

Wounded Covington officer to undergo surgery to - Newton Citizen, The (GA) - September 4, 2018

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COVINGTON — Doctors at Atlanta Medical Center will evaluate Covington Police Officer Matt Cooper today in preparation for removing a bullet that is lodged in his head at his carotid artery.

The Police Department issued a statement Tuesday morning thanking the thousands from around the country who have expressed concern for the officer and his family after he was shot by a shoplifting suspect Monday afternoon.

In the statement, Public Information Officer Justin Stott said "words cannot express how touched we all are," adding that Cooper's vital signs are strong. "Matt Cooper is strong!" wrote Stott. "He is a fighter! Please continue to pray for the Cooper family."

Cooper, 34, and another officer responded to a shoplifting call at the Walmart on Industrial Boulevard Monday at about 12:24 p.m. where three male suspects were encountered in the shopping center parking lot. According to Capt. Ken Malcom, two were apprehended, but a third fled across Industrial Boulevard and ran behind the Little Phillies shopping center that is adjacent to a wooded area. Cooper and the other officer pursued him, with one going around the rear of the shopping center from the east and the other from the west. Malcom said the officer approaching from the east side heard a gunshot and found Cooper wounded and unconscious.

The suspect's body was found a short time later in the wooded area. The Georgia Bureau of Investigation said preliminary findings indicate **Aaron Demonta Fleming**, 21, died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound. He was armed with a .38 revolver, according to police.

Cooper, a six-year veteran of the department and a military veteran, was taken by air ambulance to Atlanta Medical Center where he remained in serious condition Tuesday.

According to police, several gunshots were fired in the incident, but it was not clear if either officer had fired his weapon.

The investigation has been turned over to the Georgia Bureau of Investigation.

Malcom said this is the first time an officer has been wounded in the line of duty since he joined the force 33 years ago.

"Please pray for the police and pray for our officer who is fighting for his life," said Malcom.

The shootings shattered what was otherwise a quiet Labor Day afternoon. The stores in the shopping center where the shootings occurred were closed, and Malcom said he did not believe the public had been placed at risk.

"There is no such thing as a routine call," said Malcom. "As officers we are trained to believe that."

A large contingent of law enforcement officers gathered in the Walmart parking lot as the investigation continued. A man driving through the area about two hours after the incident asked what happened.

"This sort of thing didn't use to happen around Covington," he said. "This is crazy."

Cooper joined the Covington Police Department in 2012 and was named Rookie of the Year in 2013.

Cooper was in the Army for eight years and was his battalion's senior sniper with two deployments to both Iraq and Afghanistan.

When he returned home, he worked for two years as an emergency medical technician with Newton Medical Center.

"When I came back, I just wanted to help people out," Cooper said in a 2013 interview with the Citizen.

As a result of his work as an EMT, he got to know several members of the Police Department, who suggested he join the force.

"I wanted to be in law enforcement because I simply wanted to help people who were in need," Cooper said. "In EMT and the Police Academy, we were taught to be a servant of the public, and I try to be that."

Law enforcement is part of Cooper's heritage. Cooper's father retired from law enforcement with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources and later worked with the Newton County Sheriff's Office at the courthouse.

Cooper said joining the Police Department was "an homage to his (father's) service in law enforcement."

The Citizen will continue to update this story as more news becomes available.

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