



Colonel W. Gerald Massengill, at his desk at state police headquarters, Richmond.

COLONEL W. GERALD MASSENGILL TAKES STATE POLICE LEAD

By Becky Gettings

Calm, kind and compassionate—hardly the traits one would expect from the highest ranking police officer in Virginia – one who manages 2,500 law enforcement personnel and an annual budget of \$212 million plus.

But those who know Colonel W. Gerald Massengill, newly appointed superintendent of the Virginia State Police, know that he has the fortitude needed to do the job and do it well. His understanding personality is backed by true grit gained while working a 34-year career with the Department.

Beginning as a trooper trainee in October 1966, members of his Academy class saw him as a leader and elected him president of the 45th Basic Session. He graduated from the Academy in 1967 and was assigned to Isle of Wight County. After patrolling for eight years, he was promoted to sergeant, Claypool Hill. Thus began his climb through the ranks, which unbeknownst to him would lead him to the top.

In July 1979, Massengill was promoted to first sergeant at the Petersburg office, responsible for Dinwiddie, Nottoway and Amelia counties. It is no small coincidence that the Massengills still live in Dinwiddie, as this was one of his favorite assignments, both by location and rank.

When asked about his favorite level of management, Massengill quickly thought of the position of first sergeant. “While serving as first sergeant,” he said, “you experience the best of both

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worlds. You are still able to do police work yet you are a part of management. It’s a level of supervision where you are still close enough that it’s possible to fully understand a trooper or agent’s day.”

Massengill stated that he “dearly enjoyed” his years at the Petersburg office because as first sergeant he knew the locals and was able to give his personal attention to law enforcement matters. “If a local farmer had questions about the laws which affect his work, I could meet him for a cup of coffee and talk with him. I miss that,” he said.

Massengill was promoted to field lieutenant in 1987, responsible for ►



Nita holds baby Alan as he tries to fit into dad's state police hat during Gerald's first Christmas as a trooper, 1966.



Trooper Massengill (left), Sergeant Massengill (center), First Sergeant Massengill (right).



Gerald at a mass arrest in Isle of Wight County during a cockfight in the early 1970s.



Gerald, after being named sergeant, and Nita, pose at a promotion party in 1975 at the Windsor Inn.



A fishing trip to Trooper Marvin Harver's home in Ivor, Virginia, in the early 1970s results in a real catch.



A bird/quail hunting trip in North Carolina in 1987 nets a truck full (37 birds) for Gerald, son Alan and brother Ted.

state police activities in twenty counties and four cities. Six years later, he was named captain, division commander of the Safety Division. He was responsible for the Motor Vehicle Inspection Program statewide.

In June 1994, he was promoted to lieutenant colonel, Director of Bureau of Field Operations (BFO), responsible for all uniform troopers. He maintained these responsibilities while he served as acting superintendent beginning January 2000. On June 22, 2000, the official announcement came through from Governor Gilmore's office that Colonel Massengill would be superintendent.

Looking back on his years with the Department, the colonel said he is probably most proud of an accomplishment in 1999 while he served as director of BFO. He says that everyone who participated in the patrols should also be proud. "The saturated patrols that we implemented that year were primarily responsible for reducing the Interstate Highway death rate by 33 percent," he said. "That's over 100 deaths prevented by our law enforcement efforts."

He also implemented DUI checkpoints in Dinwiddie in the days when checkpoints were not often scheduled. "It was satisfying that we were regularly taking people off the road that needed to be taken off," he said.

Safety measures promoted by Massengill when he was a trooper resulted in special recognition from the Windsor Ruritan Club for outstanding contribution to highway safety in 1975. Although he was pleased with the award, preventing more accidents such as the one that spurred his efforts had much greater impact on Trooper Massengill.

"I worked an accident at (Highways) 460 and 258 in Windsor where a father and his eight or nine-year-old son were both killed," he said. "I will never forget delivering that death message to the wife and mother."

"There had been 11 fatalities in nine years at this intersection," he continued. "As a result of this crash I was able to push an accident prone location study



The colonel by a blue and gray outside the Academy in Richmond.

and a number of engineers came up with changes including rumble strips to alert drivers as they approach the intersection. This was in 1973 or '74, and they were some of the first rumble strips in Virginia. There has not been a fatality at this intersection since, and that is one of the most satisfying things I have ever done."

