

SC Highway Patrol Trooper of the Year Narratives

Troop 1

Lance Corporal J.M. Hale

Troop 1 nominates Lance Corporal J.M. Hale for the 2024 Trooper of the Year. As troopers, our job is to save lives on South Carolina roadways and to be ready to act when the unexpected happens. As our Troop 1 nominee found out, the unexpected may happen during something as routine as a stop at the grocery store on your way home from work.

Lance Corporal J.M. Hale joined the South Carolina Highway Patrol in September 2022, and has been an asset since day one. He previously served as a military police officer with the Army National Guard and as an officer with the Pine Ridge Police Department. His enforcement efforts since joining the patrol have helped reduce traffic fatalities in Richland County for two consecutive years, and as a Field Training Officer, he has trained or assisted in training multiple troopers. L/Cpl.

Hale used that same training to save a young life on August 21, 2024. While driving home from a training exercise in Lexington County, L/Cpl. Hale stopped at a grocery store on South Lake Drive in the White Knoll area. As he pulled into the parking lot, he saw a woman running and carrying an infant child, with a man following behind. L/Cpl. Hale pulled in front of their SUV and learned that the infant was choking on what the mother believed to be food from the restaurant in which they were eating. L/Cpl. Hale took the child into his arms and began performing back thrusts. During the back thrusts, he and the child's parents saw a dislodged penny fall to the ground.

The boy — whose name, L/Cpl. Hale later learned was Diego — was able to breathe again and began to cry. L/Cpl. Hale calmed the boy's parents down and offered to call EMS, but the parents said they would take the infant to urgent care. With two parents who were understandably upset, L/Cpl. Hale exhibited outstanding courage throughout an emergency. By remaining calm and focused, he allowed his training to take over. And because of that, he saved a life.

His life-saving training is why he is Troop 1's finalist for Trooper of the Year 2024.

Troop 2

Lance Corporal M.L. Clark

Lance Corporal Clark got his start working in the manufacturing sector before pursuing a career in law enforcement. Despite the significant amount of time required to investigate, arrest, and prosecute DUI cases, in 2024 he led Troop 2 in DUI arrests and drug interdiction. But it was his sharp eye and fatherly instincts that helped him rescue 10 kidnapped children on Interstate 26.

Lance Corporal Clark began his law enforcement career with the Saluda County Sheriff's Office before joining the South Carolina Highway Patrol in 2019. He has since completed instructor training in several areas, and earned his associate degree in criminal justice in 2023. In 2024, he led Troop 2 in drug charges with 42, and also made 54 arrests for DUI. In addition to his achievements in law enforcement, L/Cpl. Clark is also a devoted husband and father of five. The safety and well-being of his family are the foundation of his commitment to making the roadways safer for everyone. When he received a BOLO on February 24, 2024, for 10 kidnapped children who were possibly being transported through Troop 2 on Interstate 26, he jumped into action.

The BOLO was for a white van that was believed to be transporting the missing children to New York from Florida. The van was initially reported around mile marker 91 and traveling west. Troopers initially struggled to locate the van, so L/Cpl. Clark continued north and eventually spotted the vehicle in Spartanburg County. After confirming it was the vehicle from the BOLO, L/Cpl. Clark and other troopers initiated a felony traffic stop, and took the driver and a passenger into custody. The children were inside the van, thankfully unharmed.

Although the driver turned out to be the children's father, he did not have legal custody of them. With a supervisor's assistance, L/Cpl. Clark investigated further and learned that the father had taken the children from their mother's home in Florida without notification. Additionally, a Florida judge had recently signed an injunction order prohibiting the father from having custody of the children. The children were safely returned to their mother the next day.

Troop 2 is proud to nominate L/Cpl. M.L. Clark for the 2024 Trooper of the Year Award.

Troop 3

Senior Trooper J.L. Grant

Being a state trooper sometimes means making that one extra traffic stop or picking up that extra shift. Senior Trooper Grant knows and demonstrates that.

Since joining the South Carolina Highway Patrol in 2020, Senior Trooper Grant has excelled in critical areas such as traffic stops, DUI arrests, speed enforcement, and seatbelt compliance. Throughout 2024, he maintained his exemplary enforcement efforts and excelled during each holiday enforcement period, demonstrating a steadfast commitment to public safety. But what distinguishes Senior Trooper Grant is his readiness to exceed the expectations of supervisors and colleagues alike.

