

RANGER JULIE WEIR
SERIOUS ACCIDENT INVESTIGATION
FACTUAL REPORT

Motor Vehicle Accident



February 24, 2011

RANGER JULIE WEIR SERIOUS ACCIDENT INVESTIGATION FACTUAL REPORT

Introduction

Due to the geographical and jurisdictional complexity of this incident, Associate Director, Visitor and Resource Protection, Steve Shackelton, determined that this investigation would best be coordinated by the Washington Office, Risk Management Division (RMD). Richard Powell, Chief, RMD, was assigned this task, and was advised to use a modified Serious Accident Investigation approach.

In essence, the primary purpose of this inquiry is to explore the cascade of events that culminated in the loss of a valued National Park Service (NPS) employee. It is an attempt to identify practices and/or procedures that merit reevaluation with the intent of improving employee safety. This was accomplished primarily through interviews with those who Ranger Weir communicated with prior to and during her trip, and from the Nebraska State Patrol accident investigation report.

The NPS jurisdictions associated with this incident include the National Park Service Law Enforcement Training Center (NPS-LETC), and the Northeast (NER), Midwest (MWR), Pacific West and Alaska Regions. The following personnel were selected by their central offices, to conduct interviews and collect information relating to Ranger Weir's trip to Yosemite and her fatal accident: Tammie Keller, NPS-LETC; U. S. Park Police Capt. William Davis, NER; John Madden, Senior Staff Ranger, MWR; Jeff Sullivan, Special Agent, Yosemite National Park (YOSE); and Tim Steidel, Chief Ranger, Klondike Gold Rush National Historic Park (KLGO).

Incident Summary

On Thursday, February 24, 2011, NPS Ranger Julie Weir was killed in a motor vehicle accident while en route from her previous duty station at Independence National Historical Park (INDE) to her Field Training Park (FTEP) at Yosemite National Park. Her ultimate destination following the FTEP assignment was Alaska, where she had recently accepted a new assignment at KLGO.

While traveling westbound on Interstate 80 through the state of Nebraska, Ranger Weir encountered inclement weather that resulted in a light covering of snow on the road surface. Ranger Weir was operating her privately-owned vehicle (POV), a 1998 Toyota Tacoma pick-up truck. Near the town of Kearney, she lost control of her vehicle and skidded across the center median into the path of oncoming traffic. An eastbound tractor-trailer truck impacted the driver's side of Weir's vehicle, forcing it back into the median where it came to rest. Ranger Weir was killed instantly. It is unknown if Ranger Weir was wearing a seatbelt at the time of impact, but due to the severity of the damage inflicted by the tractor trailer truck, the seatbelt

would likely not have altered the outcome of the incident. She was on full duty travel status at the time of the accident.

Chronology

10/12/10 – 2/15/11 – Attended NPS-LETC in the Land Management Police Training 101 session.

1/11 - Accepted a new duty station, transferring from INDE to KLGO, Alaska; tentative time to enter on duty sometime mid to late May after FTEP assignment.

1/21/11 – Assigned to YOSE for her FTEP with Special Agent Scott Jacobs as her Field Training Lead (FTL).

2/8/11 – E-mail from Ranger Weir to FTL Jacobs advising of concern for getting to YOSE by 2/26/11 with an approximate driving distance of 3000 miles.

2/11/11 – NPS-LETC FTEP Manager Ranger Greg Jackson and FTL Jacobs consult and agree on allowing flexibility in arrival time for traveler safety. Ranger Weir advised and requests arrival date of 2/28/11.

2/12/11 - FTL Jacobs agrees via e-mail to Ranger Weir with her first shift beginning 3/1/11.

2/13/11 –2/15/11 – NPS-LETC graduation, attended by mother, Diana, sister Cory and cousins Lesley and Vincent. Overnight at Glynco, GA.

2/16/11 – Departed Glynco, in afternoon en route to Philadelphia; overnight in Richmond Hill, GA, 75 miles north of Glynco, GA, checking in at the Comfort Suites Hotel (check-in and check-out times have not been determined).

2/17/11 – Arrived in Philadelphia, 738 miles north of Richmond Hill, GA.

2/18/11 – Turned in her law enforcement gear, packed for move to KLGO, planned to meet with movers.

2/19-20/11 – Continued packing for move, spent time with friends, went shopping.

