

Check Out This Beat

Construction noise, traffic jams, and rap music exploding in all directions from tricked out cars that undulate up and down defying the rules of physics. They're all part of what we see on a daily basis as cops. Valleys defined by towering office buildings, busses and trucks obstructing sight lines, and billboards attacking our psyches on a constant basis—that's the lot of big city police.

Contrast that image with this one: a pristine, 4,200 acre conservation easement containing two rapidly flowing rivers, the Rappahannock and Rapidan, thick woods rife with wildlife, and soaring cliffs sheltering one of the nation's most precious symbols—the majestic bald eagle. If you'd call working in this environment your dream job, you'd be echoing the sentiments of Fredericksburg, Virginia Police Officer Lee Sillitoe. These are his stomping grounds—his beat.

Over a year ago, the city hired him to protect and create a stewardship for this precious gift of nature, one that extends 25 miles meandering through five counties. In searching for an ideal candidate to embrace this task, the city culled him from a herd of applicants over 100 strong. Some of those who applied had science backgrounds;



others had military or law enforcement experience. Some were from the world of academia. However, none possessed the complete package that Sillitoe offered. A retired Marine from Quantico, VA, he was a crew chief in the Presidential Helicopter Unit, as well as a rescue swimmer. He spent his last year of active duty over in the sandbox.

After leaving the Corps, the military sent him to Mary Washington University, in Fredericksburg, where he received

a Geological Science degree in Geomorphology. His expertise focused on sedimentation, erosion, and other environmental impacts around waterways. Inasmuch as he did his independent study on the Rappahannock River, clearly the city had found their perfect "Water Cop," a scientist with a gun.

Lee graduated from the Rappahannock Regional Criminal Justice Academy, granting him the same police powers that every cop has. He thought that his Marine experience would suffice until he learned during his academy training about things like officer survival, winning mindset, action versus reaction, and other concepts that delineate a

police officer's job from that of a soldier. He found the rules of engagement to be quite disparate, and had to shift gears from the proactive military mode to the reactive that law enforcement must operate under.

As dissimilar as his job is from that of other cops, there are just as many similarities. His police cruiser is a pickup truck, complete with a rack which holds his canoe. In the bed of the vehicle is his ATV, which he uses to patrol the two tracks and trails that crisscross the property. The winch on the front of his truck allows him to extricate himself from mud and deep ditches; a chainsaw and axe help him to access or clear areas that need investigating.

One universal problem that impedes his ability to work efficiently is communication. He has yet to have a radio installed in his truck; he's making do with an HT. The difficulty arises from receiving only his department's signal. As he travels through and works within the five counties, he has no common channel. He may see another police unit roaring by, lights and siren activated, and he will have no clue as to the nature of the emergency. Sound familiar? More often than not, his cell phone is his only life line.

Another obstacle that he faces is working alone. He is "The Cop" for 25 miles of water and woods. If he gets in a jam with hunters, anglers, or people out riding ATVs where they shouldn't ride them, or for that matter, driving them drunk, he's a one-man unit. Help is a long way off.

The inherent danger in rough terrain and moving water poses its own threat. If he should become injured from a fall, his ATV tips over, or even an attack from the occasional black bear, he's all alone. He's learned to carry a personal GPS unit to help pinpoint his location. In addition, one of his tasks is to map the entire strip of land so that it can be plotted via GPS. That will aid in not only locating him, but finding hikers in trouble, environmental problems, and a myriad of other items that need identifying.

Officer Sillitoe points out that one of the big benefits that his assignment affords him is the ability to set his own hours. He attends no roll call, but he may work weekends or afternoons, sometimes even camping overnight somewhere in the woods just to get a sense of what's going on within his beat during a 24 hour period. Another advantage is simply being outdoors patrolling on foot. Hiking and covering areas inaccessible by motorized vehicle allows him to stay fit and trim. His whole shift demands that he be able to climb a steep cliff, or traverse an area of thick undergrowth. It's not a job for a sedentary person, but Lee is an avid backpacker who has hiked the Appalachian Trail. This job is a perfect fit for the former Marine turned cop.

The bureaucracy of working in five counties is burdensome. Just imagine having many different court dates, five administrations to be dealt with—judges, bailiffs, decorum and different protocol in each courtroom—it's enough to baffle anyone trying to keep straight the different personalities and idiosyncrasies of each venue. However, Lee knows that no job is perfect and that his brothers and sisters in law enforcement all have their own challenges unique to their jurisdictions.

As he moves further along in his second career, he's enjoying learning the job. He's discovered that even though he's not the typical street cop, things that are instrumental in solving crimes and making arrests in the big city, like informants and sources, are just as important to a scientist-cop. Sillitoe will hang around county stores just to listen and talk with the locals. Many times, they will drop a hint about someone or something amiss down by the river. Human intel is just as critical on the water as it is on the street.

Although not complaining, Lee hopes that the City will add another officer to assist him in protecting this valuable watershed. When you think about the difficulty of policing 25 miles of mostly inaccessible land, you can clearly see the need for more than one person. But right now if you're lucky enough to be down by the Rappahannock River in Fredericksburg, you may see him trudging through the woods or paddling his canoe. If you do, tell him that John said, "Hi!"

Stay safe brothers and sister!