Senior Trooper Grant routinely volunteers to adjust his work schedule to accommodate the needs of the post, the troop, and the agency. This was evident during the 2024 Clemson football season. Despite having scheduled days off, Senior Trooper Grant recognized the heightened demand for law enforcement presence during these high-traffic events and willingly covered multiple game weekends.

Along with his achievements in enforcement, a complex fatal collision investigation last fall highlighted Senior Trooper Grant's expertise in investigations. This incident involved a contributing driver who was using a fraudulent identity tied to multiple prior incidents. Senior Trooper Grant not only unraveled this complicated case, resulting in the appropriate charges being filed, but he also established a connection to another outstanding case in Greenville County that was connected with this same false identity.

For his selfless service, remarkable work ethic, and relentless drive to make South Carolina's roads safer, Troop 3 is proud to nominate Senior Trooper J.L. Grant for Trooper of the Year 2024.

Troop 4

Senior Trooper R.A. Lee

Every day, we put on this uniform and go out on shift with the goal of saving lives. But sometimes saving a life has nothing to do with arresting a drunk driver, or urging someone to put on a seatbelt. Sometimes, it's extending a helping hand to someone in their darkest hour.

That's what happened in the early-morning hours of November 16, 2024, when Senior Trooper R.A. Lee saw a suspicious vehicle parked in a gravel pull-off with its engine running and lights off. As Senior Trooper Lee approached the vehicle to check on its occupant, he found the driver in an extremely distressed state, holding a firearm and contemplating ending his own life.

Facing a critical situation, Senior Trooper Lee remained calm, composed, and reassuring. With compassion and patience, he engaged in conversation with the man, speaking to him not as a law enforcement officer but as if he were a member of the trooper's family. Through that crucial conversation, with his empathetic demeanor, Senior Trooper Lee ultimately convinced the man to put the gun down and step out of the vehicle.

After securing the weapon, he sat with the man, offering words of support and ensuring his safety. Senior Trooper Lee stayed by the man's side until EMS arrived to provide further assistance. This was just one example of the ways in which Senior Trooper Lee goes beyond the call of duty.

Throughout 2024, he consistently led his post and troop in enforcement efforts, issuing more than 11-hundred citations, more than 1-thousand warnings, making 35 DUI arrests, and working 203 collisions. His strong work ethic and willingness to step up when called upon have made him a go-to for both his fellow troopers and local law enforcement agencies.

For his dedication to making South Carolina roadways safer, for leading by example, and for saving the life of that young man, Troop 4 is proud to nominate Senior Trooper R.A. Lee for this year's Trooper of the Year.

Troop 5

Master Trooper W.C. Wilks II

Our Troop 5 nominee is Master Trooper W.C. Wilks, who joined the South Carolina Highway Patrol in 2001. Through the years has earned the respect of his peers, his command staff, and the public he serves.

When assigned a task, his colleagues and supervisors know he will complete it in a timely and precise manner. Master Trooper Wilks' dedication and consistent performance earned him the distinction of receiving the first Ford Mustang in Troop 5. This assignment carries with it increased responsibilities, including participation in high-profile events such as the NASCAR Cup Series Hauler Parade at Darlington Raceway. And yet, in 2024 Master Trooper Wilks made more than 1,000 traffic stops resulting in approximately 13-hundred cases, while also investigating 347 collisions and making 18 DUI arrests.

What sets Master Trooper Wilks apart is his self-motivation and willingness to go beyond the call of duty for someone in need. He demonstrated this on December 15, 2024, when the reckless actions of a violator put both their lives in jeopardy. While patrolling in the Myrtle Beach area, Master Trooper Wilks tried to stop a speeding vehicle, but the driver kept going and continued to accelerate. Recognizing the increasing danger to the public, Master Trooper Wilks deactivated his emergency equipment and reduced his speed, following proper protocol.

A short time later, he discovered that the fleeing vehicle had crashed into an embankment and caught fire. Without hesitation or regard for his own safety, Master Trooper Wilks approached the burning vehicle and pulled the violator to safety. EMS arrived and took the driver to a hospital to receive critical treatment. Meanwhile, an investigation showed that the vehicle was stolen out of North Carolina. Master Trooper Wilks arrested the suspect and obtained warrants that included possession of a stolen vehicle, passing unlawfully, driving under suspension, and speeding.

Master Trooper Wilks' swift actions that day not only saved a life, but prevented further harm to the community. Today – he is being celebrated as Troop 5's finalist for Trooper of the Year.