2/21/11 – Movers arrived. Ranger Weir finished packing personal items to be shipped to KLGO, and after dinner with friends, departed Philadelphia heading west to avoid potential problems associated with impending snowfall that was forecast for the Philadelphia metropolitan area. She stopped overnight in Exton, PA, 30 miles west of Philadelphia, checking in at the Fairfield Inn at 11:09 p.m. Her plans were to visit with her mother in Salt Lake City en route on 2/25/11. She had a dental appointment there as well. She also had plans to visit a friend from the U.S. Forest Service in California prior to going to YOSE. Shortly after leaving Philadelphia, Ranger Weir had four new tires installed.

2/21/11 – Posted final Facebook expressing concern for the weather throughout the I-80 corridor.

2/22/22 – Checked out of the Fairfield Inn at 8:13 a.m. and continued her journey west. She stopped at Champaign, IL, 737 miles west of Exton, PA, checking in at the Fairfield Inn at 9:11 p.m.

2/23 – Checked out of her hotel at 11:35 a.m. and stopped in Lincoln, NE, 543 miles west of Champaign, IL, checking in at the Fairfield Inn at 11:32 p.m. Salt Lake City is 882 miles due west of Lincoln, NE.

2/24 – Checked out of hotel at 9:00 a.m. iNote posted to Tim Steidel at KLGO indicating that she was driving extra since she expected snow to slow her down that day.

2/24 – Crash on I-80 at approximately 1250 hours, about four miles East of Kearney, Nebraska, and approximately 129 miles west of Lincoln, NE, the origin of her travel that day.

NOTES FROM INVESTIGATORS

The following summarized the information obtained by investigators:

NPS-LETC

- Ranger Weir was very positive about this opportunity to work in YOSE for FELP experience, and felt that she would get good experience there.
- Ranger Weir was specifically advised by NPS-LETC staff that she was expected to travel for 8 hours, which doesn't translate into miles. If she ran into bad weather, the 8 hours could be at 30 miles an hour, for example.
- She was very positive about her move to Alaska and actively communicated with KLGO Chief Ranger Tim Steidel.

Northeast Region

- She had planned her travel itinerary in general terms with a goal of hitting certain "benchmarks" along the way. Those benchmarks have not been identified.
- En route, she conveyed to friends that she had stopped along the way to have four new tires installed on her vehicle Wednesday or Thursday morning prior to the accident.
- She had expressed a mild nervousness about the impending field training assignment.
- In terms of her overall demeanor and mood, a consistent theme emerged during the interview process. Words and phrases such as "happy," "optimistic," "in good humor," "excited and upbeat," "beaming with excitement" and "in a good frame of mind" were notably recurrent. There is little to suggest that she felt stressed, harried, or fatigued.
- One friend had observed that Ranger Weir was "a competent person who was not easily ruffled," but had related a mild nervousness about her impending field training assignment, believing it could potentially be more demanding than the regimen of basic training. If there was any underlying sense of trepidation or anxiety, this was not apparent in her behavior. She had an enduring sense of optimism and pure joy.
- Ranger Weir's friends report she was fastidious about car care (it is said that she "loved" her pickup truck), no specific maintenance history is available.

Midwest Region

The role played by the MWR relating to this accident was primarily as liaison with the Nebraska State Patrol (NSP) and with Ranger Weir's family.

A synopsis of the NSP crash report is as follows:

"This report documents the activities of Trp. T. A. Suchsland #379 and Sgt. Bockstadter #127 of the Nebraska State Patrol concerning a crash reconstruction call involving a two vehicle crash near milepost 276 on I-80 in Buffalo County. Ranger Weir was operating a 1998 Toyota Tacoma pickup westbound on I-80. Ernest Nix was operating a 2011 Volvo semi truck/tractor with double trailers eastbound on I-80. Weir lost control of her vehicle on the icy/snow roadway. Weir's vehicle crossed the median, entered the eastbound lanes

and collided with the vehicle driven by Nix. Weir died as a result of crash. Trp. Suchsland and Sgt. Bockstadter assisted Trp. Hazard with the crash investigation.”

The report states the following conclusion:

“In considering the facts of this case and evidence presented, the cause of this crash is contributed to the driver of the Toyota pickup failing to keep her vehicle in the proper lane. The Toyota pickup left the roadway, slid through the median and entered the eastbound lanes in front of the eastbound Volvo truck/tractor with double trailers.”

This report describes the roadway as “icy/snowy, all covered,” temperature being 26 degrees Fahrenheit. Skid marks show Ranger Weir’s vehicle leaving the road essentially in a straight line, crossing the median and entering the east-bound lane.

