

02-24-1998 CA- Britt Irvine and Rick Stovall – LEO – Auto Flood

**Ptl. Britt Irvine**

40 years old

and

**Ptl. Rick Stovall**

39 years old

**California Highway Patrol**

**Off. Irvine was killed with Off. Stovall while patrolling highway 166. Their patrol vehicle was sucked into the muddy Cuyama River, which had washed out about 100 yards of rural highway. They were last heard from at 2:45 a.m. Their vehicle was found upside down buried under silt, mud and debris. 03-98**



OFFICER DOWN MEMORIAL PAGE



REMEMBERING ALL OF LAW ENFORCEMENT'S HEROES

<http://www.odmp.org/officer/15055-traffic-officer-britt-thomas-irvine>



***Bio & Incident Details***

**Age:** 40

**Tour:** 13 years

**Badge #** 10657

**Cause:** Weather/Natural disaster

*Traffic Officer*

**Britt Thomas Irvine**

California Highway Patrol, California

**End of Watch: Tuesday, February 24, 1998**

Officer Britt Thomas Irvine was killed when his patrol car was washed off of a roadway in a terrible storm attributed to the El Niño phenomenon.

Officer Irvine and his partner, Officer Rick Stovall, were responding to a call to assist stranded motorists on Highway 166 when the storm washed out the section of roadway they were on. Both officers were killed and several other motorists were washed into the water as well. Their patrol car was found upside down under silt, mud, and debris approximately 100 yards from the roadway.

<http://www.odmp.org/officer/15056-officer-ricky-bill-stovall>



Officer



<b>Bio &amp; Incident Details</b>
<b>Age:</b> 39
<b>Tour:</b> 18 years
<b>Badge #</b> 9623
<b>Cause:</b> Weather/Natural disaster

## **Ricky Bill Stovall**

California Highway Patrol, California

### **End of Watch: Tuesday, February 24, 1998**

Officer Ricky Bill Stovall was killed when his patrol car was washed off of a roadway in a terrible storm attributed to the El Niño phenomenon.

Officer Stovall and his partner, Officer Britt Irvine, were responding to a call to assist stranded motorists on Highway 166 when the storm washed out the section of roadway they were on. Both officers were killed and several other motorists were washed into the water as well. Their patrol car was found upside down under silt, mud, and debris approximately 100 yards from the roadway.

Officer Stovall had served with the California Highway Patrol for 18 years. He is survived by his wife and two children.

## **CALIF. STORM KILLS 2 CHP OFFICERS**

<http://www.apnewsarchive.com/1998/Calif-Storm-Kills-2-CHP-Officers/id-ae5f7520ad778f044963f66dfd097116>

**Feb. 24, 1998** JEFF WILSON, Associated Press

SANTA MARIA, Calif. (AP) \_ Two Highway Patrol officers responding to reports of a road washout were killed Tuesday when their patrol car was pitched into a gushing river swollen by a savage El Nino storm that killed five others and caused mudslides and tornadoes.

The two-day storm, the worst from El Nino this winter, blew out of the waterlogged state just hours after the officers and at least three other drivers were sucked into the muddy river.

Two men were rescued by helicopter, but divers searched for other victims in the Cuyama River near Santa Maria, about 200 miles north of Los Angeles after part of Highway 166 gave way.

Officers Rick Stovall and Brit Irvine were veterans, both with more than 10 years with the CHP, said Officer Ray Schultz, a CHP spokesman.

The two men rescued by helicopter were being treated for hypothermia at a hospital. One was in good condition and another was undergoing surgery to repair a scalp injury.

Elsewhere in California, two college students were killed when a tree fell on cars in the Los Angeles suburb of Claremont; a man died in a mudslide in Orange County; one person died in a pileup on a fog-shrouded and flooded highway in the San Joaquin Valley; and one was dead and four missing in a car that washed away in Tijuana, Mexico.

In Northern California, waves chewed into a cliff beneath eight precariously perched homes in Pacifica south of San Francisco, and residents remained barred from 500 homes around Clear Lake north of Santa Rosa as the lake was at its highest level since 1909.

In the Sierra Nevada, El Nino dumped up to 2 feet of snow, triggering one road-closing avalanche south of Reno.

A wall of mud plowed down Laguna Beach Canyon Road in Orange County about 12:30 a.m., tossing about residents as they scrambled from their homes, said police Sgt. Bob Rahaeuser.

“I was just rocking and rolling, and just desperately crawling my way to the top of wherever I was,” Ann Quilter said. “Every second, you're trying to keep your hands in front of your face to create an air pocket so that you can breathe.”

At daybreak, rescue workers found feet protruding from the mud, then unearthed the body of Glenn Flook, 25, outside one of those homes. Flook had sought refuge at the home from his flood-damaged house.

Eight of the 10 mud-covered victims, including Ms. Quilter, were released from the hospital, Rahaeuser said.

Throughout the region, roads were closed by mudslides and sinkholes.

In San Diego, an underground stormwater drain pipe burst just after midnight, carving a gigantic sinkhole \_ 65 feet deep by 25 feet wide and some 700 feet long \_ at the Interstate 15 on-ramp at Balboa Avenue.