Troop 6

Senior Trooper D. Rivera Figueroa

Troop 6 is proud to recognize Senior Trooper Derick Rivera Figueroa as this year's finalist. Being nominated for Trooper of the Year is, in itself, an honor. But it is especially noteworthy when a trooper's peers within his own post nominate him for this distinguished honor two years in a row.

Senior Trooper Derick Rivera Figueroa was born and raised in Boston, Massachusetts. After graduating from high school, he joined the Army National Guard, proudly serving six years, which included a yearlong deployment in Africa. He joined the South Carolina Highway Patrol in 2021, and from day one, he has consistently demonstrated the highest standards of professionalism, dedication, and service.

Whether responding to critical incidents, engaging with the community, or mentoring fellow officers, Senior Trooper Rivera Figueroa exceeds what is expected to ensure the safety and well-being of the motoring public. Among his achievements in 2024, he issued more than 22-hundred citations, 1-thousand warnings, and arrested 21 impaired drivers. He also investigated 353 collisions.

Senior Trooper Rivera Figueroa is also known and recognized for his leadership and teamwork. He inspires others by leading with compassion and integrity, fostering a culture of excellence and mutual respect, and also taking great pride in his uniform. Most recently, Senior Trooper Rivera Figueroa took his leadership to the next level by completing the field training officer program, and has been assigned his first trainee. He takes pride in molding new troopers and teaching them what it takes to have a successful career with the Highway Patrol, and is quickly emerging as a leader his teammates can trust and depend on.

Senior Trooper Derrick Rivera Figueroa is the Troop 6 nominee, and a rising star within the Highway Patrol.

Troop 7

Corporal W.C. Lewis and Lance Corporal C.J. Arnold

Troop 7 is nominating not one but two troopers who put themselves in harm's way to help a suspect escape a burning car after a high-speed chase.

On November 30, 2024, Corporal W.C. Lewis and Lance Corporal C.J. Arnold received a call from dispatch about a possible impaired driver in Orangeburg County. The driver refused to stop and led them in a high-speed pursuit that ended when his vehicle crashed into several trees and burst into flames. With the fire quickly spreading and the driver trapped inside, without hesitation, Cpl. Lewis and L/Cpl. Arnold sprang into action, pulling the driver out and dragging him to safety, seconds before flames fully engulfed the vehicle. The suspect was treated for injuries and later arrested on several charges, including DUI.

Not only did Cpl. Lewis and L/Cpl. Arnold run toward the danger that night; their bravery and quick action saved a life, and they are Troop 7's nominees for Trooper of the Year.

Troop 8, Motor Unit

Master Trooper T.W. Floyd

Before joining the South Carolina Highway Patrol, Master Trooper Floyd served in the Army National Guard for nine years, re-enlisted in 2021, and continues to serve today while dividing his time as a trooper with the Motor Unit. Master Trooper T.W. Floyd spent five years as a sheriff's deputy for Abbeville and McCormick counties before joining the Highway Patrol in 2020. He was later selected for the Highway Patrol's coveted Motor Unit and attended the patrol's rigorous motorcycle school, completing the intensive two-week course in December 2022. He went on to complete two additional weeks of motorcycle field training with an instructor, in which he excelled.

Master Trooper Floyd currently is assigned to the Troop 8 ACE Upstate Team's motorcycle unit. There, he has demonstrated exceptional dedication to public safety throughout the year in the performance of his duties, and shows consistent professionalism and a proactive approach to law enforcement daily. In 2024, he conducted more than 16-hundred traffic stops, making 838 speeding contacts and issuing more than 13-hundred citations and more than 1-thousand warnings to motorists.

While conducting patrols and traffic enforcement, Master Trooper Floyd's motorcycle skills continues to improve daily, and he is eager to participate in training to further refine those skills. In addition to being extremely knowledgeable in all aspects of his job as a state trooper, he possesses a very strong work ethic, sound decision making, and is always willing to help with last-minute duty assignments.

He sets an example for others around him to follow, and he is Troop 8's nominee for Trooper of the Year.

Troop 9

Lance Corporal C.H. Sprott

When a driver leaves the scene of a fatal collision, that's where our Multi-disciplinary Accident Investigations Team — or MAIT — comes in, to solve the tragic puzzle, and provide justice for the victim and closure for their grieving family. Lance Corporal Sprott did that several times in 2024.