The following additional information, which was not addressed in the report, was recently conveyed to John Madden via telephone from the NSP trooper who investigated the accident. I-80 is generally a very straight interstate highway, but this accident occurred at one of the few curves in the area. The skid marks at the scene show the vehicle leaving the roadway at the beginning of the curve, the vehicle traveling straight as the curve bends to the right. Beyond that, the report provides little insight into possible causal factors including estimated speed, distraction, fatigue, vehicle malfunction, cell phone use, etc.

Pacific West Region

This phase of the investigation was assigned to Special Agent Jeff Sullivan, YOSE. He conducted interviews with park personnel associated with the field training program and specifically those who had communicated with Ranger Weir. FTL Jacobs stated that he checked Ranger Weir’s trip plans and mileage and found that the trip worked out to approximately 490 miles per day, and would fit within an 8 hour work day. He stated that he has been told that the drive distance during official government travel was 350 miles minimum per day. On 2/12 FTL Jacobs advised Ranger Weir that it was a good plan and that he would see her on 1 March 2011 when she reported for duty.

Based on the information gathered, no evidence was found of undue pressure placed on Rgr. Weir to arrive at YOSE in a manner which would have caused her to feel that she had to rush.

Alaska Region

Chief Ranger Tim Steidel was Ranger Weir’s primary point of contact. Ranger Weir understood that her arrival in Skagway would be sometime in mid to late May but no leave or actual Permanent Change in Station move schedules had been negotiated. Ranger Weir had expressed to Chief Steidel her excitement at going to KLGGO and said that she couldn’t wait to get to Skagway. She had not indicated any concerns or stress to him about her field training assignment or the transfer to KLGGO.

Close

The direct cause of this fatal motor vehicle accident is the loss of control of her POV by Ranger Weir, with weather and road conditions playing contributing factors. Ranger Weir was aware of possible inclement weather conditions en route and had expressed some concern about that as well as having enough time to get to YOSE by the extended reporting date.

RANGER WEIR SERIOUS ACCIDENT INVESTIGATION BOARD OF REVIEW REPORT

Introduction

FINDINGS

Neither the factual report nor the Nebraska State Patrol report provides enough information to allow conclusions about the factors that lead to this fatal accident. Several issues raised during this investigation have been discussed in the past relating to the safety of trainees on travel to and from NPS-LETC and are reflected in the Recommendation section. There is nothing to link those concerns as causal factors in this incident, and the recommendations listed further below should not be construed as being related to the cause of this incident. What has been determined:

- Ranger Weir was generally up-beat about her field training assignment in YOSE and her new park assignment in KLGO following her FTEP.
- She had expressed to friends and associates what the Board believes to be normal concerns and anxieties about her new assignments, but nothing to suggest that she was distracted or to cause her to become dangerously distracted while driving.
- Ranger Weir realized that she was facing a long drive from Lincoln, Nebraska to reach Salt Lake City to be with her mother, and that she might encounter inclement weather en-route.
- She had planned to visit a friend in California after she left Utah and prior to entering YOSE. She was scheduled to arrive in YOSE on Feb. 28 and start her first shift March 1.
- Factors NPS-LETC considers when making FTEP assignments:
 - Trainee Developmental Needs: Areas identified during the NPS-LETC experience that suggest the need for further training
 - Objectivity: Effort to provide a neutral and objective experience under the mentorship of neutral observers: not a friend, or close former co-worker, and not someone who has a conflict with the employee
 - Cost: Proximity to the trainee's home park often minimizes total travel expenditures.
 - Special Needs: Occasionally trainees have special needs, such as newborn children, or close family members that are ill, or otherwise require special care or attention. An effort is made to accommodate these needs when possible by assigning them a location that
 - Trainee Preference: to expand their horizons, giving them an opportunity to experience different park environments and law enforcement challenges

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Convene a panel to evaluate current NPS guidelines for driving via POV/government vehicles while on authorized government travel. Explore and recommend methods to ensure that distances traveled by vehicle are safe and reasonable **(WASO/Risk Management/Oct 1, 2011)**.
2. Develop guidelines for supervisors to use in preparing an employee for an extended driving trip on official duty to include:
 - Obtaining a travel itinerary to use when scheduling the trip
 - Advising employee on the NPS “rules” governing travel time, distance, cell phone use, etc. and additional safety briefings as appropriate.
 - Use the principles of OL to evaluate the trip in terms of risk and actions to prevent mishaps **(WASO/Risk Management/Oct 1, 2011)**
3. Evaluate the FTEP to determine if there are any changes that can/should be made to improve the safety of the trainee from the time they leave NPS-LETC until they return to their home park **(WASO/LETC/Jan 1, 2012)**.