

LAW ENFORCEMENT ETHICS AND PROFESSIONALISM

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From time to time we read in the newspaper, or see on the evening news, the story of a law enforcement officer who has been arrested for some violation of the law. Although the violations may differ, the discredit to the fellow officers and the affected department is virtually the same. The news media seem ready to capitalize on this type story as sensationalism. The general public takes a close look at such atrocities in much the same light as a clergyman caught in an immoral act with one of the members of his church. And rightly so, for the impact is essentially the same.

Once the damaging publicity is out, there is no retraction on the part of the accused and all in the law enforcement community seem to suffer equally or more than the accused. Although the fellow officers and the department may be absolutely innocent of any wrong doing, it is difficult for them to erase this blemish from their reputation.

There are other areas of concern that are not as dramatic but which still need to be reviewed with greater scrutiny than possibly we have afforded them in the past. These areas include accepting gratuities, extending professional courtesy, and engaging in activities that could be construed as conflict of interest.

At one time or another, some or all of these areas concern management and employees; therefore, we will be taking a closer look at them along with suggestions to alleviate future painful conflicts.

The modern day Conservation Officer is seen by the public that he serves as guardian of our nation's natural resources. We should not let them down in the esteem they hold for us as law enforcement officers. After all, we are sworn officers of the law. Sworn to enforce and uphold it, not to violate it and/or take advantage of it.

GRATUITIES

There is little which is more despicable in the eyes of law enforcement personnel and the general public than an officer who accepts a bribe. His very acceptance makes him a partner in a criminal act. In addition to its illegality, it is ethically and morally wrong. It has a profound impact on the public's image of other officers and the Department as a whole.

While they would never accept an outright bribe, many Conservation Officers accept gratuities in one form or another during their careers. Although this is not nearly as severe as accepting a bribe, it is nevertheless, accepting a gift, service, or privilege in exchange for a service rendered, or to be rendered, by the accepting officer.

Most Rangers think little or nothing of accepting a free cup of coffee at the local coffee shop, a free or discounted meal at a nearby restaurant, or hunting and/or fishing privileges from a landowner. Even though this, in itself, may seem

perfectly harmless, it could have far-reaching effects. There is one thing to keep in mind before accepting such offers . . . no restaurant owner, store keeper, landowner or anyone else gives away something for nothing. They all want something in return for their "favor."

The motive behind such "favors" may be nothing more than to have you frequent their place of business to deter crime or be seen on their private property to deter trespassers. This is the explanation given most often by officers when questioned about the possible motives of a merchant or landowner.

But consider this . . . if in the performance of his duties, the Ranger encounters the same merchant or landowner or their friends or relatives, would the merchant or landowner hesitate to remind him of the free coffee, the discounted meals, or the hunting and/or fishing privileges he has enjoyed?

Many an officer has been embarrassed to have someone remind him of a favor that is "owed." When he feels obligated to return the favor, then the officer's integrity is on the line.

If a Conservation Officer accepts gratuities, is he opening himself up to the possibility of feeling obligated to return a favor? When gratuities are offered to a Ranger, he is being singled out from the average citizen. He should stop and ask himself, "why?."

Many Game and Fish Departments have policies governing the acceptance of gratuities, while others do not. To alleviate the possibility of encountering the aforementioned problems, it would be beneficial to Conservation Officers and their respective agencies to adopt policies concerning gratuities.

PROFESSIONAL COURTESY

Another practice which may jeopardize a Ranger's integrity is extending what is known, in law enforcement circles, as "professional courtesy." This is sort of an unwritten law that one law enforcement officer must show partiality to another officer who has violated the law.

There are many sides to this practice which should be considered. For instance, what if non-law enforcement persons are also involved at the time the violation occurs? What impression will be made if they are cased while the law enforcement officer, who is just as guilty, "gets off the hook?" On the other hand, if the Ranger cases no one involved in the violation(s), then the impression may be left in the minds of the non-law enforcement persons that as long as they are with a law enforcement officer, they are above the law.

In some cases, a written or verbal warning issued by one law enforcement officer to another would suffice, if the violation were of a minor nature. However, no one, law enforcement officer or not, should be allowed to blatantly violate the laws of the land without fear of prosecution.

The truth of the matter is that no man is above the law, whether he is a law enforcement officer or private citizen. No professional Conservation Officer will feel that he is above the law that he himself is charged by public appointment to enforce.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Another concern of Conservation Officers and their supervisors alike is conflict of interest. This becomes a controversial issue in cases where management refuses Conservation Officers the privilege of engaging in some activities, such as commercial shrimping or trapping, that the general public has the liberty to pursue. Being restricted in this area makes many officers feel that they are being denied some of the privileges enjoyed by other citizens, and thus are 2nd-class citizens.