Another source of pride for the colonel is having served as one of the first Virginia State Police Tactical Team leaders in 1977. "There were many barricade situations in Division Four," he said. "There was one where the individual killed his mother-in-law and father-in-law and barricaded himself in the bedroom with his estranged wife and son. There were negotiations and it ended peacefully. I was proud of the way our people worked together as a team to prevent more violence. The comradery was strong."

Most law enforcement officers experience at least one incident that leaves such an impression on them that it is imprinted in their minds forever. Colonel Massengill is no different.

"While working in Southwest Virginia, I responded to a call about a teenager who had shot his father in the back with a shotgun and killed him,"

he said. "The man was beating the boy's mother and the boy said he could not take it any more. I recall sitting on the front porch with my arm around this boy who had just committed an act that undoubtedly would be with him for the rest of his life. Still, he had the presence of mind to think about his responsibilities. We had to go to the local magistrate, and he asked if he could feed the animals before we left."

Massengill says it's these as well as many more incidents that give him the insight needed to lead the Department effectively. He also cites the positive influence many law enforcement professionals have had on him throughout his years with the Department. He recalls Basil Belsches' advice, "Don't kill a fly with a sledge hammer." He also praises Wayne Huggins' philosophy that it is more important to do the right thing than it is to do things right.

When asked about his plans for the Department, Colonel Massengill said, "My overall goal for the Department is to continue with efforts to make the Virginia State Police the most effective police agency it can be and to serve the Commonwealth in a way that's expected of us. At the same time, a parallel goal is to create a work environment where people enjoy coming to work. Morale is higher when people have the equipment and training needed to do their jobs. They want work schedules that allow them time with their families. We need to create an atmosphere up top which encourages the type of supervision which participates whenever possible."

Massengill was born on September 27, 1942 in Four Oaks, North Carolina. He was raised on a tobacco, corn and cotton farm with two sisters and a brother. His father is deceased, but his mother still lives in Four Oaks. Two siblings also stayed in North Carolina, and his oldest sister lives in Chesapeake.

It was while visiting his sister's Chesapeake home, in fact, that he met wife Juanita in 1962. He was serving in the U.S. Air *text continued on p. 11* ▶



Gerald with grandson, Colton, who is almost eight months old.



Gerald, left, does the "Chicken" at son Kevin's wedding. Clapping, far right, is nine-year-old Todd, who Nita watches during the day.



Nita poses with Nettie, her 88-year-old mother, before Kevin's wedding.



The whole Massengill clan includes, left to right, son Alan and wife Patty. Their children, Wesley and Lori, are standing in back on the picnic table. Courtney and son Kevin are next, followed by Nita and Gerald holding Colton for their daughter Laura and her husband, David.



The Massengill home on Lake Chesdin in Dinwiddie County is a haven for family activities.



Gerald passes Colton back to his mother.



Colton, still sporting a fishing cap Nita bought him, sacks out on the family hammock.

Force as an air policeman and was on furlough. "We talked a little bit and he called to see if he could come over," said Nita. "We dated for about a year and married on August 17, 1963."

Nita was born and raised in Norfolk. Her father is deceased but her mother, Nettie, who is 88 years of age, lives with Nita and Gerald. Nita is also one of four with a sister in Great Bridge, one in Norfolk and a brother in Chesapeake.

When Nita and Gerald were first married, he was still serving in the military and away most of the time, so she lived with her mother. For almost a year, the newlyweds visited only during his military furloughs. Gerald left for a temporary overseas assignment soon after Nita became pregnant with Alan, their first child. "I was small when he left, and when he returned four months later, I was huge," she laughed. She was pleased that he was home for Alan's birth.

The couple then moved to the Chesapeake area where they bought their first home on Omar Street in South Norfolk. He worked with the tunnel police and then joined the Department.

