

## **Trooper of the Year – 2018**

### **Troop One, Post A**

#### **TFC James C. Welsh**

TFC Welsh is a dependable trooper who always reports to work early with a sharp appearance and excellent attitude. TFC Welsh is always willing to have adjustments made to his schedule for coverage and to assist with special enforcement efforts within the Post. During 2018, TFC Welsh apprehended 62 DUI motorists. TFC Welsh also served as a Field Training Officer during the year and assisted with traffic control during the USC Football Games.

TFC Welsh did not allow working specials to deter his enforcement efforts. TFC Welsh made exceptional use of his patrol time, which kept him among the top enforcement troopers in the post and Troop. TFC Welsh is also certified as a DRE Officer, which results in him being called out on his time off to assist other troopers and officers within Sumter and Clarendon Counties with DUI cases where the arrestee may be driving under the influence of a substance other than alcohol.

TFC Welsh performs these duties without complaining, which is further evidence that he is committed to removing DUI motorists from the roadways of South Carolina and doing his part to reach the goal of Target Zero.

### **Troop Two/Post B**

#### **F/Sgt. J.C. Gambrell**

On April 13, 2018, at approximately 12:40 p.m., First Sergeant J. C. Gambrell was patrolling South Main Street in Greenwood County. While waiting on a traffic light to change, he heard several gun shots in rapid succession. He noticed two silver sedans side by side. The furthest sedan was rolling forward and he noticed that the right front passenger window was shattered. F/Sgt. Gambrell saw that the passenger in the vehicle was slumped over in his seat. The other sedan made a right turn onto US-25 and sped away at a high rate of speed.

F/Sgt. Gambrell advised dispatch that shots were fired, and he was in pursuit of the vehicle. He eventually got close to the vehicle and provided dispatch with the tag number, description, and make of the vehicle. The driver jumped out of the sedan while it was still in motion on Maple Wood Circle and fled on foot. First Sergeant J. C. Gambrell gave the arriving police units a description of the violator. A

perimeter was set up to search for the violator. Corporal Heitzenrater with State Transport Police got a tip that the violator was hiding in a trash bin at a resident on Vine Street. The subject was located inside the trash bin and arrested without incident. The violator was charged with Attempted Murder, Possession of a Weapon during the Commission of a Violent Crime, Failure to Stop for Blue Lights, and Driving under Suspension.

In another incident, On October 23, 2018 at approximately 1212 hours, SCHP dispatch gave out a BOLO for a White Chevrolet Blazer that was recently reported stolen from a gas station on SC-121 in Newberry County. While traveling eastbound on Interstate 26 at approximately the 87 mile-marker, Gambrell and another trooper noticed a vehicle matching the description of the stolen vehicle. First Sergeant Gambrell attempted to perform a traffic stop on the vehicle. First Sergeant Gambrell pursued the vehicle eastbound on Interstate 26. The vehicle was passing traffic in the emergency lane and driving in a reckless manner. First Sergeant Gambrell was beginning to position himself to initiate a PIT maneuver when the violator swerved to the right making contact with the left front side of First Sergeant Gambrell's patrol car. The pursuit continued for a short distance after the collision, until the violator pulled to the right shoulder of the roadway and stopped. The violator was then taken into custody without further incident.

### **Troop 3, Post D**

#### **Trooper Colby B. Grigg**

Trooper Grigg began his career with the South Carolina Highway Patrol in June of 2016. Prior to joining the ranks of the South Carolina Highway Patrol, he attended and graduated from the University of South Carolina with a Bachelor's Degree in Criminal Justice. Trooper Grigg was assigned to Spartanburg County. Last year, Trooper Grigg worked hard to reduce the fatality rate in Spartanburg County, issuing 2,586 public contacts in 2018. He investigated 383 collisions, including two fatalities. Trooper Grigg also apprehended 20 impaired drivers and made seven drug cases.

In March 2018, Trooper Grigg responded to a call of a vehicle traveling the wrong way on Interstate 26 near Interstate 85. Trooper Grigg was able to locate the vehicle traveling the wrong way and successfully stop it. The driver was found to be under the influence of alcoholic beverages and illegal drugs. Due to Trooper Grigg's quick response, he was able to prevent a head-on collision that would have most likely resulted in a fatality.