Oscar Johnson jumped out of his car and helped a woman to flee before the ground cracked open and swallowed her car.

“You could feel the ground under you trembling and sucking down,” Johnson said. “She jumped out and we ran ... then her whole car just went down.”

Volunteers combed the rugged, snow-covered San Bernardino Mountains near Big Bear Lake, looking for a plane with two people aboard that disappeared Monday.

Two tornadoes \_ almost unheard-of in Southern California \_ touched down overnight, one in Huntington Beach and one in Long Beach. The twisters ripped up storage sheds and carport awnings and knocked down trees and fences.

No injuries were reported.

``The wind became so great that I saw my neighbor's fence just fly away," said Charles Ford, 74, a retired businessman, who described a horrendous wind followed by a bright flash and a smacking sound that occurred as the twister cut a half-mile swath through the eastern part of Long Beach.

That smacking sound was an 80-foot-tall Acacia tree that fell on his Ultimo Avenue home in Long Beach, crashing through a stairway and second-floor bedroom.

The storm swept ashore early Monday. It was the strongest \_ and apparently the last \_ in a series of rigorous weather systems that have punished the state since Feb. 1, causing more than \$475 million in damage statewide this season and prompting 35 of 58 counties to declare states of emergency.

## **Officers Fell Into A Death Trap -- On The Way To Save Somebody's Life, They Lost Theirs**

<http://community.seattletimes.nwsourc.com/archive/?date=19980225&slug=2736462>

February 25, 1998 **By Jeff Wilson** *The AP*

SANTA MARIA, Calif. - They never saw the end of the road.

Two California Highway Patrol officers, their car rushing through swirling fog to help a motorist in trouble, dropped off the jagged asphalt and into a churning river of watery mud.

In the middle of the flooded Cuyama River, James Rowan, clinging to the cab of his tractor-trailer, watched the cruiser's flashing rooftop lights grow dim as the cruiser sank and floated away.

About 150 feet downstream, Steven Miller shivered violently on the murky riverbank. He had escaped from his submerged Toyota Camry, floated downstream and latched onto a sand berm before crawling onto the bank. He saw lights in the distance.

Both of the men desperately needed help, but by then their rescuers were beyond rescue. It would be more than 15 hours before the bodies of Officers Rick Stovall and Britt Irvine, their seat belts still buckled, were pulled from the overturned patrol car.

## **11 inches of rain in February**

Two 911 calls came into CHP dispatch around 2:30 a.m. yesterday. One caller reported a road washout, the other said a big rig was in trouble.

The dispatcher sent Stovall and Irvine to check it out. They headed for Highway 166. The two-lane highway links the central coast town of Santa Maria and its population of 68,000 with the San Joaquin Valley.

Rain - Santa Maria has had 11.5 inches since Feb. 1 - had slackened but drifting fog had taken its place. Minutes went by. The dispatcher tried to reach the patrol car. Silence. Worry crept in. It was nearly 4 a.m.

Santa Barbara County sheriff's Deputy Dennis Swack was called to take a look. He knows radio transmission is notoriously poor on the desolate rural route.

"It was slightly foggy. . . . The next thing I know, the front end of my car went over the edge. I bailed out the driver's side door real quick and hit the pavement," he said. "I could hear the water rushing down below me."

His supervisor drove up behind him and aimed his headlights at the car, screaming at Swack to get clear. Below him, maybe 15 feet down, the gushing water had chewed away at the asphalt. He was on a ledge, a gaping hole where 300 feet of road had been yawning in front of him.

Swack could see fog and dim lights on the other side of the wash. "I was just thinking somebody probably went over the ledge down in the river. But I didn't know that at the time."

And in the foggy blackness, he couldn't know that four cars already had plunged into the Cuyama - the CHP cruiser, the semi, the Camry and a pickup truck.  
'My car was airborne'

Miller was coming to the end of his 200-mile trip. He looked at his watch. It was 3:10 a.m. The 47-year-old manager of the Robinsons-May department store in Santa Maria had been visiting his old store in Arcadia, just east of Los Angeles. Now he was just 20 minutes from home.

He drove into a fog bank and the road was gone.

"Then my car was airborne, my car started down nose first. I had no idea what happened. I fell for about 2 or 3 seconds. I hit the river, and it broke the driver's side window and immediately filled up the car. I thought to myself, 'I'm going to die.' "

Yet he made it out of the passenger window and drifted downstream before clawing his way onto the bank. As he neared solid ground, he thought, "I'm going to live."

For more than three hours, he shivered at the river's edge, catching glimpses of light through the fog. "I could see the lights. I thought to myself they must have seen my car." He didn't realize the washout was swallowing other cars. He said he yelled, but no one answered.

As filthy as Miller's white shirt was, he took it off and waved it helplessly at helicopters that flew over before dawn. Miller watched the stars give way to the sun. Then rescuers saw him.

### **Both officers had families**

Several hours later, CHP Commissioner Spike Helmick stood on the riverbank, his heart heavy because he knew by then that two of his friends - devoted family men and excellent officers - were dead.

The recovery was painfully difficult, the suction of the muddy slime thwarting efforts to get the bodies from the overturned car. Not far away was the yellow pickup truck; efforts to pull it free with a cable ended when the line snapped.

