A photo of Oklahoma City police officer Terry Yeakey, taken by Cottrell A. Dawson on the day of the attack in 1995, appears in the book “In Their Name,” a tribute to the tragedy’s victims, survivors and rescue workers. (Will Lanzoni/CNN)

Why did this cop turn up dead?

A heroic police officer rescued at least three people after the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. A year later, he was found shot in the head

By Thomas Lake, CNN
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OKLAHOMA CITY — The bombing memorial is a somber and beautiful place, framed by two monuments called the Gates of Time.

at 9:02 a.m. and became known as the deadliest act of domestic terrorism in U.S. history.

The 9:03 Gate represents “the moment healing began.”

But some survivors never healed. With time, their suffering only got worse.

This story is about one of those people. His name was Terry Yeakey. He was an Oklahoma City police officer and a military veteran. Yeakey saved at least three people from the ruins of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building on April 19, 1995, the day a terrorist attack killed 168 people and injured hundreds of others.

Something happened to Yeakey in those hours in the wreckage. He was badly shaken, and his worldview seemed to change. In time, he grew suspicious and afraid. He ran afoul of his supervisors. He went on secret missions, withholding his motives and plans from fellow officers. He seemed to be conducting his own investigation.

And then, 385 days after the bombing, his body was found near some trees in a field off a country road.

His wrists were cut.

His neck was cut.

He’d been shot through the head.

The authorities said it was suicide. But among those who knew Terry Yeakey, not many believed he had killed himself.

In a recent interview, his sister Lashon Hargrove said this:

“I think they murdered Terry because he knew too much.”

Despite his bravery that day, Yeakey did not see himself as a hero

dispute on these two points:

1. The Oklahoma City Police Department planned to give him a medal of valor for his actions on the day of the bombing.

2. Yeakey did not want the medal of valor.

Much of this story hinges on *why* he didn't want the medal. But by any reasonable standard, he deserved it.

Not long after the explosion, a maintenance worker lay under the rubble, willing himself to stay conscious. His name was Randy Ledger. Broken glass had pierced his carotid artery and his jugular vein. Part of his face was missing.

Ledger had been cleaning light fixtures in the federal building's child-care center a few minutes before the bomb went off. Now, trapped by debris and bleeding to death, Ledger felt a strange weight on his lower body. He was buried so deeply that someone had stepped on his legs without knowing he was there. That someone turned out to be Yeakey, the police officer who was about to save his life.

Yeakey was 29 years old, tall and muscular, well-known among colleagues for his strength and determination. On his way to back up a partner on a burglary-in-progress call one day, his patrol car broke down. It was over 100 degrees outside, but Yeakey got out and ran the rest of the way. Another time, when an angry crowd surrounded Yeakey and a colleague, and the ringleader tried to grab the other officer's badge, Yeakey picked up the suspect, "wadded him up like a paper napkin, and threw him on the ground," the other officer, Larry Spruill, recalled. The rest of the mob quickly dispersed.

Yeakey was one of the first officers in the ruins of the federal building after the explosion, and he'd already saved at least two other people before he stumbled upon Randy Ledger. Yeakey called for other rescuers, and together they dug Ledger out and helped him onto a backboard. Ledger drifted out of consciousness. Minutes

He'd fallen and hurt his back while carrying Ledger to safety.

Ledger needed 12 pints of blood and multiple surgeries to repair his face. He recently turned 66, and he still thinks of the bombing almost every day. Little things bring the memory back: a musty smell, a news report, a yellow truck on the highway. And when Ledger recalls the bombing, he sometimes thinks of Terry Yeakey. He feels gratitude, and sadness.

As for the official story that Yeakey killed himself, Ledger finds it unconvincing.

“There’s too many unanswered questions,” he said recently.

Office, played basketball with Yeakey and knew many of the same people Yeakey knew. He said that in the Black community of El Reno, a town northwest of Oklahoma City where Yeakey grew up, the official story never took hold.

“No one believed that he killed himself,” Spann said.

Three of Yeakey’s fellow Oklahoma City police officers also shared their doubts in interviews with CNN.

Jim Ramsey won a medal for bravery on the day of the bombing and had previously patrolled the streets with Yeakey. Here’s how he responded in late 2022 when asked if he believed what the authorities said about Yeakey’s death.

