

03-11-1981 Southold Suffolk CO – William F Becker – LEO - Suspicious Circumstances

William F. Becker: End of Watch - March 11, 1981

<http://www.dec.ny.gov/regulations/2744.html>

Drowned under suspicious circumstances at a marina in Southold, Suffolk County. His death is still a matter of great controversy to this day.

New York State Department of Environmental Conservation Police

William Becker	Wednesday, March 11, 1981	Suffolk County	Drowned
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DEC seeks new leads in 1981 drowning case of Mattituck couple

<http://www.newsday.com/long-island/suffolk/dec-seeks-new-leads-in-1981-drowning-case-of-mattituck-couple-1.11553019>

March 8, 2016 By Will James

Thirty-five years after police pulled the bodies of a conservation officer and his wife from Mattituck Inlet, his fellow officers are seeking new leads in a case that has long baffled the couple's North Fork community.

Department of Environmental Conservation officers said Tuesday that, in advance of the 35th anniversary of the case, they are offering \$15,000 for new information in the deaths of William and Michelle Becker of Mattituck on the night of March 10, 1981.

The case has hung for decades over William's former colleagues at the DEC and the couple's relatives, who said they could never quite accept police's explanation that the pair accidentally drowned.

"We've always had the case open. We've always pondered what happened," said Maj. Scott Florence, who leads the DEC's Bureau of Environmental Crimes Investigation and probed the Beckers' deaths in the 1990s.



Michelle and William Becker are seen here in an undated photo. Department of Environmental Conservation officers said Tuesday, March 8, 2016, that they are offering \$15,000 for new information in the deaths of the couple on the night of March 10, 1981. Photo Credit: Michael Malkush

Suffolk County homicide detectives said in a statement Tuesday that they “would be open to receiving any new information anyone had to provide.”

Southold Town Police Chief Martin Flatley could not be reached for comment Tuesday.

The DEC officers’ union and fraternal organization raised money for the reward, the largest in the department’s history.

Michelle, 36, raised three children while running her beauty salon that, despite changes in ownership, is still called Michelle’s, said her brother, Michael Malkush of Cutchogue.

William, 43, he said, was a 15-year veteran of the DEC who took the North Fork assignment after patrolling elsewhere on Long Island.

They were last seen leaving a dinner party at the Mattituck home of Arthur Siemerling, a local heating oil dealer, about 11 p.m. on a brisk Tuesday night, police said.

William’s body was found 12 hours later in what was then called Matt-A-Mar marina, his foot caught on a boat’s swim platform and his arm tangled in electrical cable, in his forest green DEC uniform. He had a lump on his head, police said. A Suffolk County police diver found Michelle’s body 40 feet from her husband’s about 20 hours later. Her slippers were on the dock near Siemerling’s boat. Police said at the time that it appeared the couple took a detour to the boat on their way home from the dinner party. Yet relatives say a late-night trip to the dock seemed out of character for William, who was cautious and reserved.

William seemed to have drowned trying to save Michelle, who could not swim, then-Southold Town Police Chief Carl Cataldo told Newsday in 1981.

But Malkush said he felt police came to that conclusion too quickly, just hours after a marina worker found William’s body and before police discovered Michelle’s. “I’m there in shock saying, ‘Why aren’t you out there looking for my sister?’ ” said Malkush, 64, a retired teacher.

Timothy Becker, the oldest of the couple’s three children, said he and his siblings are “so disenchanted with how the initial investigation took place” and want closure. “My mother’s body wasn’t even found yet, and Southold Town police detectives already put together exactly what happened and sold it to us as fact,” said Becker, 51, who lives in Southern California.

Malkush has hired two private investigators over the years. After 35 years, he said, police risk losing witnesses to old age.