Both Stovall, 39, and Irvine, 40, had been assigned to the Santa Maria office for nearly eight years, Helmick said. Irvine, a country-music fan, had two stepsons and a stepdaughter. Stovall, the son of a retired CHP officer, had a wife and son, 10, and daughter, 12.

Irvine was a member of the Santa Maria Swim Club while Stovall was well known for his church work, fellow officers said. There were no strangers at work - Helmick said coping with the loss would be tough.

### **Tears for the dead**

As Miller held his hospital news conference at 3 p.m., Rowan was undergoing surgery for injuries to his scalp, knee, neck, shoulder, chin and face. His mother, Detta, who flew up from Los Angeles, said he was in acute care after the nearly three-hour operation, but his prognosis was good.

"God saved him" she said.

Her 38-year-old son was returning from a trip delivering merchandise to a department store.

As he sat on the truck's overturned cab, river water sweeping past him, Detta Rowan said, her son broke off the truck's side-view mirror and tried to signal whenever headlights approached.

She said he knew the officers who died and cried for them.

### **One truck with no one in it**

When the search was suspended, all four vehicles were still embedded in the muck. The occupants of the pickup - if there were any - were nowhere to be found.

Officers on duty covered their badges with black bands, and a chaplain was called in to help officers and other workers deal with the grief.

"They are friends of mine. They are the heroes in this situation. They were on the way to save somebody's life and lost their lives in the process," Swack said, wiping away tears. "Everyone is grieving, but two lives were saved."

## **Storm Kills Two Highway Patrol Officers At Least 5 Others Die As Mudslides, Tornadoes, Snow And Rain Continue To Rack California**

<http://www.spokesman.com/stories/1998/feb/25/storm-kills-two-highway-patrol-officers-at-least/>

FEB. 25, 1998 **By Jeff Wilson Associated Press**

Two California Highway Patrol officers on their way to help a disabled motorist were killed Tuesday when their patrol car was pitched into a gushing river swollen by a savage El Nino storm that killed at least five others and caused mudslides and tornadoes.

The two-day storm, the worst from El Nino this winter, blew out of the waterlogged state just hours after the officers and at least three other drivers had been sucked into the muddy river.

Two men were rescued by helicopter, but divers searched for other victims in the Cuyama River near Santa Maria, about 200 miles north of Los Angeles, after part of state Highway 166 gave way.

The patrol car carrying officers Rick Stovall and Brit Irvine was found upside down, buried under silt, mud and debris. Crews with cranes attempted to lift it from the river, which washed out 100 yards of the rural highway.

The veteran officers, who were working the graveyard shift, were answering a call about a disabled motorist. The last radio contact with them was at 2:45 a.m., Lt. Paul Matthies said at a news conference.

"They were out doing what they are supposed to do. They were out helping the public," Matthies said.

Matthies said a chaplain is helping other officers through their grief.

"The highway patrol is a family," he said. "We're going to be going through a rough time. It hits very hard."

The two men rescued by helicopter were being treated for hypothermia at a hospital. One was in good condition; the other was undergoing surgery to repair a scalp injury.

Elsewhere in California, two college students were killed when a tree fell on cars in the Los Angeles suburb of Claremont; a man died in a mudslide in Orange County;

and one person died in a pileup on a fog-shrouded and flooded highway in the San Joaquin Valley.

One person also was killed and four were missing in a car that washed away in Tijuana, Mexico.

In Northern California, waves chewed into a cliff beneath eight precariously perched homes in Pacifica south of San Francisco, and residents remained barred from 500 homes around Clear Lake north of Santa Rosa as the lake rose to its highest level since 1909.

In the Sierra Nevadas, El Nino dumped up to 2 feet of snow, triggering a road-closing avalanche south of Reno, Nev.

The storm also slammed into Arizona, Utah, Nevada and New Mexico with rain and snow, and Wyoming and Colorado were next in line. A steady rain fell Tuesday over Las Vegas, which has recorded its wettest February ever, with 2.85 inches of rain so far.

In California, a wall of mud plowed down Laguna Beach Canyon Road in Orange County about 12:30 a.m. Tuesday, tossing about residents as they scrambled from their homes, said police Sgt. Bob Rahaeuser.

"I was just rocking and rolling and just desperately crawling my way to the top of wherever I was," Ann Quilter said. "Every second, you're trying to keep your hands in front of your face to create an air pocket so you can breathe."

At daybreak, rescue workers found feet protruding from the mud, then unearthed the body of Glenn Flook, 25, outside one of the homes. Flook had sought refuge at the home from his flood-damaged house.

Eight of the 10 mud-covered victims, including Quilter, were released from the hospital, Rahaeuser said.

Throughout California, roads were closed by mudslides and sinkholes.

In San Diego, an underground stormwater drainpipe burst just after midnight, carving a gigantic sinkhole - 65 feet deep, 25 feet wide and some 700 feet long - at the I-15 on-ramp at Balboa Avenue.

Oscar Johnson jumped out of his car and helped a woman flee before the ground cracked open and swallowed her car. "You could feel the ground under you trembling and sucking down," Johnson said. "She jumped out and we ran. ... Then her whole car just went down."