Gerald and Nita have three children and three grandchildren. Son Alan and wife, Patty, have a boy named Alan Wesley Massengill, II and a girl named Lori. They live in North Carolina. Daughter Laura married David Taylor and they have a young son, Colton. They live in McKenney. Son Kevin and his new bride Courtney live on River Road in Dinwiddie County.

"Gerald is very family oriented," said Nita. "He is a devoted husband and father."

Commenting about his appointment, Nita says she is truly excited for him, and she cited some traits that are positive at work and at home. "Gerald is compassionate and conscientious and he cares for people," she said. "He is honest, patient and is a good listener. He gives his all," she said.

When asked about the impact on their family life, Nita says he has always been caught up in his work and away



The Executive staff for the Department of Virginia State Police (left to right, front row first): Lt. Colonel Darrel E. Stilwell, Lt. Colonel Harry M. Durham, Colonel W. Gerald Massengill, Administrative Assistant Sandra H. Beasley, Lt. Colonel John B. Scott, Major Larry W. Burchett, Major R. Lewis Vass, Major Jerry S. Conner and Major W. Steven Flaherty.

a lot. "When he is here he is available to us and that means a lot," she said. "Gerald is a big mentor in the lives of all of his children. They know they can come to him no matter what."

Every member of the Massengill family enjoys water sports. Boating, tubing, water skiing, swimming, and especially bass fishing, are favorites. A family dream came true when Gerald and Nita were able to purchase a home on Lake Chesdin in Dinwiddie. Their lot spans 900-feet of waterfront and the house abounds with huge windows overlooking the lake.

Gerald, Nita and Nettie enjoy calling the resort style property home, but they say the best part is that it is a family haven. There are plenty of bedrooms for the kids and grandkids to visit – and sometimes they all come at once.

Some might think that would be too hectic, but not the Massengills. "We have always been focused on family, and the more the merrier," the colonel said. "It wasn't until three years ago that Nita and I took our first vacation by ourselves. We went to Niagara Falls in New York, and we did have a wonderful time."

Nita watches her youngest grand-

child, Colton, every weekday while his mother works. He is almost eight months old. She also watches Todd, 9, the son of a good friend. Nita has kept him since he was six weeks old and she also provided loving day care for his older brother. Todd calls Nettie "Grandma" and the three of them juggle the care of Colton and take pride in entertaining him.

Nita also enjoys crocheting and ceramic painting. She is an avid reader of mysteries and especially likes Patricia Cornwell.

Gerald used to be an avid quail hunter, but as quail became scarce and the bird dogs died, he quit. Fishing with family has replaced hunting as a pastime when he is free. Free time, however, is at a premium since he became superintendent. But Massengill does not mind. "I am one trooper who never in my wildest dreams thought I'd be superintendent," he said.

"When I made lieutenant I could not imagine it was real, to obtain such a prestigious position," he said. "And when I made captain I thought, this is the ultimate. Lieutenant colonel was unexpected, but I gave it my best. I am completely and thoroughly humbled ➤



Lori and Wesley pause on the picnic table before taking a swim in the lake.



Nothing like a good float on the lake, say Wesley and Lori.



Courtney and Kevin relax in the hammock at his parents home.



Nita enjoys the sun on their upper deck.



Daughter Laura and husband David enjoy their young son, Colton.



Son Alan and wife Patty enjoy the lake view from the swing.



Nita and Gerald pose in the kitchen of their lakefront home.



Nita and Gerald have been married for 37 years.



Nita enjoys collecting spoons.

by the honor of serving as the superintendent of the Virginia State Police.”

Colonel Massengill may be humble, but he is also confident. Working his way up through the Department has allowed him to experience it all and gain a good grasp on all facets of police work. “I am equipped to understand

the concerns and issues which impact the Virginia State Police, the troopers and agents in the state and the law enforcement community,” he said.

Members of the Department agree it’s good background for the man in the number one seat at headquarters. They are glad that he’s been there. □



The Massengills and children are, left to right, Laura, Kevin, Nita, Gerald and Alan.



Glass windows abound in the Massengill home, making the lake view available in the background.



Visitors who exit the front door leave by car; those who use the back door leave by jet ski. The Massengills give a good old southern farewell to a couple using the Lake Chesdin route.

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