“No,” Ramsey said. “I guess I don’t.”

“I still don’t believe Terry did it,” said Steve Vassar, one of Yeakey’s closest friends on the force. “I have just a hard time believing that Terry would take his life.”

Don Browning served the Oklahoma City PD for 28 years and helped with Yeakey’s initial police training. Here’s what Browning said about Yeakey:

“I still think he was murdered.”

They found blood in Yeakey’s car. But no autopsy was conducted on his body

A CNN investigation found several anomalies surrounding Yeakey’s death, along with a lack of transparency by the authorities.

Although Yeakey apparently died from a gunshot wound to the head, no autopsy was performed. Medical examiners can sometimes choose not to perform an autopsy when suicide is suspected and the cause of death is not in dispute, according to Dr. Joyce deJong, president of the National Association of Medical Examiners. But three

autopsy should have been done.

When asked why there was no autopsy on Yeakey, an Oklahoma City Police Department spokesman, Master Sgt. Gary Knight, referred a reporter to the state medical examiner's office, whose director of operations, Kari Learned, wrote, "Our office does not answer case specific questions."

The Oklahoma City Police Department took over the investigation of Yeakey's death even though his body was found outside the city limits, in adjacent Canadian County, to the west. When CNN asked what gave the city's police department legal justification to take over the case, Knight wrote back that he didn't know.

The precise location where Yeakey's body was found has never been publicly disclosed, and basic information about the death scene is unclear. The police department declined multiple requests to release its full investigative report on the case. The redacted two-page report released by OCPD in response to CNN's records request does not say whether a gun was found at the scene, much less what kind of gun killed Yeakey or whether it was subjected to fingerprinting or ballistics tests.

Both Knight and Police Chief Wade Gourley declined to be interviewed about Yeakey's death.

"There is absolutely no hard or physical evidence whatsoever to support Yeakey was murdered," Knight, a police-academy classmate who considered Yeakey a friend, wrote in an email to CNN. "Anyone who suggests the Oklahoma City Police Department participated in the coverup of the murder of one its most popular officers is engaging in fool's folly."

Yeakey's car, a maroon Ford Probe coupe, was found abandoned near Fort Reno Road in Canadian County around 6 p.m. on May 8, 1996, according to a sheriff's report. The car was locked and the windows were rolled up. A deputy looked inside and saw a Bible, an empty gun holster, a razor blade, and a "large amount of blood."

Yeakey's body was eventually found about half a mile away, the police said. A medical examiner's report noted "multiple superficial incised wounds" to Yeakey's wrists, neck, and antecubital fossa, the inner crook of the arm. Although there was

HEAD.

If the prevailing narrative is correct, Yeakey cut his own wrists, arms and neck with razor blades, bled heavily in his car, and then walked or ran about half a mile into either a field or a grove of trees, where he shot himself to death. There was no suicide note.

The absence of a note was among several reasons people wondered what might have pushed Yeakey toward suicide. In statements to the news media after his death, the police had two answers for that.

One possible factor was turmoil in Yeakey's personal life. He had been married, with two young daughters, but he and his wife, Tonia, divorced in late 1995. In court records, Tonia wrote that Terry had beaten her, choked her, and threatened to shoot her, himself, and one of their daughters.

She had repeatedly applied for protective orders against him, and in February 1995, about 15 months before Terry's death, a judge had ordered Terry to have no contact with Tonia, "except regarding visitation and the welfare" of their daughters.

Yeakey's friend and colleague Steve Vassar told CNN he once read Oklahoma City Police Department's full investigative report on Yeakey's death. According to Vassar, the report said Major Steve Upchurch called Yeakey shortly before his death, told him Tonia had reported him for violating the protective order, told Yeakey he was being placed on administrative leave, and told Yeakey another officer was coming to take away Yeakey's gun and badge.

But even if Vassar correctly remembers what was in the report — which has never been released — those details are contested. Major Upchurch told CNN in a phone interview he had no recollection of making such a call to Yeakey. He said he didn't remember Yeakey having any trouble with his ex-wife before his death. And he said he didn't remember anything about Yeakey being in trouble with his superiors.

Besides that, Tonia vehemently denied reporting him for a protective-order violation in 1996. In interviews with the author Craig Roberts, the tapes of which were reviewed by CNN, Tonia Yeakey said she and Terry Yeakey were on good terms before his death. She said they regularly saw each other, and he had recently asked her about getting remarried. She had not said yes, but she had not said no.

