

For Immediate Release

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Vernon George Fortin

Commissioned - March 18, 1922
End of Watch - September 30, 1923



Washington Highway Patrol Officer Vernon Fortin died on September 30, 1923, five days after a motorcycle collision with a fellow officer while in route to the Lynden Fair for traffic duty. Patrolman Fortin was seriously injured and was transported to a Bellingham hospital where he succumbed to pneumonia. He was 24 years old.

Patrolman Fortin (WSP commissioned officers were not referred to as Troopers until 1963) had been with the agency for 18 months after a 3 1/2 year stint in the US Army during WWI. The combat veteran was the product of a hard working Skagit Valley farm family and left behind two small children, a grieving widow, and a heartbroken agency that numbered roughly 20 officers at the time. He was the first of 30 WSP personnel to die in the line of duty in the agency's century of operations. Nearly a century has passed since his loss and the State of Washington still remembers his service and sacrifice with gratitude and honor.

BIO

The Washington State Patrol's first fallen officer dedicated his young life to service.

Highway Patrolman Vernon George Fortin, 24, was the product of a hard-working farming family born on December 16, 1898, to Napoleon S. Fortin and Effie F.E. Fortin in Mount Vernon, WA. Raised on the family farm, Fortin and his four brothers, Clement, Joseph, Michael and Frank, grew up in the Skagit Valley and attended school in Mount Vernon.

At just 17, Fortin joined the U.S. Army on May 16, 1916, as a private in Company C, 3rd Army M.P. Battalion in the midst of World War I. First stationed at Camp Murray, WA, Fortin was later transferred to Camp Mills in New York. The United States joined allied forces in World War I on April 6, 1917, and Fortin deployed overseas to France and Germany. Fortin served in the regions of Chateau-Thierry, Soissons, St. Mihiel and Argonne in France during his 20 months of duty overseas.

Fortin met his future wife, Jeanne Marie, during his tour. The couple married in Coblenz, Germany on July 14, 1919. The pair returned to the United States where Fortin mustered out at Camp Hoboken in New Jersey on August 15, 1919. The Fortins returned to the Skagit Valley and had two children: a daughter, Marcelle, and son, Paul.



Fortin's need to serve did not end with his discharge from the military. On March 18, 1922, he was commissioned with the newly formed Washington State Highway Patrol and assigned to Whatcom and Skagit counties.

December 1922 - The first known photo of the Washington Highway Patrol. The agency would not have uniforms until 1924. The photo includes Fortin (back row – third from right) as well as Orin Leidy (far right) the agency's second supervisor, and L.D. McArdle (front row -far right) who directed the state's Department of Efficiency. DOE oversaw operations until 1933 when after depression-era protests in Olympia, the agency was granted full law enforcement powers, came under the direct supervision of the Governor, and changed its name to the Washington State Patrol.

END OF WATCH

Washington Highway Patrol Officer Vernon Fortin died on September 30, 1923, five days after a motorcycle collision with fellow officer, Benny Rousch. Both were in route to the Lynden Fair for traffic duty when while trying to make room for another vehicle their handlebars locked together. Patrolman Fortin seriously injured his leg and shoulder trying to jump clear and was transported to a Bellingham hospital where he succumbed to pneumonia. He was 24 years old.

Following his death, Fortin's wife, Jeanne, returned to France with their three-year-old daughter and two-year-old son returning to the Mount Vernon area five years later. Jeanne taught French and later married Edward Crandall. Fortin's son Paul passed away in 2003. His daughter, Marcelle Gorman, age 99, lives in New Jersey. She visited the National Law Enforcement Officer's Memorial Wall in Washington D.C. for the first time to honor her father in 2017.



The Washington State Patrol will always remember Highway Patrolman Vernon Fortin. His sacrifice would be the first of 30 during the agency's 100 years of service to the state of Washington. Though the agency's name and uniforms, as well as officer ranks and titles changed through the years, the Fortin name and the photo of him smiling astride his Indian Motorcycle are iconic symbols of the service and sacrifice that have become hallmarks of the organization. We will not forget him.

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