Two tornadoes - almost unheard-of in Southern California - touched down overnight, one in Huntington Beach and one in Long Beach. The twisters ripped up storage sheds and carport awnings and knocked down trees and fences.

## **Storms pound coasts: At least 24 dead in California, Florida**

<http://www.recordpub.com/news/1998/02/25/storms-pound-coasts-at-least-24-dead-in-california-florida>

**February 25, 1998 By Larry Gerber Associated Press**

LAGUNA BEACH, Calif. \_ Mud oozed down the canyons of this seaside enclave like lumpy chocolate pudding, smashing through homes and sweeping away residents as they scrambled to stay above the hip-high torrent.

"It was a washing machine as far as I knew. I was just rocking and rolling, and just desperately crawling my way to the top of wherever I was," Ann Quilter said. Quilter and others escaped with their lives as the wall of mud came thundering toward their Laguna Canyon Road homes early Tuesday. But as the sun rose, rescuers found the body of Glenn Flook, 25, in the mud. A search for more victims was to resume today.

At least nine people were killed as the season's most powerful El Nino storm struck the waterlogged West Coast, killing people from Tijuana, Mexico, to northeastern California. It moved east Tuesday after leaving hundreds homeless, severing roads and rail lines and closing 35 miles of pristine Los Angeles County shoreline.

On the other coast, in Kissimmee, Fla., Rescuers with dogs searched the piney woods near a tornado-devastated campground Tuesday for possible victims of a swarm of tornadoes that strafed central Florida.

The death toll was 39.

Three people were missing late Tuesday, one from the Ponderosa Park Campground. Three others listed as missing from the campground were found alive at a hospital.

As the region continues to recover from the devastating tornadoes, President Clinton is paying a visit to assess the damage for himself and comfort storm victims.

Clinton will fly over Osceola County by helicopter today to see the destruction. The president added the Florida stop to a previously scheduled trip to California for Democratic fund-raising events in the evening. He is to address a technology conference on Thursday and meet with California disaster relief officials.

The storm in California was apparently the last in a series of rigorous weather systems that have repeatedly punished the state since late January, causing more than \$475 million in damage and prompting 36 of 58 counties to declare states of emergency.

As Los Angeles recorded 13.7 inches of rain for the month \_ breaking a 114-year record \_ a flooded Los Angeles County sewer system sent millions of gallons of

untreated sewage spilling into Santa Monica Bay. Beaches from Palos Verdes to Malibu were closed.

Meanwhile, a rescue effort ended sadly early Tuesday when the bodies of two California Highway Patrol officers were found lodged inside their patrol car, turned upside down in a rain-swollen river in Santa Maria, about 200 miles north of Los Angeles.

Officers Rick Stovall and Britt Irvine were on their way to help a disabled motorist on fog-shrouded Highway 166 when they were swept away by a torrent that had gouged 100 yards out of the two-lane rural highway.

"They were out doing what they are supposed to do. They were out helping the public," said patrol Lt. Paul Matthies.

Three other vehicles, including a jackknifed big rig, were stuck in the mud. Two drivers were rescued by helicopter; crews did not immediately find a third motorist in a submerged pickup.

Other damage from the storm included an underground drain that burst and carved a sinkhole 65 feet deep, 25 feet wide and 700 feet long at an interstate on-ramp in San Diego. Parts of six beachfront homes in Del Mar were slowly toppling into the sea.

In Northern California, waves chewed into a cliff beneath eight precariously perched homes in Pacifica, south of San Francisco, and residents remained barred from 500 homes around the rising Clear Lake north of Santa Rosa.

Two tornadoes \_ almost unheard-of in Southern California \_ touched down early Tuesday, ripping up storage sheds and knocking down trees in Huntington Beach and Long Beach. No injuries were reported.

In the snow-capped San Bernardino Mountains, east of Los Angeles, search crews were expected to look for two men aboard a Beechcraft Bonanza that disappeared Monday. Wreckage believed to be that of the plane was spotted at 11,100 feet Tuesday.

## **AT LEAST 7 REPORTED DEAD AS RAIN DRENCHES CALIFORNIA**

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1998/02/25/at-least-7-reported-dead-as-rain-drenches-california/75bdc748-ac54-4928-8e4b-43b8c0646fc1/?utm\\_term=.4e6319f5300e](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1998/02/25/at-least-7-reported-dead-as-rain-drenches-california/75bdc748-ac54-4928-8e4b-43b8c0646fc1/?utm_term=.4e6319f5300e)

By William Claiborne February 25, 1998

The winter's fiercest El Niño-driven storm dumped a long night of torrential rain on California, churning up swollen rivers, washing out highways and unleashing mudslides that destroyed many houses while leaving others teetering on unstable slopes.

At least seven people were killed, authorities said, including two California Highway Patrol officers whose patrol car was flipped onto its top and swept into a rampaging river early today during a flash flood in Santa Barbara County.

The deluge -- nearly 18 straight hours of rain -- was the latest in a series of El Niño-powered storms that have lashed the Pacific Coast for a month as part of a pattern of abnormal weather extending across the country to central Florida, where tornadoes early Monday killed 38 people and left hundreds homeless.

