

# PONTIAC DAILY LEADER

## Fallen officers remembered in ceremony at PCC

By Erich Murphy

July 23, 2016



At 11 a.m. Friday, a group of people gathered on the front lawn of Pontiac Correctional Center to be part of a ceremony that remembered three brave souls who lost their life during a horrific event just a few yards away.

The event being remembered was the worst prison riot in Illinois history that took place on July 22, 1978. It was during the riot, that seemed a lifetime away on this peaceful yet balmy morning,

when Lt. William Thomas and Correctional Officers Robert Conkle and Stanley Cole lost their lives at the hands of inmates.

On hand for this special ceremony were family members of the three guards, as well family members of other PCC personnel who lost their lives in the line of duty at the prison.

Among those was a strong contingency of Frieda King family members wearing shirts with Mrs. King's smiling face on the front. She was killed in the prison in 1983, the first female IDOC employee to die in the line of duty in Illinois.

It was that event on July 22, 1978, that created the need for Friday's ceremony. It was put into focus by Warden Michael Melvin, who was just a kid living nearby when Pontiac Correctional Central exploded in a riot that drew national news.

"I remember that day very vividly," Melvin told the group of family members and larger throng of correctional officers and other officials. "I was in fourth grade and I remember seeing a swarm of state police vehicles across the street from my house.

"My mom broke the news to me. She told me the inmates had started a riot and that my dad was on duty inside the prison.

"I was filled with a mix of emotions, a heavy weight came over me," Melvin continued. "I was worried about my dad, just wishful that I would see him walk through the doors of my house when it was over. He did.

"Not every child had the opportunity to hug their father again. We lost three men that day — Lt. William Thomas, Correctional Officer Stanley Cole and Correctional Officer Robert Conkle. Three men who committed their lives and took an oath to protect public safety. Three men who felt the same pride that my dad and I both felt when we put on that uniform and walked into Pontiac Correctional Center to serve as officers.

"But these three men had an honor of service that I cannot boast of," Melvin said. "Each of them suited up in a uniform that, I'm sure, made their hearts swell with pride as they served in the United State military. They put themselves on the front lines and fought in battles that have guaranteed the freedoms you and I enjoy today.

"We are forever thankful for that and we honor their bravery. We will never forget the sacrifice they made here at Pontiac Correctional Center."

Melvin continued his speech, one that was emotional at times, by pointing out there were those who also fell while on duty at other times in PCC's nearly 150-year history.

"But they aren't the only ones who died in the line of duty at Pontiac," Melvin said. "Today we are also honoring the lives of the other correctional officers and staff members who were killed

while working here, like Frieda King, the food service supervisor who was stabbed by an offender in 1983.

“Mrs. King served with the department for just over two years but is widely believed she was the first female law enforcement official killed in the line of duty in this state. She had a large family — children, sisters, brothers — who loved her deeply. Some of them are with us today. I’m sure the pain they have to endure for the past 33 years is not easy. The burden of her loss is not light.”

Another reason for the ceremony was recognizing that Thomas, Cole and Conkle also served in the military. Currently, it is thought that these are the only three of the 10 who have died while serving on staff at PCC who also served in the military.

“The thing that I think is great about the three men is that they served their country and they returned back to Illinois to serve their state,” Ed Long, president of the Livingston County War Museum and Dal Estes Education Center, told the audience. “They are very special in our hearts in the museum, they’re very special to all of our visitors. I think these three men represent the best of the best.

“Their uniforms have been on display at the museum for the past two years and their have been thousands of visitors who have humbly heard their story and recognize these are very special men. They must never be forgotten.”

The IDOC Honor Guard presented the colors and the ceremony included the playing of “Taps” and, on the bagpipes, “Amazing Grace.”

A presentation of 10 roses was made to family members of fallen officers by correctional officers. The first officer killed in the line of duty at PCC was in 1919 while it was still the boys’ reformatory.

Afterward the ceremony, Melvin explained what this event meant.

“On a personal and professional level, to have the opportunity to be the warden and to be able to present a ceremony of this nature means everything to me,” he said. “It’s what my job is about — to give back to the community and give back to the people who have made the sacrifices so I can be here now.

“All we can do is honor their sacrifices. It’s such a great magnitude. This ceremony pales in comparison to what they gave to us. The loss is still felt.”

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