If Yeakey's death was unrelated to a troubled relationship, or to fears of losing his job, that left another potential cause put forth to the news media by the police department: Yeakey was depressed about the bombing. News coverage after Yeakey's death depicted a man haunted by what he'd seen in the rubble and wracked with guilt that he couldn't save more lives.

"There are some people that like to be heroes and some that don't," one of Yeakey's supervisors, Lt. Joe Ann Randall, said, as quoted by the Associated Press in 1996. "He was not one that wanted that."

Why didn't Terry Yeakey want the medal of valor? There was another possible reason. And for those who said he was murdered, that reason was a crucial part of the story.

Oklahoma City Fire Capt. Chris Fields carries 1-year-old Baylee Almon in the aftermath of the bombing. The child died of her injuries. (Charles H. Porter IV/AP)

Rescue personnel converge on the bombed Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. The blast killed 168 people and injured hundreds more. (Rick Bowmer/AP)

‘They’re not telling the truth,’ Yeakey said

In a brief phone conversation last November, Yeakey’s ex-wife, Tonia, told CNN she still believed Yeakey had been murdered. Then she stopped answering the reporter’s calls. But Tonia’s story was captured in 1998 in two recorded interviews with Craig Roberts, a former police officer who was researching the Oklahoma City bombing. One was a private phone interview, and the other was for a radio broadcast. After reviewing the tapes, CNN found corroboration for some of Tonia’s claims.

On the day of the bombing, Tonia said, she got a phone call. It was someone at Presbyterian Hospital, telling her Terry was there. His back was injured when he fell while carrying Randy Ledger, and now Terry needed someone to pick him up. So Tonia picked him up from the hospital. And in the car, she says, he started to cry.

“Tonia, it’s not what they’re saying it is,” he told her. “They’re not telling the truth. They’re lying about what’s going on down there.”

Terry was disturbed by what he’d seen in the ruins of the federal building — and not just because he’d walked into an unfathomable human tragedy. Terry was convinced there was more to the story of the bombing, some other piece the authorities were withholding. He was not the only one who believed this.

Federal authorities said Timothy McVeigh, a 26-year-old Army veteran who hated the government, caused the explosion by parking a rented Ryder truck near the federal building and setting off timed fuses that detonated a bomb made of “agricultural fertilizer, diesel fuel, and other chemicals.” Two more men, Terry Nichols and Michael Fortier, were also prosecuted in connection with the case.

In the months and years that followed, a stubborn contingent of skeptics pursued other angles to the story. Some of them had either survived the bombing or lost loved ones because of it. They insisted that government officials were somehow

permitted or even orchestrated the bombing for political advantage. The government denied these allegations, of course, and still does.

"This was probably the FBI's finest moment," Bob Ricks, who was special agent in charge of the FBI's Oklahoma City field office in 1995, said in a recent interview, referring to the bombing investigation.

Still, there is something about the case that makes people want to keep investigating. There were multiple reports of prior warnings given to some federal employees. Of an unidentified second suspect in the Ryder truck. And of additional explosives that allegedly contributed to the blast.

Ricks said those reports were false and started laughing when a reporter asked about them. But in 1997, more than 10,000 Oklahoma County residents signed a petition to convene a grand jury to examine the bombing. Even after the grand jury dismissed allegations of additional suspects and prior knowledge by the government, a band of citizens kept digging into the mystery. Led by former Oklahoma State Rep. Charles Key, the Oklahoma Bombing Investigation Committee issued its own report, which filled more than 500 pages and told a story at odds with the one that emerged at McVeigh's trial.

Explosives experts, including retired Air Force Brigadier General Benton Partin, reviewed the case and said McVeigh's bomb alone could not have caused that much damage.

"There is strong evidence that demolition charges were in the building," Partin wrote in a letter to a prosecutor in 1997, "irrespective of the size of the truck bomb."

For his part, Terry Yeakey believed some government employees had lied about their whereabouts during the bombing. Associates said Yeakey was surprised to see so many federal agents, apparently dressed in riot gear, on the scene moments after the blast. And he had questions about the source of the explosion. According to his

evidence of blowing *out*," or signs of a blast that appeared to have come from inside the building.

