

Colonel James Keathley Retires

By Public Info. Spec. III Cheryl D. Cobb, Q/PIED

On January 7, 2010, Colonel James F. Keathley, superintendent of the Missouri State Highway Patrol, announced he would retire on March 1, 2010, after more than 33 years of dedicated and honorable service to the citizens of Missouri. "I intend to be available to assure a smooth transition," said Colonel Keathley. "When you first sit down at this desk, there are items in your in box that you don't have history for. I called [retired Colonel Roger D.] Stottlemire every day that first month. It was nice to have someone to ask."

Once the transition is complete, Colonel Keathley will move on to ... turkey season. "I have the state record," he said with a smile. "I've never, not killed one. Missouri may have 1,000 of us tied for that record. But, I've killed one every year. My dad first took me turkey hunting when I was 16 years old."

Colonel Keathley and his wife, Jana, also plan to build a house on their farm in Madison County. He said they bought the property 10 years ago with that plan. He'll be hunting and fishing ... doing pretty much anything outdoors.

But, how did he get here ... to retirement? Colonel Keathley's professional journey with the Patrol began in 1977, when he accepted the position of weight inspector in Troop E. At the time, he was a teacher, having earned a bachelor's degree of science in biology and agriculture from Southeast Missouri State University in 1976. The superintendent of the school where he was substitute teaching talked incessantly about his son, who was a weight inspector for the Patrol. The superintendent talked about his son and how much he enjoyed the work.

"I took in all he said. After a while, I realized I didn't enjoy teaching that much. So, I thought about looking into the Patrol to see if they were hiring."

He took the test to become a weight inspector and then waited for a call. The call came with an offer in Caruthersville, MO.

"I'd never been there. After talking it over with the family, we decided, 'Why not?' I enjoyed it a lot."

Colonel Keathley said his interest in being a trooper developed while he worked as a weight inspector. "Being a weight inspector, you worked around troopers all of the time and listened to what they did ... heard about it over the radio," said Colonel Keathley. "Man, that was exciting. Why wouldn't you want to do that?"

After his weight inspector shift, he would ride with a trooper. He looked at troopers' paperwork to see if he could do the job. "I could do the paperwork and was smart enough to do it, which made it easier in the Academy. I knew you'd have to study counties and county seats. I studied that at the scale house on

midnight shift and had it memorized before I arrived. Everyone else stayed up studying that and I was asleep. Being an employee helped me prepare for the Academy.”

Colonel Keathley was accepted into the Patrol’s Law Enforcement Academy on his first try and felt very fortunate to be selected. He arrived at the Academy with the 50th Recruit Class on July 8, 1979.

“Recruiting training back then was all about [retired Captain] Paul Corbin. He was our PT instructor. I remember being scared to death of him ... running up and down these hills and doing pushups. He still frightens me,” said Colonel Keathley with a chuckle.

“I remember one time my boots weren’t shined. Corbin did an inspection and he didn’t like my boots. He told me after I got done running in the afternoon I needed to spend my time polishing my boots, so I could present them to him at 3 a.m. on the steps behind the cafeteria. [now Sergeant] Terry G. Mills helped me. I thought it was a trick and he wouldn’t be there. He was sitting there on the steps drinking a cup of coffee. It was somewhat of a punishment to him, having to get up early to show me it meant something. He had punished himself for my benefit just as I was punished for not having my boots shined.”

Colonel Keathley graduated first academically in his class. At that time, it was the only award the Academy presented at graduation. He said he and present Captain Bradley W. Jones, Q/TFD, were virtually tied, with only a fraction of a point’s difference between them.

“A couple of days before graduation, you visited with colonel for three to five minutes. I remember that day. You don’t know your grade average during training. I remember Colonel [AI] Lubker telling me, ‘From what I have in front of me, looks like you’re pretty smart. You’re first in your class. But, that doesn’t mean anything. It just means you made it through this stage.’ I thought the Academy was going to be the hard part.”

His first assignment was close to home in Marble Hill, MO, allowing him to visit his parents, who were older, whenever he wanted. He also worked marijuana eradication for a while, “Grew a beard and got scruffy looking.” He got a taste for criminal work doing that, and joined the Division of Drug and Crime Control’s Troop E Unit as an investigator in 1985.

“I counted up my tenure--I worked 53 homicides while I was in Troop E ... along with fraud, special investigations, burglary. That is still the busiest DDCC unit in the state. There are more criminal investigators in Troop E today than any other troop.”

He was promoted to a corporal, sergeant, lieutenant, and captain while serving in the Division of Drug and Crime Control. As a lieutenant, he moved to Jefferson City, where Capt. Darnell placed him in charge of field investigators. He also served as the division’s administrative lieutenant under Capt. Darnell, who felt the duties should rotate among the division’s lieutenants. This served as good preparation for Col. Keathley becoming the division director (1994).

