

County remembers fallen law officers

By Ryan Whisner, Union regional editor | Posted: Friday, May 16, 2014 9:08 am

JEFFERSON — Jefferson County law enforcement officials gathered Thursday to salute law enforcement officers who have fallen in the line of duty.

Tony Barthuly, Wisconsin Department of Justice Division of Law Enforcement Services Training and Standards Bureau director, keynoted the annual Law Enforcement Memorial Day Ceremony.

Organized by the Jefferson County Chiefs and Sheriff's Association, the event was held at the Jefferson County Fair Park Activity Center.

"We are gathered today to express a heartfelt tribute to the law enforcement professionals who serve us so well today and those who have sacrificed so much in the name of public safety," said Watertown Police Chief Tim Roets, serving as master of ceremonies for the event.

Roets recalled that it was President John F. Kennedy who in 1962 signed the law designating May 15 as Peace Officers Memorial Day and the seven days that surround it as National Police Week.

Following his brief remarks, he introduced Barthuly, who served for 32 years with the Fond du Lac Police Department, working his way up the ranks until his retirement as chief of police in 2011.

Prior to getting into administration, his background was in SWAT, firearms and defensive tactics.

"When I took over training and standards, I went there with a purpose to make sure the law enforcement officers that serve us have the best training possible," Barthuly said.

He pointed out that some departments don't have a field training officer program, sending officers on the road with only four hours of tactical considerations, no long gun courses, no wellness and no physical fitness requirements.

"To me, I felt that was remiss and needed to be changed," Barthuly said.

Over the past year, the director said, a new law was passed requiring new recruits graduating to have more than 700 hours of training, including that in long guns, fitness and the wellness.

"When I talk about fitness, I'm not expecting anybody to be in pro football player-type condition," Barthuly said, noting that it is more about the importance of leading a healthy lifestyle.

"As the law enforcement officers here know, it is a demanding job and it is not getting any easier," he said.

Barthuly said the wellness program addresses issues about how to stay financially sound, how to take care of yourself and find a listening ear or someone to whom one can vent, if needed.

He recalled that when he first started in law enforcement, attending counseling would have been seen as a sign of a weakness.

The retired chief said that when Fond du Lac Officer Craig Birkholz was killed in March 2011, it was a sign of

strength that officers went to get help and get back on track. He equated the tragedy to falling off a pier and needing someone to jump in and save you.

“That’s exactly what we’re trying to do with training,” he said.

Appearing as the keynote speaker Thursday, Barthuly thanked the Jefferson County law enforcement community for its activities and being well-trained and professional.

“It is an honor to be invited to this event and allow me to share my thoughts and pay tribute to you that serve and those who have served to protect us,” he said. “We are here to express our gratitude to the fallen officers and their families.”

Barthuly noted that there are law enforcement memorials taking place all over the country this week to pay tribute to those officers who gave their lives in the line of duty.

There will be colors present, wreaths laid, formal dress uniforms worn, black bands across badges and lone bugles sounding “Taps.”

He cited the song lyrics, “all gave some and some gave all.”

“We should always remember those that wear the badge to keep our community safe,” Barthuly said. “The law enforcement officers are the ones that roll in the blood, the mud; they fight in the snow, they enter those dark, gloomy buildings where there is an armed perpetrator inside without hesitation. These individuals are the ones that protect us so we can sleep soundly at night.”

He said law enforcement is a special calling.

“There are not too many professions were you run to a fight rather than away from a fight,” Barthuly said.

The state director said people should be thankful to the men and women who serve, working the night shifts and holidays, missing family gatherings, birthdays and sometimes anniversaries.

“Being called a law enforcement officer is a privilege, but most of all it is a calling,” he said. “Not everyone can do this job. I don’t think the average citizen realizes how much it takes to be a police officer and how much you take home and how much responsibility it truly is. I cannot think of a more honorable profession that one could serve.”

Barthuly thanked the officers and their families for their support and understanding. Then he shared his story about the officer killed under his command just three months prior to his retirement, in March 2011.

“It is the most gut-wrenching experience a law enforcement leader can have,” Barthuly said.

Officer Craig Birkholz had completed two tours in the U.S. Army and wanted to serve as a police officer. He picked Fond du Lac because that is where he wanted to raise a family.

Barthuly said Birkholz’s street address and badge number were identical: 67. He lived a few houses down from Barthuly’s parents and was constantly involved in department activities as a young officer.

“He was very goal-oriented,” he said, noting that Birkholz wanted to be the chief someday.

With that kind of attitude and only 18 months on the force, he was consistently razzed among his peers.

“Everybody respected him,” Barthuly said. “He was an outstanding young man, but most of all, he was an outstanding person. He was a good husband, son and a brother.”

Barthuly recalled Birkholz racing to the scene where another officer had been shot twice.

“Not only did he race to the scene, he left his squad car without hesitation and was shot twice,” Barthuly said.

He said Birkholz was fatally shot after he and another officer responded to a home on South Lincoln Avenue at approximately 6 a.m. for an emergency call. As the two approached the house, a suspect opened fire from the second floor, striking Birkholz, the other officer and a K9.

“Craig never knew what hit him and he died before he hit the ground,” Barthuly said.

During the standoff that followed, the suspect committed suicide.

“Watching and seeing Craig lying on the ground while our other officers were taking fire and putting us in such a helpless situation was unbelievable,” Barthuly said. “The Fond du Lac Police Department fared well that day or there would have been other officers lost. “

He noted that Officer Birkholz was truly a hero and it is shame he was not allowed to live the life he envisioned.

Citing the Bible, Barthuly referenced John 15:13, which states there is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.

“That is exactly how Craig Birkholz and many of the other fallen officers have died,” he said. “They gave all to protecting their fellow brothers and keeping their community safe.”

He stressed the importance of never forgetting those officers.

“We should remember those that have served and pay respect and tribute to those that are presently serving,” Barthuly said. “We should always be thankful to law enforcement officers for the service they provide and the dedication and commitment to keep us safe. We are so lucky to have these men and women ready and willing to serve their communities and keep their communities safe. You officers should hold your heads high and your family members should be so very proud of what you do for a living, following your calling. May God bless you, may you be safe.”

Following Barthuly’s remarks, the Greater Milwaukee Fire and Police Pipes and Drums band performed, followed by a rendition of “Taps” by Jefferson High School band member Michael Meyers.

The colors were posted and retired by Deputies Robert Meyer, Adam Kleist, Eli Wiedenfeld and Kyle Vande Zande, all of the Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office; Officer Laura Bohlman of the Watertown Police Department, Officer David Fritsche of the Lake Mills Police Department, and Officer Kevin Miller of the Fort Atkinson Police Department.

Prior to the ceremony, “The Star-Spangled Banner” was sung by Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office patrol secretary Brenda Nitardy