove the 30-mile distance in 17 minutes, he said.

When they arrived at MCV, Gary was still alert enough to sign all the necessary medical forms and releases before being prepped for surgery.

He recalls seeing some familiar faces at the hospital upon his arrival. His sergeant, Sgt. Barrack, was there as was Lt. Col. Scott and Colonel Massengill.

He was anxious to head to surgery so he could start recovering.

Back home

As a trooper's wife, Terry Horner feared the worst and hoped for the best.

"You can't live your life afraid. If I've learned anything from this inci-

dent, it's that you have to live your life no matter what. Don't give in to fear."

Despite his injuries, Gary was determined to get out of the hospital as soon as possible. He left the hospital on Friday, four days after being admitted.

He lost 40 pounds.

Terry, who had just started a new job, worked three weeks after Gary's shooting. However, he needed someone with him at home to help him and Terry lost her job because she stayed home with him.

"He needed me. I felt horrible going off and leaving him alone, in case he needed something. The hospital had taught me how to take care of his wounds and change the dressing. If I had not been able to do it, he would not have been allowed to leave."

Before the shooting, Gary said he was in excellent physical condition and was a healthy 28-year-old state trooper.

Now he is approximately 60 percent of the capacity that he was. He walks slowly with a limp.

Gary wants to go back to being a trooper.

Terry said, "He is a good trooper. His training kicked in just like it was supposed to."

The day Gary goes back to work, Terry said she will probably call him several times to make sure that he is okay.

Gary said he thinks about what happened fairly often, but he does not want to let it incapacitate him as a state trooper.

"What this man did is so bad ... What kind of mentality do you have to have to take a life?"

While he recuperated, Gary said he received numerous letters, phone calls and flowers.

"The whole state police family ... All our family is in New York, but Tom Mears said we have a family here. People have been so kind. They asked us if we need anything or if there's anything they can do."

We will never know why the man shot Trooper Horner. He was positive-

ly identified by the State Medical Examiner's Office as Eliot Sanders Sacks, 33, of Littleton, Colo. Sacks was wanted by the state of Tennessee for a 2002 grand larceny. His vehicle, a 1985 Saab displaying stolen Virginia license plates, was parked at the rest stop. He died at the scene.

Col. Massengill carries a tape recording of Horner's radio transmission after he had been shot. He said he was so proud of the way he reacted, but the tape also serves a dual purpose.

"It's a difficult transmission to listen to, but I offer to play it for anyone who is willing to listen. The transmission is so poor due to the 1970s-era radios the troopers carry that you can hardly hear what he is saying. If there was ever a case to show the need for new radios, this is it." □



Gary and Terry together at Headquarters.