The California storms already have dumped twice the seasonal average rainfall in many parts of the state, breaking accumulation records and wreaking havoc in flood and mudslide-prone areas.

San Francisco's rainfall this winter has passed 38 inches, a record for this century and more than the devastating El Niño winter of 1982-83. Last night's rainfall raised the downtown Los Angeles total for this month to 13.68 inches, surpassing the record 13.37 inches set in 1884. Throughout the state, storm damage is estimated at \$475 million, with a state of emergency declared in 35 of California's 58 counties.

The two California Highway Patrol officers were found dead when divers reached their upside-down patrol car in the swollen Cuyama River, about 60 miles northeast of Santa Barbara, nearly 10 hours after the officers were reported missing just downstream from where a section of Highway 166 washed away.

The officers had been dispatched to the river at 2:30 a.m. after a tractor-trailer truck and six cars were reported to have been swept away in the washout about 20 miles east of Santa Maria. Two motorists were rescued by helicopter and a search continued in the muddy waters for the others.

Officer Marlon Varin of the CHP's Santa Maria office said efforts to pull the dead officers from their patrol car were hampered by swift water, heavy rain and an accumulation of mud. Varin said the vehicle was almost completely submerged. The victims were identified as Rick Stovall and Brit Irvine, both 10-year veterans of the force.

A 25-year-old man was killed when a wall of mud cascaded down a steep residential street in Laguna Canyon, in Orange County south of Los Angeles, and flattened the victim's mobile home. Police said three houses were destroyed and eight people were hospitalized with injuries they sustained while fleeing their homes.

Pat Brennan, a Laguna Beach Fire Department spokesman, said rescuers searched house-to-house for survivors, but that the mud was so deep in some places that trapped residents were unable to open their doors to get out. Firefighters used long poles to probe in the mud while looking for residents who were seen near their houses during the night but had not been accounted for since then.

"There was a lot of screaming. It sounded like people were dying in there," rescue worker Todd Tingley said of the neighborhood of about 20 houses that was in the mudslide's path.

In the Los Angeles suburb of Claremont, two 19-year-old Pomona College students were killed when a 70-foot eucalyptus tree fell on their sports utility vehicle early today at a stop sign as they drove to classes. A third person, who was not in the vehicle, was injured, authorities said. The campus is known for its majestic, 100-year-old eucalyptus trees.

One person died in a flood-related, multivehicle crash on Highway 99 near McFarland, in the San Joaquin Valley. In addition, the driver of a car trying to cross a stream in Tijuana, just across the Mexican border from San Diego, was drowned, Mexican authorities reported.

Busy Route 101, one of the main Los Angeles-San Francisco highways, was closed by mudslides and flooding and the coastal Union Pacific line was shut down when a trestle washed out in a flash flood. The Pacific Coast Highway through tony Malibu was closed because of landslides.

In a rarity for Southern California, two tornadoes touched down overnight in Huntington Beach and Long Beach, coastal cities south of here. While trees were knocked down and a trailer park was damaged, no injuries were reported in the twisters.

In the city of Ventura, an apartment building in a complex where 300 residents were evacuated over the weekend was flattened by a mudslide. Residents of Hollywood Hills and Glendale, in Los Angeles, anxiously watched unstable hillsides above their homes and building inspectors warned them to stay clear in case of a sudden slide. Work crews draped huge plastic tarpaulins over the slope in Hollywood Hills to hopes of saving the saturated hillside, but the ground already was so sodden that authorities said they expect some houses will be lost.

## **Hundreds Recall 2 CHP Officers Who Died in River**

<http://articles.latimes.com/1998/mar/01/news/mn-24297>

March 01, 1998 | Associated Press

***Funeral: Law enforcement personnel from across U.S. attend service for men whose car plunged off washed-out road during recent storms.***

**ANTA MARIA, Calif.** — Hundreds of law enforcement officers from across the nation joined family and friends in crammed church pews to remember Britt Irvine and Rick Stovall, who died while on duty.

The California Highway Patrol officers were killed Tuesday when their cruiser dropped off a section of California 166 washed out by the Cuyama River east of Santa Maria.

They were trying to rescue a stranded motorist.

The officers' flag-draped coffins were surrounded by flowers and their color portraits. Tears flowed during the two-hour service at Pacific Christian Center Church as speakers struggled to express what the two meant to them.

"He was a man who made me whole, a man who spent quality time with his children, a man of great faith, a man who sought wisdom and knowledge," said Stovall's wife, Lynn.

"How do I go on without you? I'm not sure," she added. "But I know that you expect nothing less."

Among those who praised the officers Saturday was President Clinton, who spoke of them when he arrived in Los Angeles in the evening.

"I especially want to send our condolences to the families of Officer Rick Stovall and Officer Britt Irvine, who gave their lives in the line of service as they responded to the emergency in Santa Maria," the president said at Los Angeles International Airport.

Mourners at the funeral dabbed at tears as Stovall's 12-year-old daughter, Alyssa, stood up before the congregation and joined a church choir in singing "Come Just As You Are."

Gov. Pete Wilson joined state and local lawmakers in eulogizing the pair. "These were men of uncommon courage and compassion and who know full well the purpose and meaning of the lives they chose," Wilson said.