In June 2018, Trooper Grigg attempted to stop a vehicle for speeding and a seatbelt violation. The driver of the vehicle failed to stop resulting in a vehicle pursuit. The suspect eventually stopped and fled on foot into a heavily wooded area. Trooper Grigg was unable to pursue the suspect on foot due to a passenger being in the vehicle. Shortly thereafter, a 911 call came in from a homeowner in the immediate area, reporting that the suspect had forced his way into his residence resulting in a home invasion. He assaulted the homeowner and then attempted to steal his vehicle.

Trooper Grigg, along with the assistance of the Spartanburg County Sheriff's Office, was able to take the suspect into custody without further incident. The vehicle the suspect was driving was stolen and the suspect claimed to have a bomb in the trunk of the vehicle. The Spartanburg County Sheriff's Office Bomb Squad responded and determined there was not a bomb in the trunk. A deceased subject was found in the trunk of the vehicle and the suspect Trooper Grigg had in custody was ultimately charged with murder.

**Troop Four, Post A**  
**L/Cpl. Paul M. Wilkins**

L/Cpl. Paul M. Wilkins has served the citizens of Cherokee County and the State of South Carolina since he was a teenager working as a volunteer firefighter and later as a reserve deputy. Wilkins joined the South Carolina Highway Patrol in 2012 and was assigned to Troop 3 Post D (Spartanburg County). In 2015, he transferred to Troop 4, Post A (Cherokee/Union).

In 2018, L/Cpl. Wilkins was involved in incidents that resulted in several felony charges, including an incident where he was injured in the line of duty when he was stabbed in the shoulder by a violator. In October, L/Cpl. Wilkins responded to a BOLO on I-85 at the 96 mile marker. L/Cpl. Wilkins located the violator's vehicle on SC 329 and he attempted to conduct a traffic stop. The violator fled and L/Cpl. Wilkins engaged in a vehicle pursuit. L/Cpl. Wilkins was being assisted by another trooper who attempted to perform a rolling roadblock, but as he passed the violator's vehicle, the violator swerved into the assisting trooper's vehicle, forcing him off the roadway.

The pursuit continued until the violator stopped his vehicle in the lane of travel and backed into the front of L/Cpl. Wilkins' patrol car, which caused the violator's vehicle to become stuck on the front end of the patrol car. The driver then exited

the vehicle and started to flee carrying an unknown object. L/Cpl. Wilkins advised the violator several times to drop the object before he turned to run.

After a short foot pursuit, the subject stopped and the officer attempted to take the violator into custody. It was then determined the object was a machete. Another officer took the machete from the violator. After the violator was apprehended, it was determined that L/Cpl. Wilkins had been stabbed by the violator in the right rear shoulder; however, he was treated and released from the hospital. The violator had approached two other individuals with this machete, one on the interstate and one in the parking lot of a restaurant. This violator was charged with two counts of Attempted Murder, Assault & Battery 1<sup>st</sup> Degree, Assault & Battery 3<sup>rd</sup> Degree, and three counts of Malicious Damage to patrol vehicles. L/Cpl. Wilkins returned to work full duty without permanent damage from the assault.

This incident has not stopped L/Cpl. Wilkins from performing his duties. His activity for the year consists of 1,371 cases, and he investigated 108 traffic collisions, including three fatal collisions.

L/Cpl. Wilkins is a certified field training officer, and a graduate of USC Upstate with a BS Degree in Criminal Justice.

**Troop Five, Post B**  
**TFC Frank A. Virzi**

TFC Virzi has a positive attitude and strong work ethic. TFC Virzi joined the Highway Patrol in January of 2015. During 2018, he totaled 1,050 cases, made 29 DUI arrests, issued 473 seat belt citations and investigated 118 collisions. He was also recognized at a ceremony by the Florence Breakfast Optimist Club for his positive attitude and outstanding work ethic.

On May 15, 2018, TFC Virzi received a BOLO for a vehicle which was involved in a road rage incident. The offender had fired a handgun from her vehicle, striking the victim's vehicle. TFC Virzi, along with a Marion County Deputy, were able to locate the suspect vehicle and conducted a felony traffic stop. The offender was taken into custody without further incident and was subsequently charged with attempted murder. TFC Virzi has been married to his wife, Jennifer, for 24 years and they have one child, an 18 year old son Joshua. TFC Virzi is well respected by his co-workers and supervisors, and in his spare time, he and his wife enjoy restoring old houses.