A few days after the bombing, Tonia said, Terry asked her to drive him back to the federal building. He wanted to go at night, when he couldn't be seen as easily.

"We did go down there, probably between 9:30, 10:00, and he said that we were going to go look underneath where the daycare had been," she said. "There was something he wanted to see over there and get a picture, if possible. As we went down there, we were stopped and I can't remember which personnel it was, but I know definitely it was either ATF or FBI ... And Terry had attempted to badge his way through, and the guy told him no ... And he said something a little more specific, like, you know, 'You're not supposed to be back down here.' ... (It) made me realize the two of them recognized each other and the interaction was very antagonistic. I think had I not been with Terry, he would have said a little more to the man and maybe been a little more forceful about getting through. But it seemed like he thought better about it since I was with him. And we left."

Tonia says Terry wrote a detailed report for the police department, perhaps nine pages long. She didn't know what was in the report. But one day he came to the house, furious, telling her the report had disappeared. And now his superiors were telling him to write another report, only one page long, leaving out most of what he'd written before. About two weeks after the bombing, she says, she got a phone call from one of Terry's supervisors.

"And she was being pretty hostile, pretty aggressive, and asked me where Terry was," Tonia said. "...She said, 'You tell Terry that if he doesn't get that other report in, that he's going to be reprimanded."

Did an officer's report on the bombing disappear? A spokesman for the Oklahoma City Police Department declined to answer this or other questions on an extensive list sent by CNN. Knight said most of the questions on the list were requests for materials that were "not an open record."

told.

Steve Vassar said he was downtown a few minutes before the bombing and saw the infamous Ryder truck. Officially, Timothy McVeigh was alone when he drove the truck to the federal building. But others have said he had an accomplice that morning, and Vassar said he saw another person in the truck.

“I’m going to tell you right now,” he said, “as God is my witness, there were two people.”

Vassar says that although he wrote this account in one of his supplemental reports on the bombing, no investigator ever questioned him about what he'd seen. Years later, he searched for his reports in the Oklahoma City police department's computer

aftermath. But he couldn't find his own reports.

"They were gone," he said. "They were not in the system, as if I never was there."

On the day he died, Yeakey said he was on his way to a mysterious meeting

In his final weeks, Terry seemed afraid. Tonia said he showed up at her house at odd hours, trying to make plans.

"He wanted me to leave in the middle of the night with him," she said. "Right then. He said, 'We need to get remarried. Don't ask me questions. This is the only way I can make sure you and the girls are taken care of in the event that something happens to me.'"

Tonia says she reported his behavior to the police. He did not appear suicidal, and she did not accuse him of violating a protective order, she said, but she was worried about him because he'd been saying his days were numbered. One day in May 1996, he showed up at her house and put a VCR in her car without explaining why. The VCR had a tape in it, but she didn't get a chance to watch it. Terry was talking about insurance papers. He left and said he would be back. She never saw him again.

Shortly before his death, Terry also visited his sister Vickie and her husband, Glen, in El Reno, the town northwest of Oklahoma City where Terry and Vickie grew up. Vickie and Glen have both died since then, but another sister, Lashon Hargrove, said they told her about the encounter.

Terry was exhausted, upset, crying. He said he needed to sleep, and they encouraged him to take a nap there, which he did. Afterwards he calmed down, but he was talking about the bombing, and the official story with which he disagreed. According to Lashon, he told his sister and brother-in-law, "It's just not what they say it is."

They asked him to tell them more, but he said he couldn't.

met in the rubble of the federal building. This account is drawn from an interview she gave CNN in January, as well as a taped interview with the author Craig Roberts in 1998. McDonald eventually left Oklahoma City and changed her name, a decision she attributed in part to trauma related to the bombing and to Yeakey's death.

McDonald was a businesswoman who'd been downtown when the bomb went off. She helped publish a book, *Angels Over Oklahoma City*, that named and honored hundreds of first responders from around the country who converged in Oklahoma City after the bombing.

While volunteering in the rescue and recovery effort, McDonald also met survivors who questioned the official story. Her home became a meeting place for those people, and a clearinghouse for pictures and other evidence they gathered. She said that evidence included a copy of Terry Yeakey’s full report from the day of the bombing — the one his supervisors had allegedly suppressed.

She believed they were federal agents. They said they were with a task force that was investigating the bombing, and they spent hours examining her collection of pictures.