Not all of the memories were sad. Officer Reggie Julius, a colleague at the Santa Maria station, remembered inviting Irvine to his home for dinner.

"He quickly volunteered to cover my beat while I went home and cooked," he said, drawing laughter in the church.

Thousands of other mourners lined the streets outside the church. Among them was former Santa Maria swimming and diving instructor Wink Russell and his wife, Barbara.

"I taught Rick to swim, to dive, and then he worked for me," Wink Russell said. Juan Ibarra, 17, and his sister, Veronica, 7, clutched lilies as they waited for the funeral procession to pass. Juan said he was in the CHP Explorer program and spent four hours riding on patrol with Stovall.

The time with the officer meant a lot to him, he said.

## California Rescue Bid Ends in Death

<http://www.lospadrescounty.net/et/ap.html>

By JEFF WILSON Associated Press Writer

### **SANTA MARIA, Calif. (AP) -- They never saw the end of the road.**

Two California Highway Patrol officers, their car rushing through swirling fog to help a motorist in trouble, dropped off the jagged asphalt and into a churning river of watery mud.

In the middle of the flooded Cuyama River, James Rowan, clinging to the cab of his tractor-trailer, watched the cruiser's flashing rooftop lights grow dim as the cruiser sank and floated away.

About 150 feet downstream, Steven Miller shivered violently, his wool pants and mud-caked shirt melding him with the murky riverbank. He had escaped from his submerged Toyota Camry, floated downstream and latched onto a sand berm before crawling onto the bank. He saw lights in the distance.

Both of the men desperately needed help, but by then their rescuers were beyond rescue.

It would be more than 15 hours before the bodies of Officers Rick Stovall and Britt Irvine, their seat belts still buckled, were pulled from the overturned patrol car.

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Two 911 calls came into CHP dispatch around 2:30 a.m. Tuesday. One caller reported a road washout, the other said a big rig was in trouble.

The dispatcher sent Stovall and Irvine to check it out. They headed for Highway 166. The two-lane highway links the central coast town of Santa Maria and its population of 68,000 with the San Joaquin Valley.

Rain -- Santa Maria has had 11.5 inches since Feb. 1 -- had slackened but drifting fog had taken its place. Minutes went by. The dispatcher tried to reach the patrol car. Silence. Worry crept in. It was nearly 4 a.m.

Santa Barbara County sheriff's Deputy Dennis Swack was called to take a look. He knows radio transmission is notoriously poor on the desolate rural route.

"It was slightly foggy. ... The next thing I know, the front end of my car went over the edge. I bailed out the driver's side door real quick and hit the pavement," he said. "I could hear the water rushing down below me."

His supervisor drove up behind him and aimed his headlights at the car, screaming at Swack to get clear. Below him, maybe 15 feet down, the gushing water had chewed away at the asphalt. He was on a ledge, a gaping hole where 300 feet of road had been yawning in front of him.

Swack could see fog and dim lights on the other side of the wash. "I was just thinking somebody probably went over the ledge down in the river. But I didn't know that at the time."

And in the foggy blackness, he couldn't know that four cars already had plunged into the Cuyama -- the CHP cruiser, the semi, the Camry and a pickup truck.

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Miller was coming to the end of his 200-mile trip. He looked at his watch. It was 3:10 a.m. The 47-year-old manager of the Robinsons-May department store in Santa Maria had been visiting his old store in Arcadia, just east of Los Angeles. Now he was just 20 minutes from home.

He drove into a fog bank and the road was gone.

"Then my car was airborne, my car started down nose first. I had no idea what happened. I fell for about 2 or 3 seconds. I hit the river, and it broke the driver's side window and immediately filled up the car. I thought to myself, 'I'm going to die.'"

Yet he made it out of the passenger window and drifted downstream before clawing his way onto the bank. As he neared solid ground, he thought, "I'm going to live."

For more than three hours, he shivered at the river's edge, catching glimpses of light through the fog. "I could see the lights. I thought to myself they must have seen my car." He didn't realize the washout was swallowing other cars. He said he yelled but no one answered.

As filthy as Miller's white shirt was, he took it off and waved it helplessly at helicopters that flew over before dawn. Miller watched the stars give way to the sun. Then rescuers saw him.

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Several hours later, CHP Commissioner Spike Helmick stood on the riverbank, his heart heavy because he knew by then that two of his friends -- devoted family men and excellent officers -- were dead.

The recovery was painfully difficult, the suction of the muddy slime thwarting efforts to get the bodies from the overturned car. Not far away was the yellow pickup truck; efforts to pull it free with a cable ended when the line snapped.

Both Stovall, 39, and Irvine, 40, had been assigned to the Santa Maria office for nearly eight years, Helmick said. Irvine, a country music fan, had two stepsons and a stepdaughter. Stovall, the son of a retired CHP officer, had a wife and son, 10 and daughter, 12.

Irvine was a member of the Santa Maria Swim Club while Stovall was well known for his church work, fellow officers said. There were no strangers at work -- Helmick said coping with the loss would be tough.

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As Miller held his hospital news conference at 3 p.m., Rowan was undergoing surgery for injuries to his scalp, knee, neck, shoulder, chin and face. His mother, Detta, who flew up from Los Angeles, said he was in acute care after the nearly three-hour operation, but his prognosis was good.