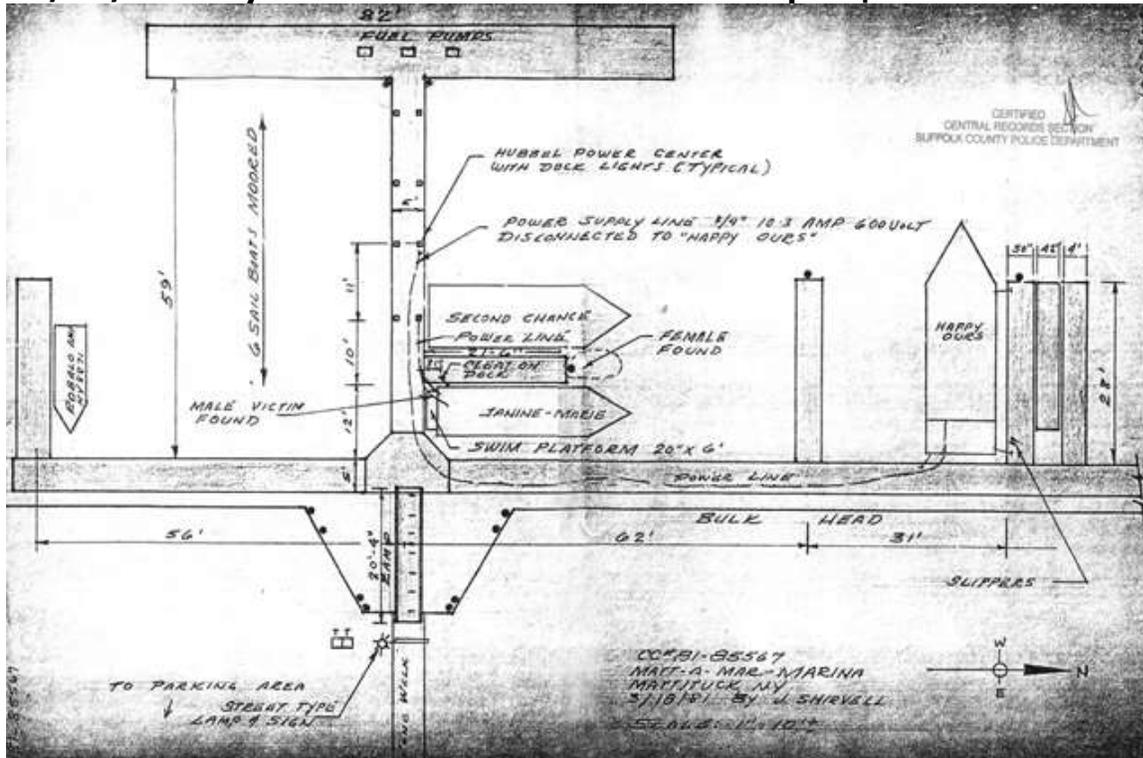
“It’s going to take somebody to talk,” he said. “Somebody on their deathbed, or somebody who finds religion, or somebody with a guilty conscience.”

Police News

A closer look inside the Becker death investigation

<http://suffolktimes.timesreview.com/2016/03/66291/a-closer-look-inside-the-becker-death-investigation/>

03/09/2016 by Joe Werkmeister and Grant Parpan |



The following was compiled using reports obtained from the Suffolk County Police Department's initial investigation into the deaths of William and Michelle Becker. It was supplemented with information from previous articles published by The Suffolk Times.

- Investigators said the Beckers likely drowned sometime before 1 a.m. March 11, 1981. A state Department of Environmental Conservation officer told investigators Mr. Becker was "afraid of the water" and family members added that Ms. Becker didn't know how to swim.
- A medical examiner's report determined that Ms. Becker's blood alcohol content was .20 and Mr. Becker's was .22. Witnesses who were with the Beckers the evening of March 10, 1981, said Ms. Becker drank a grasshopper and some white wine. Mr. Becker drank beer, they said, with one witness later adding that he also consumed scotch that night.

- The dock was icy and the water was 38 degrees around the time the Beckers are believed to have drowned. Police said the inlet was about seven and a half feet deep.

While Mr. Becker was found wearing his DEC police uniform, Ms. Becker was wearing only a robe, socks and a sweater. Her slippers were found on a dock near a friend's boat, inside which her husband's tie was located under a broken table. Investigators surmised that Mr. Becker may have fallen into the water while attempting to plug a space heater into the boat.

