Memorial to Slain State Police Sergeant Unveiled

By Art Charlton

HARMONY TWP., NJ – A public memorial to NJ State Police Sgt. Cornelius A. "Dick" O'Donnell, killed in the line of duty 81 years ago, was unveiled in a ceremony held just a few miles from where he was shot while escorting a prisoner on a railroad bridge from Pennsylvania to New Jersey.

Warren County Commissioner Director Lori Ciesla was among the speakers at the October 9, 2026 ceremony attended by more than 100 in a crowd that including O'Donnell family members, local and State Police, firefighters, officials from local and county government, and area residents. The ceremony included bagpipes and a State Police helicopter flyover.

The memorial, a bronze plaque topped with the triangular State Police emblem that tells of the July 16, 1945 episode that led to Sgt. O'Donnell's death, will be located on the intersection of Brainards Road and River Road, which is County Route 621.



"Most of us go to work every day knowing there's a really good chance you'll come home," Ciesla said, but added, "that's not the case in law enforcement." She said she hopes that people will see the marker and remember O'Donnell as well as all officers who put their lives on the line.

"Up here in Warren County, we believe in law and order, and support our officers," Ciesla noted.

"Most of us spend our lives trying to avoid danger. We ask our police officers to run toward it," State Sen. Douglas Steinhardt said in his remarks to the crowd. He added that while we can never repay the debt in asking this of officers, we can make sure that "we never forget it."

On that July 1945 day, Sgt. O'Donnell and Trooper Frank Perry were near the hamlet of Brainards in rural Harmony Township, escorting a prisoner across a railroad bridge over the Delaware River back into New Jersey. The man had surrendered after murdering his wife in Orange, NJ and fleeing to Pennsylvania. Near the midpoint of the bridge, the prisoner attempted to escape and in the ensuring struggle, managed to pull the sergeant's revolver from its holster, firing three shots. Two struck Sgt. O'Donnell and one hit Trooper Perry, and both men were taken to Warren Hospital in Phillipsburg, where O'Donnell died a few hours later.

Sgt. O'Donnell served 17 years and 4 months with the New Jersey State Police and was survived by his wife, Alice. He was 42 years old.

The prisoner was caught the next day, convicted of murder, and died in prison in 1962.

Sgt. O'Donnell's grandnephew, Gregory Gaertner of Hackettstown, spoke on behalf of the family and recounted that his great-uncle was known as "a fun-loving guy, liked by all who knew him."

Gaertner said the memorial was the idea of retired State Police Sgt. William Sirotnik and immediately gained the full support of Warren County Administrator Alex J. Lazorisak to erect the memorial along the County road.

Sirotnik grew up in Brainards and was 3 or 4 years old when the incident occurred. He brought the idea for the memorial to Brenton S. Warne, Chief of Detectives in the Warren County Prosecutor's Office, who also is a retired State Police Lt. Colonel, and the project was launched earlier this year.

"A name spoken is never forgotten. I believe today we've accomplished that," Gaertner remarked.

"Eighty-one years may separate us from his sacrifice, but time does not diminish our duty to remember him," said Lieutenant Colonel David Sierotowicz, the Deputy Superintendent of the State Police. "May we always honor his sacrifice."

Following the ceremony, State Police Detective Sgt. First Class Rich Wheeler, who drove a group of O'Donnell family members from South Jersey to the event, brought them to see the spot where the shooting occurred. He pointed out the railroad bridge in the quiet corner of Warren County and the location where the memorial sign is being erected.

"I'm glad we came," said Robert O'Donnell, another grand-nephew of Sgt. O'Donnell.

Read more about Sgt. O'Donnell, who was station commander of the Washington Barracks in Warren County at the time of his death, at this link https://njsp.njoag.gov/in-memoriam-1940s/