"God saved him" she said.

Her 38-year-old son was returning from a trip delivering merchandise to a department store.

As he sat on the truck's overturned cab, river water sweeping past him, Mrs. Rowan said, her son broke off the truck's side-view mirror and tried to signal whenever headlights approached.

She said he knew the officers who died and cried for them.

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When the search was suspended at sundown, all four vehicles were still embedded in the muck. The occupants of the pickup -- if there were any -- were nowhere to be found.

Officers on duty covered their badges with black bands, and a chaplain was called in to help officers and other workers deal with the grief.

"They are friends of mine. They are the heroes in this situation. They were on the way to save somebody's life and lost their lives in the process," Swack said, wiping away tears. "Everyone is grieving but two lives were saved."

Associated Press Writer Amanda Covarrubias contributed to this report.

## **Washout: Harrowing highway has a deadly history**

[http://santamariatimes.com/news/local/washout-harrowing-highway-has-a-deadly-history/article\\_6af9073f-732c-5aa7-91f5-187f45e82619.html](http://santamariatimes.com/news/local/washout-harrowing-highway-has-a-deadly-history/article_6af9073f-732c-5aa7-91f5-187f45e82619.html)

Feb 23, 2003 Janene Scully/Times Staff Writer

CHP officer Ray Meyer cruises down Highway 166 on a recent sunny day, offering a friendly wave back to other drivers on the rural highway. It's an easy drive through a bucolic scene that belies the trauma and tragedy that scarred the place five years earlier.

"It's still tough to talk about today," said Meyer.

On Feb. 24, 1998, two California Highway Patrol officers and a Nipomo man died when they plunged into a churning chocolate-colored abyss created when the rain-swollen Cuyama River consumed a section of Highway 166 east of Santa Maria. Two other men were lucky to survive their drop into the deadly waters.

It/s a loss that, five years later, still feels fresh, even as survivors raise concerns about the road/s safety.

El Niño-spawned rains created a raging river out of what normally is hardly more than a trickle. Swift-moving water tore away protective boulders and gouged a huge hunk out of the highway, 13 miles east of Santa Maria.

"I remember standing at the big hole at the end of the roadway wondering why?" said Meyer.

Five years later green grass and wildflowers fill the landscape and a blue sky allows sunshine to fall over the washout site. Decorated wooden crosses sit as roadside memorials to the tragedy.

A truck driver on an alternate route. A department store manager on his way home. A Nipomo man heading off to a new life. Two California Highway Patrol officers on routine patrol.

All five men landed in the gaping hole of what once was Highway 166.

A sheriff/s deputy who nearly drove off the road that morning said it still haunts him today, and he doesn/t want to talk about it. Truck driver James Rowan had remained reticent about sharing his experiences until this year.

Repairs have long since allowed that roadway to reopen, but Orcutt resident Steve Miller, whose Toyota landed in the river leaving him stranded for three hours, expresses doubts about the safety.

"It is still a very unsafe highway," said Miller. "People need to understand if it rains don/t go on that highway."

"It worries me every time there/s a storm and I know the road/s still open," said Betty Castillo, an Arroyo Grande resident whose brother, Michael Bennett Tye, remains missing in the river. "They say it/s safe, but I don/t believe it,"

A pair of attorneys said it/s an accident that should have been avoided. Attorney Jude Basile represented Steve Miller. Louis Koory from the San Luis Obispo/s McKiernan Law Firm represented Michael Bennett Tye/s father.

Miller, unable to return to a high-paying job, received just less than ,1 million in a legal settlement with the state, while James B. Tye of Nipomo agreed to accept just under ,100,000.

Attorneys said they turned up incriminating evidence while conducting research for the lawsuit before the cases were settled.

"It/s another tragedy that should have never happened," said Basile, a San Luis Obispo-based attorney who represented Miller.

Nobody watched a U.S. Geological Survey stream monitoring system that had a measuring tool just a short distance from the washout site, Basile said.

"They never checked it," he added. "Had they checked it, they would've seen the river rising at incredible rates all day."

After an earlier washout in 1978 that left one man dead and two others lucky to escape with their lives, a Caltrans committee recommended steps for repairs. It was the same location as the 1998 washout, according to Koory.

"After the wash-out, Caltrans went to the site and they recognized that the site of the wash-out was very problematic because of the configuration of the river and the way it was situated right up against the side of the highway," said Koory.

But the attorneys discovered crews used rocks half the size recommended by Caltrans engineers.

Ironically, a Caltrans crew member who witnessed the 1978 washout responded in 1998 within 12 hours of the washout, and told attorneys he observed the rising river.

"Yet, he takes no steps whatsoever to close the highway or to alert someone, even though he had already witnessed the road washout 20 years earlier," Koory said, adding the revelation came during a deposition.

"It was a truly amazing year with the quantity of rainfall," said Marta Bortner, a Caltrans spokeswoman.

Crews had to oversee mudslides and washouts on various roadways as El Niño rains drenched the Central Coast.

Caltrans representatives say crews used 8-ton rock to make the repairs months after the washout, dumping 20,000 tons of rock slope protection to guard against another washout in a ,2.2 million project.

