

Wounded Covington Police officer described as ' - Newton Citizen, The (GA) - September 4, 2018

September 4, 2018 | Newton Citizen, The (GA) | Alice Queen

COVINGTON — Covington Police Officer Matt Cooper, who was shot in the line of duty Monday, was transferred to Grady Memorial Hospital Tuesday for further evaluation as doctors prepare for surgery to remove a bullet lodged next to his carotid artery.

Covington Police Chief Stacey Cotton spoke to the media Tuesday afternoon, describing Cooper as a "survivor" and a "fighter." Cotton said Cooper not only has excellent tactical skills as an officer but also has the heart of a protector.

Cotton said the outpouring of support for Cooper and the Police Department — from both the local community and farther afield — has been tremendous.

"The community support and outreach for this officer and this department show me that the public loves and cares for law enforcement," said Cotton. "That they know it's a tough job, and we're not always treated fairly. A man got up to go to work that day. The only thing he did was go to work ... and he was seriously, critically injured for doing his job. We don't do this for the paycheck; we do it because we love it, and many of us feel like we are protectors. Matt Cooper is one of those protectors. Not only does he defend this community every day, he defended his country overseas."

Although Cooper remained in serious condition Tuesday, he was able to tell his wife that he loves her, Cotton said. The officer's family is "tired but holding up well," he added.

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. The three were reportedly attempting to steal bandannas.

According to Capt. Ken Malcom, the two younger suspects 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.

The other two suspects have not been identified by police due to their status as juveniles.

Cooper, a six-year veteran of the department and a military veteran, was taken by air ambulance

to Atlanta Medical Center.

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.

Cotton said this is the first time an officer has been wounded in the line of duty during his tenure.

"I've been chief almost 21 years and almost 32 years of service, and I really hoped I would get through it without having to face something like this," said Cotton. "It's been challenging. Nothing you do in your career prepares you for this, other than I think trusting in and watching and seeing the fine men and women who wear the Covington Police badge and how they do the things they do has made my job a whole lot easier because I knew they knew what they were doing."

Cotton also praised the work of the public safety agencies that worked the incident Monday — the Covington Fire Department, Newton EMS and Covington-Newton County 911.

"All of those entities worked together under trying conditions," Cotton said, noting that at the time the gunman was still at large. "They were able to do their duty, be safe and do their best to save Matt's life, and they worked like a well-oiled machine. The community should be proud of the high level of public safety service that was provided."

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."

Cotton said there will be a special recognition of Cooper at Saturday's 35th annual Covington Fuzz Run.

Anyone who would like to make a contribution to support the Cooper family may make a donation to the Covington Police Who Care fund. Donations may be made at Newton Federal Bank or at the Police Department at 1143 Oak St., Covington.

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