

12-09-1983 – Port Clinton OH – Bruce Mettler – LEO – Plane Crash -Hypothermia

Deputy Sheriff Bruce E. Mettler

<https://www.odmp.org/officer/9249-deputy-sheriff-bruce-e-mettler>

Ottawa County Sheriff's Office, Ohio

End of Watch Friday, December 9, 1983

BRUCE E. METTLER

Deputy Sheriff Bruce Mettler, Sergeant Robert Rigoni of the Port Clinton Police Department, and Dispatcher Michael Sweeney of the Put-in-Bay Police Department were killed when the plane they were riding in crashed into Lake Erie.

The officers were travelling to assist a police chief on a neighboring island who was suffering a heart attack. All four occupants of the plane were killed in the accident.

Deputy Mettler was a U.S. Army veteran.



Four Killed In Put-in-Bay Plane Crash

<https://www.putinbayresort.com/put-bay-plane-crash/>

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One slow Friday night in December, Port Clinton Police Patrolman Don Gaydosh received a call from his fellow officer. That call would be a precursor to a deadly plane crash which would take the lives of four.

"We were working together. He actually called me to meet him on North Jefferson Street. He said, 'Can you handle it?' because we were just the two of us. He said, 'I've got to make a flight over to Kelleys (Island). Someone's having a heart attack,'" Gaydosh said. "He expected to be back in a couple of hours." That conversation was the last one Gaydosh, now a sergeant with the police force along the Lake Erie shoreline community had with Sgt. Robert Rigoni. "He was my sergeant, and he wanted to make sure I would be all right by myself," Gaydosh said.

This month marks the 25th anniversary of the plane crash which took the lives of Rigoni and three emergency medical personnel from Put-in-Bay — Bruce Mettler, Duane Dress, and Mike Sweeney. Kelleys Island Police Chief Norbert McKillips was having heart trouble, and the four men died trying to transport him for medical care on Dec. 9, 1983. "(Rigoni) went to the Port Clinton airport, picked up a plane, flew to Put-in-Bay, picked up the EMTs and then they went from Put-in-Bay to Kelleys and then when they got over by Kelleys, the best they can figure out, they hit a fog bank or something and went down."

Gaydosh did not learn of the accident until hours later. "They called me at home about midnight and said Bob's plane hadn't come back yet, and they thought he was down somewhere," he said.

"Dave Paulsen and I went up in an airplane with Terry Rudes the next day. We were looking," he said. The sergeant said he nearly missed his shift at work because of fog at the Port Clinton airport. He had to land at the Put-in-Bay Airport and take the Jet Express ferry back to the mainland. "It was scary, even in the daytime. It was really bad." The wreckage of the plane crash was found that day, Dec. 10. The bodies of the men were found two days later.

The men had drowned. According to Gaydosh, their bodies were found close together. "That was Bob's Navy training. Nobody gets left behind ... He got them all together, kept them all together," the sergeant said. "They were all within an arm's length of each other."

Gaydosh said he misses his friend's personality and sense of humor. "Bob could go into a room, and within five minutes he would be your friend. The thing is, he had one of those personalities, you either loved him or you hated him," he said. "He could arrest you today and tomorrow it's fine because that was yesterday and yesterday is in the past."

When asked if anything, in particular, triggered memories of Rigoni, Gaydosh answered, "The Benny Hill song," and laughed.

"He used to do this thing that would drive us all nuts. We'd all laugh at the same time," he said. "He'd throw his hat on backward, do the backward salute and you'd swear Benny Hill was in the room with you. He would do Charlie Chaplin ... when there was a dull moment he'd find a way to liven it up."

Rigoni was a loyal friend, Gaydosh said. "Bob could be everybody's best friend. He was just a really good person. No matter what you needed from him he was there to help you," he said. He was a great person to work with and there wasn't anything he wouldn't do to help the citizens or his fellow officers. He was just a good all-around person."

Valerie Mettler of Put-in-Bay, widow of Bruce Mettler, said if her husband could have chosen a way to die it would have been in the pursuit of helping someone.

"Absolutely, absolutely," she said. He also served as a deputy for the Ottawa County Sheriff's Office. On that December night, they had debated whether he should go on the flight to Kelleys Island.

"I think that in that line of work when you're working as a police officer, you're always thinking that today can be the last day," she said. "The last thing I said was, 'Don't worry. I'll take care of everything,' and that was it. The fog was very patchy that night. "We had tried several other ways and everybody was fogged in," she said. "It was like puffy clouds that were sitting on the ground when they took off."

There were no other options to get help to the other island, she said. "We had already tried all the different avenues of getting some kind of help over to Kelleys." Her husband had been in the 82nd Airborne and served on the Summit County Sheriff's Department. He also loved medicine. "I don't think he ever really wanted to do much else," Mettler said.

Sonya Dress of Put-in-Bay, widow of Duane Dress, also remembered the last conversation she had with her husband.

"He was going out the door that night to board the plane and he stopped at the door and said, 'I'm not sure when I'll be back,' and he kissed me and went out the door, and that was the last time I saw him," she said. "He was the last one that they pulled from the lake," she said. "We knew the ice was coming and they did everything that they could to find the bodies before the ice came."

She said she believed all four men would have been at peace with the fact that they died trying to help another.

"I'm sure they probably all would have gone that way," she said. "They were all very young. Everybody thinks about death. No one wants to die sooner than they have to, but I think that he thought that what he was doing was a good thing." She and her family still remember Dress every day. "Surely we miss him. It's been 25 years since the plane crash, but it still brings tears to my eyes. I wish he could have been able to know the rest of our grandchildren and that sort of thing."

Both women, who still reside on Put-in-Bay, remember Sweeney as a young man who seemed to find his way once he entered public service. Sweeney was part of the emergency medical service, a part-time dispatcher for the local police department and a member of the fire department. "He seemed to really be starting out to follow what he wanted to do," Dress said. "He'd been one of my high school students. He was a great guy," Mettler said. "He'd had some challenges. I think he admired Bruce and wanted to follow in his footsteps."

She said Sweeney planned to go to school to become an emergency medical technician before the plane crash. "He was a great kid. He was just a great kid," she said. Pat Chrysler, former Put-in-Bay Fire Department chief, said Sweeney had been through some hard times before he entered public service. "He had just found his niche, and he was not only on the fire department but he was a police dispatcher here at Put-in-Bay," Chrysler said.

"He had found something that he could do that he could really get a grip on and do well, and he loved the EMS runs." The former chief said Sweeney excelled at advanced cardiac life support calls like the one McKillips had needed that December night. "He felt that it was, as all of them, as all of us felt, that it's a service to the community," Chrysler said. He said everyone did his or her part in the rescue efforts. "It was a symphony of cooperation. It shows what a small community can do when they're called upon," he said. Chrysler said he thinks the plane crash incident has made first responders in the area more cautious.

"I take my hat off to all the volunteers all over America because they keep this country running, whether they're volunteering at Magruder Hospital or one of the EMS services or the fire department. Think where this country would be without all the volunteers," he said. "At this time of year, we've got a lot to be thankful for."