“Seems every time I got promoted there was a different challenge,” said Col. Keathley. “1994 was when we entered into the terrible meth years. My last year in Troop E there were rumors of meth labs, but we didn’t have them. In 1994, the home-based, small toxic user based labs began to surface. The narcotics side changed to meth, meth labs, and murders related to meth labs. There was a lot of time devoted to that.”

While serving as the director of DDCC, the Violent Crime Unit was formed. This unit provides assistance to criminal justice agencies throughout the state during the investigation of serious crimes.

Col. Keathley became a major and was designated commander of the Criminal Investigation Bureau on September 1, 2001. “Eleven days later the nation’s focus turned to terrorism,” Col. Keathley said. “Again, everything is turned on its end and things change, and we immediately assigned troopers to joint terrorism task forces, homeland security money came in, and for the first time we had a DPS homeland security coordinator.”

Most everyone can remember where they were on September 11, 2001. Col. Keathley, a major at the time, was attending a biannual conference for the National Association of State Drug Enforcement Administrators in Portland, ME. He’s not sure why, but he had driven to the conference. It turned out to be a good decision.

“We were listening to a speaker when a good friend of mine from North Carolina received a page--most had pagers not cell phones at that time. Within 20 seconds, the guys from New York received pages, then the colonel from New Jersey. Within two or three minutes, everyone’s pager had gone off and we were walking out on this guy, and he kept speaking. Two of the hijackers who attacked the Twin Towers stayed in the hotel across from ours the night before they did that. They entered system in Portland and flew to Boston, then hijacked plane.” said Col. Keathley.

“The airport was shut down. Several tried to rent cars. The New York and New Jersey guys needed to get home. No one knew what was happening. The man in charge of conference was smart and went to the airport immediately and reserved five cars. Attendees were divided up by region to get everyone home. They’d flown in and didn’t have weapons, so I gave one my shotgun, which was later returned, and I kept my pistol.”

As a major, he set some goals regarding the Crime Laboratory Division. “At that time, lab employees were underpaid and experiencing an extreme backlog. I wanted to do something to alleviate this situation. We had to do something for our state crime lab system. We were losing people. I wanted to bring our crime lab system forward. My background was in science and it has always interested me.”

He said a lot of progress was made regarding a pay parity plan, assuming responsibilities of the SEMO crime lab and Joplin crime lab, and moving forward to build Springfield Crime lab to mirror the laboratory at General Headquarters.”

He remained focused on the Crime Lab issues when he became colonel to complete this goal. “If Crime Lab isn’t getting things done, the criminal justice system grinds to a halt--we can’t have trials. We’ve

made a ton of progress. Our attrition rate is now up to normal and we are able to hire experienced people, where before we were used as a training ground.”

Col. Keathley was appointed superintendent on September 1, 2006. “Being superintendent is the toughest and most fulfilling position I’ve had on the Patrol. It was something I didn’t ever image happening, and it has been very rewarding.”

He described the position of trooper as being the “most fun”, explaining that you were your own boss and the stress level was lower. “I still think being a trooper is the best job on the Highway Patrol. I appreciate that everyone has goals and wants to move up. But, once you move up, the stress level goes up.”

“I don’t know if I really have an accomplishment as superintendent. As colonel, I set policy and ensure the integrity of the agency. The employees have had a lot of accomplishments over the past three years ... I’m not afraid to change things. I’m not afraid of change. I’m not afraid to say something doesn’t work. For instance, we changed when we tell a recruit where they are going to be assigned. We gave one class an opportunity to designate going into the Academy. We thought it could help recruiting. It didn’t help us in ways we thought it would, and gave us some headaches we didn’t foresee. So, we didn’t do that again.

“One thing I feel strongly about is that I would have loved to say I got all the Patrol employees under Chapter 43. I would have loved to be able to say the employees were under direct supervision of the superintendent’s office. We have so many specific job titles that no one else has--criminalists, driver examiner, motor vehicle inspector ...”

Law enforcement has changed much since Col. Keathley was a trooper in 1979. Communication is much different for troopers today compared to that time. “When I came on, you had one radio and two channels. You had two options: pick up the mic and call another car or call the troop.” Today, there is a new interoperability plan, MCDs, and online reports. “I’ve never done a report on an MCD ... If I had to do a crash report it would be on paper.”

Case law has affected how law enforcement officers do their job and additional documentation is required of today’s law enforcement.

“I remember my first car was a big Mercury like the one in the museum. On a busy shift, you had to fill it up with fuel three times a shift. Patrol cars have changed tremendously. We didn’t have the specialized equipment we have now. I never would have thought about having a MCCV or SWAT team. If there was someone barricaded in a house, you grabbed another trooper and deputy, and went and got them ... You didn’t wait for a SWAT team. A lot of times, I was the only trooper in the county.”

Technology is, understandably, the biggest change in law enforcement. “I foresee that the technological advancements in the next five years will be more than in the last 30 ... and that includes just the planned changes of interoperability, MoDEX, and RMS (CAD).”