After a tow truck driver was killed in a hit-and-run in Jasper County in December 2023 while assisting a motorist, the suspect's vehicle was found abandoned in a field in January 2024. Over the next few months, L/Cpl. Sprott learned the identities of two occupants who were inside the vehicle at the time of the crash. They provided statements that helped MAIT identify and locate the driver of the suspect vehicle, who was charged in April 2024 with leaving the scene of a collision resulting in death.

While investigating another hit-and-run in Dorchester County, L/Cpl. Sprott was contacted by a Charleston County deputy about a dog left inside a Ford Ranger at a local brewery. Evidence showed that was the kind of vehicle driven by a suspect involved in an unrelated hit-and-run. That vehicle was later towed to a collision repair center, and the suspect told deputies he would rent a car from the Charleston airport.

At Budget Car Rental at the airport, L/Cpl. Scott learned the vehicle was overdue for return. A manager confirmed the overdue vehicle was equipped with a GPS tracker, which helped determine the car's location in the Columbia area. Within an hour, the overdue rental car was located, a traffic stop was conducted, and the suspect was charged with leaving the scene of a collision resulting in death.

L/Cpl. Sprott helped piece together a hit-and-run collision that killed a young Berkeley County sheriff's deputy who was on his way to work. Car parts found at the scene helped investigators

determine the suspect vehicle was a blue Toyota Camry. Moments after the collision, a blue 2011 Toyota Camry drove past a traffic camera. Working with other MAIT troopers, L/Cpl. Sprott located the registered owner's social media profiles, which included a photo of the owner wearing a safety vest with a company name on it.

The investigation revealed that the company was contracting workers out to a large local factory located near the collision scene. L/Cpl. Sprott drove to the factory and located the suspect vehicle in the parking lot. The driver was identified, located, and charged in the deadly hit-and-run of the Berkeley County sheriff's deputy.

L/Cpl. Sprott has a special way of talking with people that builds rapport and trust when interviewing suspects and witnesses.

His ability to identify persons of interest, follow up on tedious tasks, and think outside the box has helped solve cases and hold violators accountable. His work has helped MAIT solve nearly all hit-and-run cases investigated in the coastal counties in 2024, making him Troop 9's nominee for Trooper of the Year.

Troop 10, Community Relations, Recruiting and Employment Unit

Master trooper W.H. Bennett

A road trooper may interact with a dozen or so motorists during the course of a single shift. But a Community Relations Officer has the potential to make an impact on dozens of drivers during a single 30-minute presentation. Master Trooper Bennett takes a proactive approach to saving lives and building connections with communities.

As the Community Relations Officer for Troop 1, Master Trooper W.H. Bennett displays a steadfast commitment to recruiting and promoting traffic safety in the communities of Kershaw, Lexington, and Richland counties. His dedication is evident through his proactive engagement with schools, colleges, businesses and churches.

Master Trooper Bennett came to the Highway Patrol in 2021 with 18 years of law enforcement experience, joining the Community Relations, Recruiting, and FOIA Unit in 2023. In 2024, he made 173 safety presentations and represented the Highway Patrol at 67 community events. He is passionate about recruiting, and his knack for spotting talent serves the Highway Patrol well.

Master Trooper Bennett is also heavily involved with Serve & Connect, a nonprofit organization that promotes positive relationships between law enforcement officers and the communities

we serve. In 2024, he participated in 10 Greg's Groceries packing events where food was packaged and sent to law enforcement agencies for distribution to needy families.

This included a trip to North Carolina to help Greg's Groceries expand in which Master Trooper Bennett was specifically asked by the Serve & Connect team to attend. This was a poignant full-circle moment for Master Trooper Bennett, who handed out the initiative's first box of groceries several years ago.

Furthermore, Master Trooper Bennett has cultivated strong connections with fellow troopers, demonstrating a genuine interest in building relationships within the patrol. Those efforts extend beyond internal relationships, including many members of the media to enhance communications with the public and promote a broader understanding of the Highway Patrol and its mission.

Master Trooper Bennett's work ethic, personality, and positive attitude are an asset to the Community Relations, Recruiting, and FOIA Unit, and his sharp appearance is the epitome of a South Carolina state trooper. For his outstanding work in setting the example, and helping find and recruit the next generation of talent to the Highway Patrol's ranks, Master Trooper W.H. Bennett is Troop 10's nominee for Trooper of the Year.