**Troop Six, Post A**  
**L/Cpl. Paul V. Yacobozzi**

Lance Corporal Yacobozzi is a true example of a South Carolina State Trooper. Lance Corporal Yacobozzi has continued to show his dedication to the Highway Patrol's mission of reducing fatal collisions by his standard of leading not only the Post in overall activity, but the entire Troop. Lance Corporal Yacobozzi made 1,576 public contacts, 1,680 cases, 864 warnings, 932 restraint violations, 36 vulnerable roadway users, 21 DUI arrests and 3 drug cases in 2018.

He is one of Post A's most experienced Field Training Officers. He continues to train new Troopers and is always motivated to teach and advise. All of his trainees are a mirror of his professional behavior as well as his work ethic. Throughout this process of training over the last few years Lance Corporal Yacobozzi has maintained a positive attitude towards training. He ensures each trainee receives the proper instruction and is ready to be a one man unit by the end of the FTO process.

Lance Corporal Yacobozzi is a peer leader. He continues to be the go-to guy for all of his peers for his extensive knowledge of SCDPS policy and procedure as well as South Carolina state law. Lance Corporal Yacobozzi is also an instructor in Driving and Speed Measurement devices. In addition, Lance Corporal Yacobozzi is Drug Recognition Expert.

Lance Corporal Yacobozzi does all of these things without any expectation of recognition. He has a love for the educating the public and an overall drive to ensure not only his personal success, but the success of his peers, his supervisors and the department as a whole.

**Troop Seven, Post C**  
**L/Cpl. Daniel L. Wright**

On June 24th, 2017, while assisting in a fatal collision on I-20 at the 39 mm, Trooper Wright was standing at the driver's side door of a Lexington County fire truck when a vehicle struck the truck causing the driver to sustain fatal injuries, and minor injuries to both firefighters inside the truck. As a result of the impact, Trooper Wright was tossed approximately 20 feet and landed on the roadway causing injuries to the rear of his head, elbows, feet, and causing extensive facial injuries.

He was transported to Palmetto Richland Hospital by EMS where he was treated for about ten hours. While at Palmetto Richland, x-rays revealed a cracked skull, broken orbital sockets, a broken nose, six teeth knocked out of socket, dislocated jaw, right elbow laceration to the bone, and four toes on his right foot were broken. As a result of this collision, Trooper Wright suffered a Traumatic Brain Injury, and has had multiple visits to various hospital/doctor office.

Although Trooper Wright suffered from this roughly nineteen months ago, he is still very much dealing with this on a daily basis while maintaining a very positive attitude. Trooper Wright's activity for the year (2018) consisted of 1,227 cases, 592 warnings, 259 collisions, 22 DUI cases, and 225 seatbelt cases.

On August 28, 2018, Trooper Wright was en-route to the hospital to check on a patient from a collision that he had just cleared. As Trooper Wright was entering US-1 from SC-125 exit ramp in Aiken County, he observed a man lying on the ground next to a bicycle. At first, the individual wasn't moving and Trooper Wright began talking with him, finally getting him to respond. While talking with him, Trooper Wright noticed that he was not perspiring. This was a red flag to Trooper Wright as heat index was around the 100 mark.

Trooper Wright notified SCHP dispatch to send an ambulance to his location. While waiting on EMS, Trooper Wright placed Mr. Dixon in his patrol vehicle so he could begin to cool down and gave him some of his own water and energy drink. Once EMS arrived on scene, they advised he was in a serious state of dehydration and immediately transported him to the emergency room in Augusta, Georgia for treatment. Trooper Wright went above and beyond to help this person in a great time of need and his quick instincts could've saved Mr. Dixon's life that day.

**Troop Eight SIT/Post 6**  
**L/Cpl. Leon C. Porter**

Lance Corporal Leon C. Porter has been with the Highway Patrol for 13 years. He was assigned to Troop 7, Orangeburg County before joining Troop 8 in January of 2017. L/Cpl. Porter is currently assigned to the Safety Improvement Team with a specific emphasis on work zone enforcement. L/Cpl. Porter is a true asset to the Safety Improvement Team and the Highway Patrol in many ways.