The last day McDonald saw Yeakey, she says, they sat down and had coffee together. He was talking about an appointment. From his description of the men he was supposed to meet, she believed they were the same two men who'd been at her house. The men from the task force seemed keenly interested in the evidence about the bombing. They wanted Terry to bring what he'd gathered: pictures, video, documents.

Yeakey seemed conflicted about whether to go meet the men. He sensed danger, and these misgivings led him to take a strange precaution. McDonald said Yeakey went to the meeting unarmed, so no one could use his own gun against him.

On the other hand, if the men really were investigating the bombing, this could be Yeakey's big chance. Finally, someone with authority was going to listen to him. He decided to bring them the evidence, McDonald said. The men wanted to meet Yeakey in El Reno, at or near the federal prison.

Yeakey left McDonald's house, apparently on his way to the meeting. She never saw him again. It was later that day when someone called to say he was dead.

His body was found west of El Reno, about two miles from the federal prison.

It is a lonely, windswept place, with tall grass under a big sky. Past the barbed-wire fence off Fort Reno Road, where Yeakey's car was found, a stream runs north and east toward a grove of trees and an old graveyard. Tonia said Terry would never have gone there willingly. He knew that land, and it made him afraid.

there," she said. "... He wouldn't have been caught — Oh, excuse me. I was getting ready to say he wouldn't have been caught dead there. But I guess he was."

'Mama, they executed him'

Terry Yeakey's body was found on a Wednesday night. By Thursday morning, an Oklahoma City police captain had already told the Associated Press it appeared Yeakey had killed himself. That was almost 27 years ago. Ever since then, Yeakey's death has been officially called a suicide.

Tonia said she met with the police chief and told him she disagreed with that conclusion. She said she tried, without success, to arrange for an autopsy. She said local attorneys refused to take her case. She said one told her "it'd be best for me and my family just to leave it alone."

Lashon Hargrove said that when she and her sister met with a police detective and raised questions about their brother's death, the detective suggested they needed psychiatric help.

Don Browning, one of the officers who questioned the circumstances of Yeakey's death, was especially disturbed by the lack of an autopsy. "How dare you not do an autopsy on an unattended death — on a police officer?" he said. According to Browning, he appeared before the grand jury investigating the bombing and confronted a prosecutor about the strange details of Yeakey's death. Browning said the prosecutor dismissed him and apparently took no action in the case.

Don Browning was an Oklahoma City police officer for 28 years. He says he thinks Yeakey was murdered. (Nick Oxford for CNN)

Craig Roberts, a former Marine sniper who later became a Tulsa police officer and book author, stumbled upon the Yeakey case while looking into the Oklahoma City bombing. He wrote letters asking the Oklahoma City Police Department to open a new investigation into Yeakey's death. "Though it was originally written up as a suicide," he wrote in 2006, "I feel the evidence and facts point to a torture/homicide."

Roberts wrote that Yeakey's entrance wound suggested the presence of a silencer. He wrote that the bullet's trajectory "would be consistent to one fired 'execution style' into the skull of a kneeling victim..." He wrote, "There were multiple cuts on his wrists, inner elbows, and jugular veins. If he was going to shoot himself, why would he cut himself so many times?"

in the investigator's case files or from the information you have provided that changes the finding of suicide." The chief did not answer the questions Roberts raised in his letter, including whether a gun was found at the scene, whether it was Yeakey's gun, whether the fatal bullet was ever found, or whether any ballistics tests were done to link the bullet and the gun.

The Roberts letter also raised the question of what happened to Terry Yeakey's documents after he died. Tonia said Terry kept some documents from his investigation at a storage unit in Kingfisher, a small city northwest of Oklahoma City, but "whatever was there is not there any longer." Roberts said the documents were not in Yeakey's car when it was found by the roadside.

"It would appear that this tragic event centers on what Terry Yeakey had in his files," Roberts wrote to the police chief, "and who wanted to make sure those files were never discovered."

After Terry's death, Tonia said she saw signs of a burglary at her home. She noticed various items out of place. Terry had left a VCR for her, but it disappeared. She never got a chance to see what was on the tape.

The sun sets behind the Oklahoma City Police Department. (Nick Oxford for CNN)

Likewise, Romona McDonald said her house was burglarized after Yeakey's death. Much of her bombing-related evidence was taken.

