

HEROES: Article II

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HEROES



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Article II

The air was chilly and uninviting that December evening back in 1929. It was a few days after Christmas—Dec. 27, to be exact. Dusk was slowly enveloping the city. Pedestrian traffic was hobbled by the weather. The streets, particularly those in the Hill District, were deserted. The biting winds scattered a few snowflakes here and there. Their eerie whispers could have been a warning of impending tragedy.

Who knew that on that same evening shortly before 6 o'clock, three cocky, young hoodlums would cut a deck of cards for leadership in a crime that would result in the slaying of one of the "City's Finest" while in line of duty?

Who knew that this grisly deed would lead to life sentences in "Stony Lonesome" (penitentiary) for two of the culprits and a "wanted for murder" tag placed on the third?

Certainly none of the hoodlums knew this would happen. Fate was unkind to them. She failed to warn them.

MESSAGE OF DEATH

At 6:10 P. M., Lieut. James L. Hoban of the Centre Avenue Precinct, answered the telephone call which was to send him into action and popular Patrolman James Hughes to his death.

A grocery store, operated by Harry Langer, at 10 Emmett Street, had been held up



PTL. JAMES (JIM) HUGHES

... lieutenant posthumously

and robbed by three young thugs. They had rifled the cash register, robbed an em-

ploye of the store and a customer.

Hughes, a powerful, strapping man, weighing 225 pounds, and able to handle himself well, according to fellow officers and the city's underworld, was working in plainclothes. He and his partner, Patrolman Charles Pryor, had a reputation of knowing practically every "hood" in the Hill.

Following the call, Hughes and his superior officer responded.

HAILS PHYSICIAN'S CAR

After obtaining descriptions of the suspects, Hughes commanded Dr. William Bailey's automobile and ordered the physician to drive up Centre Avenue.

As the car neared Francis Street, Plainclothesman Hughes saw the trio hurrying along the street. He jumped out of the auto and ordered the three sus-

pects to put up their hands. They obeyed.

Officer Hughes recognized the "hoods" as Johnny Franklin, Charles Ricks Jr. and Demmie Wilkins Jr., all of the Hill District.

Dr. Bailey told police that as the three suspects raised their hands, one of them slipped behind a telephone pole and fired a shot at Plainclothesman Hughes. The gallant officer, without flinching, returned the fire.

After the leaden exchange, Plainclothesman Hughes, his gun empty, lay sprawled on the ground ... his hand

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—BIGGEST and the BEST—

HEROES IN BLUE

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clutching at a gaping hole near his heart, from which flowed the red blood of courage.

Plainclothesman Hughes was taken to Passavant Hospital, where he was pronounced "dead on arrival." Another brave police officer had died in line of duty while serving the city of Pittsburgh and its people.

Ricks and Wilkins were captured in May, 1930, by another crack Negro officer, William (Big Bill) Smith. They were given life sentences in Western Penitentiary. Franklin, who was accused of being the trigger man, escaped.

A MODEL POLICEMAN

According to those who knew him, Jim Hughes typified the highest standards of the police force. He was well-liked by his fellow officers and feared by the criminal ilk.

Colleagues described him as being of "powerful mind and body and knew what it was all about." He was a credit to the Police Bureau, they agreed.

The late Mayor Charles H. Kline made Patrolman Hughes a lieutenant, posthumously. He had been appointed a patrolman Nov. 7, 1906, and was transferred later to "plainclothes," where he and Pryor distinguished themselves in grand fashion.

On one occasion, a murder occurred in the Lower Hill District in the late afternoon. Hughes and Pryor did not come on duty until 9 P. M. They investigated the slaying and learned that the suspect had fled to Baltimore, Md.

They went to Baltimore, virtually "kidnapped" the suspect and returned him to Pittsburgh,

within a matter of hours, to stand trial.

STICKLER FOR DETAIL

Hughes was a stickler for detail, fellow officers pointed out.

One time, a veteran officer, still on the force, was hospitalized because a suspect whom he had been questioning, threw red pepper in his eyes. The officer was temporarily blinded. Yet, he was able to give Hughes and Pryor a hazy description of his assailant, who was a woman living in the Hill District.

The officer-patient, though unable to see clearly at the time, happened to mention that the woman had a small mole near the corner of her mouth.

One evening, while Hughes and Pryor were leaving the hospital (after their daily visit to their colleague), Hughes noticed an influenza patient on the same floor. She was the woman who had thrown the pepper. Hughes recognized her by the mole on her face!

PUBLIC OWES A DEBT

Good officers, like "Jim" Hughes are hard to replace.

Words of praise are not always sufficient for their widows and children whom they leave behind.

The Widows' and Children's Pension Fund of the Police Department renders some assistance to the survivors of those brave "Heroes in Blue" who died in line of duty.

Each year, a Police Circus is held at Forbes Field for the benefit of this fund. This year, it will be held July 28-29-30. The entire proceeds of the event will go into the fund. You know what you can do for this worthy cause. All policemen have tickets. It is our duty, as citizens, to see that the deeds of valor, performed by the deceased, do not go unrewarded.

Next Week—The Christmas of 1946 was the saddest experienced in the life of Mrs. Laura Spencer. She had been left a widow the evening before, when her husband, Louis, a sub-patrolman, was slain during a gun battle with a prowler on Erin Street, while the couple was Christmas Eve shopping.