- A medical examiner who inspected Mr. Becker's body said he was "struck by the apparent lack of rigor, except for one arm." Ms. Becker's body was in full rigor mortis, the medical examiner said. The position of Mr. Becker's body was also questioned, with witnesses saying he was found face up but physical evidence suggesting he may have drowned while face down.
- Blood was found on a bolt on the dock near where Mr. Becker's body was found, but a medical examiner determined the sample was "insufficient." Hair samples found on Ms. Becker's robe were never tested due to "a lack of known exemplars."
- Southold Town police removed guns from the Becker home the morning Mr. Becker's body was found. An initial report states they removed three weapons, though an evidence log lists four. Throughout the investigation, police attempted to ascertain if Mr. Becker was carrying a service weapon at the gathering he attended the previous night. One witness said he did have a gun, but later changed her statement to say she was unsure.
- An August 1981 report by Suffolk County Police Detective Thomas Schmitt concluded with two possible theories. The first was that one of the Beckers, "due to their intoxicated condition," accidentally fell into the water and then the other person fell in while trying to help. The second theory was that the Beckers "could have possibly become embroiled in an argument again resulting in one or the other being pushed into the water and subsequent realization in an attempt to help the other resulted in their death."

Correction: An earlier version of this story said hair samples were taken from Mr. Becker's belt. They were actually taken from his wife's robe.

Police News

Drownings occurred during period of transition for local police

<http://suffolktimes.timesreview.com/2016/03/66293/drownings-occurred-during-period-of-transition-for-local-police/>
03/09/2016 by Grant Parpan

On March 10, 1981, the Southold Town Board gathered for its regular meeting at Town Hall. On the agenda that Tuesday evening was discussion of a matter that would have an impact on the investigation into the deaths of William and Michelle Becker, Mattituck residents who would last be seen alive later that night.

The topic was the proposed elimination of the Suffolk County Police Department's 16-member Seventh Squad investigative unit. That night, Town Board members discussed how Southold might proceed with securing specialized resources for inquiries into crimes like murder and arson if the unit were ever disbanded.

Ten days later, it was announced that the Seventh Squad was to close by the end of the month, a cost-cutting move that records show put the investigation of the Beckers' deaths on hold for several weeks.

The closure of the investigative unit was the result of a budget dispute between East End supervisors and former county executive Peter Fox Cohalan. The 1981 county budget more than doubled the amount of money East End police departments would be required to pay for the detective service — to a total of nearly \$900,000, Southold Town records show.

No East End department would be more affected by the shutdown than Southold's, according to contemporary news articles. The department, which then employed just one detective, called on the Seventh Squad 527 times in 1980, according to a January 1981 Newsday story. No other police force called on the unit's investigators more than 350 times that year, and one used its services fewer than 50 times, according to the same article.

Southold Town Police Chief Carl Cataldo requested that the Town Board create three more detective positions within the town police department following the announced closure of the Seventh Squad, according to minutes from the April 7, 1981, Town Board work session. The promotion of three patrolmen to detective would be among the chief's final acts as head of the town's police force. In late May, he informed the board of his intention to step down, a move The Suffolk Times characterized as an "early retirement." The change in leadership would lead to a bitter dispute between the Town Board and the chief over his unused sick time. By July, he had sold his house in Peconic and was living in Florida, according to town records and past Suffolk Times articles.

In the last quote Chief Cataldo gave The Suffolk Times about the Becker case, on April 21, 1981, he questioned the status of the investigation. He said the Suffolk

County District Attorney's office hadn't given him much information about the case, which he said was "now more their case than mine."

A file from the original inquiry into the Beckers' deaths, which The Suffolk Times obtained in 2014 through Freedom of Information laws, indicates that between March 20 — the day it was announced the Seventh Squad was to shut down at the end of the month — and April 15, no interviews related to the Becker case were conducted. A new lead investigator from the county's homicide squad would not be assigned until mid-May, according to that detective's initial report.

The Suffolk Times reported Aug. 27, 1981, that a grand jury would be assigned to look at the case, but the Becker family says that never occurred.

"That was our family's disappointment," Ms. Becker's brother, Michael Malkush, said in an interview this week. "If it did, I probably wouldn't be talking to you right now."