When Terry's family visited his apartment after his death, it looked as if it had been ransacked. There was paper scattered around, his sister Lashon said, and "you could tell...somebody had been in there, like, looking for something."

Both Lashon and Tonia believed they were under surveillance after Terry's death. They said they were shadowed by strange vehicles, and they heard clicking sounds when they talked on the phone.

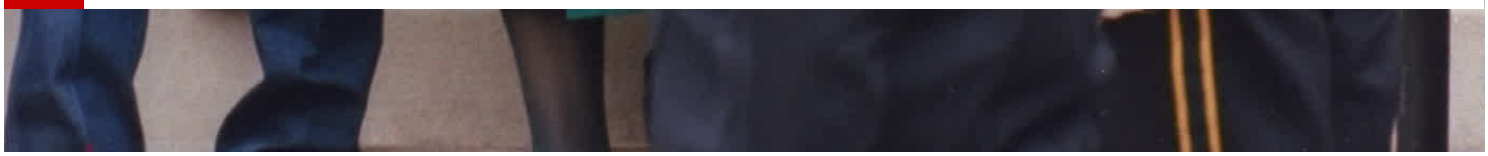
Shortly after Terry's death, several relatives went looking for the place his body had been discovered. Lashon says they found it near some trees in a field past a barbed-

had been a crime scene, but they noticed something strange. Some of the earth was freshly disturbed, apparently by shovels, as if whatever had been on the surface was now buried.

Most troubling of all was the condition of Terry's body. Although the available medical examiner's reports described only a gunshot wound to the head and superficial cuts elsewhere, Tonia said sources within the law enforcement community told her Terry's body showed evidence of having been either tied or handcuffed, and of having been dragged across the ground. She said she was told Terry had bruises on his wrists, rope burns on his ankles, dirt and grass in his wounds.

CNN asked the Oklahoma City Police Department about these details, but a department spokesman declined to answer the questions.

Lashon Hargrove said her mother viewed Terry's body at the funeral home. She said a funeral director tried to discourage her from looking at the body, but her mother said, "No, I need to see my baby."

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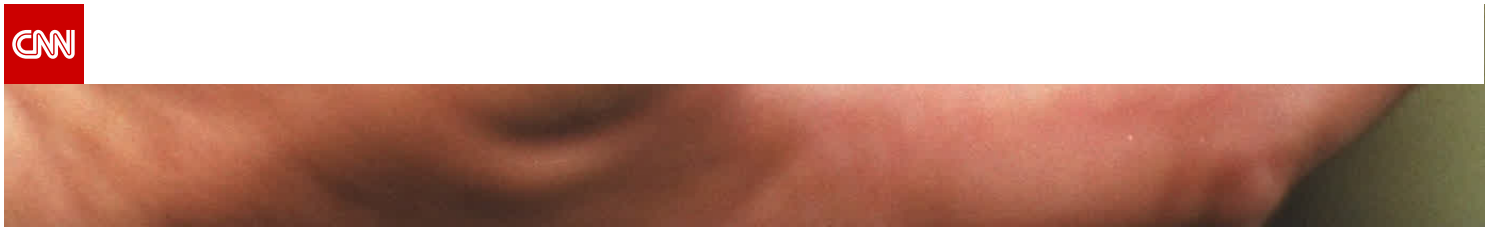

Her mother, who has since died, later told Lashon that Terry's head was enlarged and disfigured. And he didn't just have cuts on his arms and neck. Lashon said her mother reported seeing what appeared to be ligature marks. Lashon tried to imagine what that meant. It seemed to her that Terry had been tortured, hanged, put on his knees, and shot to death.

"Mama," she recalled saying, "they executed him."

Sgt. Terrance Yeakey was buried the same day he posthumously received the medal of valor he did not want. Among those at his funeral was Richard Williams, a man whose life he saved.

After the bombing Williams was trapped in the rubble, with only his arm sticking out. Yeakey came by, felt for a pulse, did not detect one, and moved on to look for other survivors. Later he returned, realized Williams was alive, freed him from the wreckage and brought him to safety. Then he went on to his next rescue.

A picture taken that morning shows the officer in action. He has sweat on his brow, blood on his shirt, dust on his shoes. Terry Yeakey is running toward the danger.

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