L/Cpl. Porter always gives the extra effort, sacrifice and selfless service to his co-workers, supervisors, the Highway Patrol and the motoring public. Through his many roles as a State Trooper L/Cpl. Porter continues to keep his enforcement program geared to reducing collisions and saving lives through enforcement and education. L/Cpl. Porter takes extra time with each traffic stop, educating the motoring public on ways to prevent highway fatalities. Lance Corporal Porter consistently performs well in his duties and is the first to volunteer for assignments. He speaks at schools, educating the youth on the dangers of unsafe driving and highway safety. Lance Corporal Porter began serving in the South Carolina National Guard in 1986 and recently retired with 20 years of service as a reservist.

The Highway Patrol recently received two letters commending L/Cpl. Porter:

“Dear Colonel Williamson, On Sunday December 9, 2018, my daughter Cindy and I were traveling from Myrtle Beach to Bamberg. We experienced car trouble in Conway. The alternator went bad in my 2011 Cadillac. We managed to get to the Firestone Store in Conway, where mechanics were on duty. After checking the situation we were told we could not drive the car and the parts to repair it would be available until Tuesday. We were left in a situation of calling someone from Bamberg to come get us, when a nice young man and his friend offered to take us as far as Orangeburg, where they lived. The young man was a highway patrolman, Leon Porter. We graciously accepted their offer and they brought us all the way to my home in Bamberg. I am 84 years old and you can't imagine how grateful I am for Mr. Porter's kindness. His comment was "I am just doing my job" .,,.Betty Kilgus, Bamberg, SC

“Dear Colonel Williamson, I recently made the acquaintance of Officer Leon Porter on US 17 between Ravenel and Jacksonboro in Charleston County, I am writing to commend Mr. Porter and the department for his professional conduct and courtesy. He was not aware of my affiliation with the SCDOT, and it made me very proud to have someone of that character represent our state...SCDOT Commissioner John Barnwell Fishburne

**Troop 9/MAIT**  
**Sgt. Jeremy T. Leach**

On August 15, 2015, in Horry County on US-17 Business, there was a collision between a vehicle and a bicyclist. The bicyclist was traveling south in lane #2

when he was struck from behind by a vehicle that fled the scene; the bicyclist received Great Bodily Injury.

MAIT investigators located paint chips at the scene that were sent to SLED. MAIT received SLED results from the paint chips that were collected on scene and a DMV list was produced with 231 possible vehicles registered in Horry County. All other leads were exhausted and the case was classified as a "Cold Case."

While reviewing this Cold Case in November of 2018, Sergeant Leach checked VINs for insurance claims involving vehicles on this list and located a vehicle in which an insurance claim was filed with a loss date of August 15, 2015, indicating that the vehicle had been reported stolen and then recovered totaled and burned. The report also indicated that the claim had been subject to investigation under suspicion of fraud.

The vehicle had been reported stolen to the Conway Police Department and was recovered burned by the Horry County Police Department. Sergeant Leach contacted local investigators and at the time Conway P.D. suspected fraud and investigated the matter with SLED, but eventually administratively closed the case.

Sergeant Leach obtained a copy of the Conway Police Department Incident Report and case file for the stolen vehicle; in it the owner reported that on August 15, 2015 at approximately 9 p.m. the vehicle was parked in his yard. Sergeant Leach searched the SLED license plate reader database for this vehicle and at 9:54 p.m. on August 15, 2015 the vehicle was located in Pawley's Island -- information not previously known to Conway PD. The recovery report also stated that the owner was able to identify his burned vehicle partially due to damage on the right front corner. This damage was found to be consistent with damage from striking a bicycle.

Sergeant Leach was able to obtain search warrants for the cell phone records of the owner and his girlfriend (who had reported the vehicle stolen). Through cell phone records it was discovered that these individuals were in Pawleys Island at the location and time when the vehicle was captured on the License Plate Reader. These records also put both individuals at the collision location on US-17 Business at the time of the collision.

Cell phone records further linked the owner to a woman listed as the person who found Mr. Brown's burning vehicle and called 911.