The truly professional Conservation Officer will recognize that, by the very nature of his job, he has an advantage over the general public when he engages in any commercial aspect of the natural resources he protects. A Conservation Officer should weigh all the facts before deciding whether to engage in any activity that could be construed as a conflict of interest. He should ask himself if his part in this activity would be ethical or incite public criticism, or would this activity tempt him to take advantage of his position, his influence, or use of tools, vehicles, equipment or time, belonging not to him but to his Department.

An obvious solution to this controversy is for Game and Fish agencies to adopt policies regulating the activities of personnel in this area, thus leaving the employee the dignity of being an equal citizen and protecting the agencies and their employees from undue criticism.

ETHICS

There is much to consider when one sets his goal to become a Conservation Officer. It is important to look sharp, be well-trained, and present oneself to the public and fellow officers as a professional law enforcement officer. However, these are only a fraction of what is required to become a truly professional Conservation Officer.

The shiny brass on a Ranger's uniform becomes tarnished in the eyes of the public when his actions, both while performing his official duties and in his private life, are not in keeping with ethical standards of a law enforcement officer.

An officer who does not apply his training in a professional and impartial manner belittles the badge he wears.

A Conservation Officer who presents himself as a professional to his fellow officers and to the public, but whose deeds contradict professionalism, soils the uniform he wears.

All law enforcement officers should live above reproach, but not above the law. Their images, both public and private, shape the public's attitude not only toward them as individual officers, but toward the Department they represent. Nothing draws more criticism than an officer of the law who is riotous, unethical, immoral, and dishonest in his personal affairs.

Conservation Officers rely on the public's respect; however, this must be earned. If the man behind the badge is respected, then it follows that the badge he wears will carry clout.

Conservation Officers also desperately need public support in their profession if they are to succeed in their task as enforcement officers. Since the front line officer is the Department to the public with which he comes in contact, he can make or break public support for the Department, its projects, its objectives, and

its personnel. Therefore, it is imperative that a Conservation Officer be a good conveyance for his Department.

Many agencies have an Information and Education Section which organizes public relations affairs, but the man in the field will, and should be, the main instrument for gaining support for the Department.

A professional Conservation Officer extends courtesy to all people, takes an interest in their problems, and handles their complaints as soon as possible.

One of the most significant qualities a Ranger can have is self motivation. With motivation, he needs no prodding from his supervisors to get the job done. Not only will he do his job, but will go about it cheerfully and energetically. This motivation is contagious and will spread to others in his Department. Any agency which has highly motivated officers will inevitably stand head and shoulders above those agencies whose officers do not have this quality.

Another important trait of a professional law enforcement officer is pride . . . pride in himself and in the uniform he wears. A sloppy officer, slothful in his actions, and complacent in his attitude is not only unprofessional in appearance and deed, but portrays the Department he represents in a dim light.

These are difficult times in which we live. It seems that all around us we are witnessing moral decay and an attitude of apathy toward law and order and law enforcement personnel. This is all the more reason we, as members of the law enforcement community should be above reproach in our public and private lives. We are judged strictly by society. Any black marks we get on our records fade slowly. Therefore, being moral, ethical and honest in our everyday lives is essential to our being professionals.

Our entire democratic system depends on law and order as a base from which to build. Without the enforcement of laws which protect each individual, this would be a chaotic world in which to live. Our Departments are striving to deliver to their personnel up-to-date and professional training. We must grasp this training and apply it fairly and impartially.

There are 2 ideals that all law enforcement officers should practice in their careers: (1) treat people as you would expect to be treated if the situation were reversed, and (2) enforce the law impartially, without respect of person or favoritism.

If these concepts are practiced, a law enforcement officer will earn the respect of the public.

In many law enforcement departments and offices there is displayed the Law Enforcement Code of Ethics (from International Chiefs of Police, Inc.):

"As a law enforcement officer, my fundamental duty is to serve mankind; to safeguard lives and property; to protect the innocent against deception, the weak against oppression or intimidation, and the peaceful against violence or disorder; and to respect the Constitutional rights of all men to liberty, equality, and justice.

"I will keep my private life unsullied as an example to all; maintain courageous calm in the face of danger, scorn, or ridicule; develop self-restraint; and be constantly mindful of the welfare of others. Honest in thought and deed in both my personal and official life, I will be exemplary in obeying the laws of the land and the regulations of my Department. Whatever I see or hear of a confidential nature or that is confided to me in my official capacity will be kept ever secret unless revelation is necessary in the performance of my duty.

"I will never act officiously or permit personal feelings, prejudice, animosities or friendships to influence my decisions. With no compromise for crime and with relentless prosecution of criminals, I will enforce the law courteously and appropriately without fear or favor, malice or ill will, never employing unnecessary force or violence and never accepting gratuities.

"I recognize the badge of my office as a symbol of public faith, and I accept it as a public trust to be held so long as I am true to the ethics of the police service. I will constantly strive to achieve these objectives and ideals, dedicating myself before God to my chosen profession . . . law enforcement."

If each of us will apply these concepts to our profession, we can come home at the end of our working day and rest assured that the world has been made a better place in which to live.