"I know they reconstructed the roadway in place," said Caltrans spokeswoman Marta Bortner, adding that there was no way to reroute the road.

The narrow, two-lane road was declared a "safety corridor" with various programs established to make the road safer. Motorists now are urged to use headlights and crews looked at where to put median barriers to cut down on the number of deadly head-on accidents.

But Bortner wouldn't comment on specifics of the memo the attorneys claim they had uncovered, saying she hadn't seen it.

"I was under the impression 4-ton rock was recommended and that's why it was there," she said.

Caltrans maintains that the road is safe today.

"It's designed to the current safety standards. When we progress as a society the safety standards change, but it's designed to today's safety standards," said Bortner.

One survivor to the washout believes the road has closed more frequently since 1998.

With miles of roadway, Caltrans crews patrol regularly, but haven't focused on Highway 166 more than any other road.

"They get out and do as much as they can as fast as they can with the limited people and equipment we have," said Bortner.

The pain of the tragedy remains fresh at the Santa Maria CHP Office on Carlotti Drive, where Officers Britt Irvine, 40, and Rick Stovall, 39, worked at the time of their deaths.

"Our mission is to save lives, sometimes at the cost of our own," said Lt. Art Aclaro, now leading the CHP's Santa Maria office.

Along with the pain, the vast community support offered up for colleagues of the fallen officers remains equally vivid. Residents filled the CHP office lobby with flowers five years ago.

"It wasn't just overwhelming to us," said Officer Ken Carroll, adding that officers who came from other areas of the state expressed amazement at the outpouring of support. "The people of Santa Maria were just fantastic."

A funeral procession of law enforcement and emergency response vehicles extended the length of Santa Maria, with the first vehicle at Santa Maria Way as the last was still at Donovan Road and Broadway.

Carroll served in the honor guard at the church, missing out on the procession that included citizens by the hundreds lining sidewalks to pay their respects.

"That is incredible," he said. "I didn't realize it was that long."

The CHP officers say the irony is that both officers were avid water sports enthusiasts.

"The majority of us were optimistic," said Carroll. "We thought if anybody from our office would survive that, it would be those two."

Rick Stovall loved working graveyard shifts.

"Rick liked apprehending DUI drivers," said CHP officer Gus Lopez.

The son of retired CHP officer Bill Stovall, Rick left behind a wife and two children, now high school students.

"We/re just trying to keep ourselves busy," said Lynn Stovall, who married Rick in 1984. Since the accident, she said she has been blessed to be able to continue being a stay-at-home mom.

On the anniversary of Rick/s death, his family visits the memorial at the washout site, and does things he would have loved.

"It/s just a remembering time," said Lynn Stovall.

She drives the two-lane road, but only to reach the memorial.

"It does bother me," Lynn Stovall said. "I would hope that after all that happened, I would hope things changed to make it safer."

Britt Irvine/s prowess at soccer led him to be drafted by a professional team. Later, he gave up soccer and joined the CHP. Swimming was among his hobbies.

Britt and Nancie Irvine of Santa Maria were married more than a decade before their divorce just days before his death.

"There weren/t very many people I knew of that didn/t like him," said Nancie Irvine.

Active in sports, Britt was close to her four kids and shared that love with them, Nancie Irvine said.

Today, large crosses sit along the roadside, regularly maintained as a living memorial to the officers.

At the washout site, carefully placed rocks sit at the base of a wooden cross. Black letters say "CHP." Leis and flowers along with an American flag decorate the cross. A fishing hook recalls Rick Stovall/s hobby. Visitors leave messages of remembrances.

Despite regular patrols, officers don/t know who maintains the site, but their actions offer serenity for colleagues who still patrol the lonely highway.

"Every time I've gone by there, it's always well-maintained," said Carroll. "We don't know who does it."

Meyer recalls comments made after the tragedy.

"I made a pledge at the office to the guys that they (Rick and Britt) might be gone, but they'll never be forgotten," said Meyer. "That somebody is paying their respects means a lot to me."



### [California Highway Patrol](#)

### **Officers Rick Stovall, 9623, and Britt Irvine, 10657**

<https://www.facebook.com/chp/photos/a.375790662488582.85112.375491895851792/639998526067793/?type=1&theater>

· February 24, 2014 ·

Today, we honor Officers Rick Stovall, 9623, and Britt Irvine, 10657. On February 24, 1998, Officer Stovall and Officer Irvine, partners on graveyard shift, were responding to a possible truck accident on mountainous State Route 166 east of Santa Maria. Rain and fog made visibility poor. Their route took them along the Cuyama River, swollen by recent storms. A huge section of roadway had been chewed away by the raging river and their patrol car plunged 20 feet into the torrent. When dispatch lost radio contact, CHP and allied agencies began to search. It wasn't until the next morning that a CHP helicopter crew found the Patrol car, upside down, buried in silt, with only the tip of one wheel visible. Officer Stovall, 39, was an 18-year veteran of the Highway Patrol and the son of retired CHP Officer R. B. Stovall. Officer Britt Irvine, 40, had served 15 years with the Highway Patrol.



Officer Rick Stovall

Officer Britt Irvine

Santa Maria  
February 24, 1998