After interviews with the owner's girlfriend, she stated she was a passenger in the vehicle during the hit-and-run and the owner told her he "wasn't going back to prison." She further admitted to traveling back to Conway with him and that he stated he was going to get rid of and burn his vehicle. She stated when they got home he left with the vehicle and that someone brought him back later without it. She then called to report the vehicle stolen.

On December 7, 2018, the woman who called police to report the burning vehicle stated that on the night prior to her reporting the burning vehicle, the owner called her and admitted to hitting someone and leaving the scene.

On December 10, 2018, Troop 5 Post D obtained an arrest warrant for the vehicle owner as it related to the hit-and-run collision investigation. Sergeant Leach's diligence and commitment were instrumental in MAIT Post D (Pee Dee) identifying the perpetrators of this crime.

**Troop 10/Insurance Enforcement Unit:  
L/Cpl. James T. Hicks**

Lance Corporal James T. Hicks joined the South Carolina Highway Patrol on July 5, 2007, at the age of 53. He was assigned to Troop 5, Post B, Florence, Marion and Dillon Counties. Lance Corporal Hicks remained in Post B until he was transferred to Troop 10 on March 2, 2016. Lance Corporal Hicks currently works with the Insurance Enforcement Unit in Troop 10 and is assigned to the Marion County area.

Those who know James are aware that he is a quiet and reserved person but is also known as a hardworking, compassionate person.

Lance Corporal Hicks' dedication to serving the citizens of the State of South Carolina is unwavering. This was demonstrated recently when his wife experienced a prolonged illness that ultimately led to her passing. Even through these very trying times, he remained committed to the Highway Patrol and its mission. He continued to serve the people of South Carolina carrying out his normal duties with the Insurance Unit and later provided assistance to the citizens in the Pee Dee region who were suffering from the aftermath of the hurricane and the flooding that followed. When there was a need for additional personnel, he always volunteered. Despite the grief and all the challenges that were presented to him, he always remained upbeat and dedicated.

L/Cpl. Hicks always gives a 100 percent in everything he is asked to do. Last year he made 5,179 contacts, cleared 3,210 suspensions and confiscated 978 suspended vehicle tags in the effort to remove uninsured drivers off the South Carolina's roadways.

### **Troop 11 / Community Relations Officer/Troop 3**

#### **L/Cpl. Joel Scott Hovis**

L/Cpl. Joe Hovis began his career with the South Carolina Highway Patrol in 2012. Prior to joining the Highway Patrol, he graduated from the University of Tennessee in 1980 with a degree in Logistics and Marketing. Upon graduating, he accepted a position with Yellow Freight where he worked in logistics and management for 32 years. Throughout his career with Yellow Freight, L/Cpl. Hovis always had an interest in the Highway Patrol and in 2012 he made the decision to retire from Yellow Freight and applied with SCHP at 54 years of age, subsequently starting patrol school in July of 2012.

Upon graduating from patrol school, L/Cpl. Hovis was initially stationed in Troop 3, Greenville County, but was transferred to Pickens & Oconee Counties in 2015. In July 2016, he laterally transferred to Troop 11 in the Office of Community Relations & Recruiting, where he made an immediate impact as a result of the many relationships that he had formed within the Troop.

Prior to 2018, L/Cpl. Hovis was responsible for the production of a prom video which has been used yearly by CROs statewide and has played an integral role in the Office of Community Relations winning the W. E. Hale Award for outstanding achievement in safety education at the 2017 Uniformed Safety Education Officer's Workshop (USEOW) in 2017.

In 2018, L/Cpl. Hovis led the Community Relations Office in safety presentations, completing 202 safety talks throughout Troop 3. He also responded to 1,317 media requests throughout the year. These talks ranged from pre-school classrooms, high school driver education classes, local businesses and even many retirement groups. His mission to educate does not stop there. In 2018, he showed creativity in using social media to communicate the importance of safety belt use and to bring attention to the dangers on our roadways.

L/Cpl. Hovis also has a passion for the restoration of classic cars and used that talent to plan a classic car cruise-in in Easley to raise money for Special Olympics. The event was a great success and raised approximately \$5,000.

As the Troop 3 CRO, L/Cpl. Hovis works in a very busy Troop and challenging media market. He has worked hard to continue building on the strong relationships between the Highway Patrol and each of these media outlets.