

**08-01-1985 Cheyenne WY – Robert A Van Alyne Jr – LEO Attempted Flood Rescue**



**Sergeant Robert A Van Alyne, Jr**

<https://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GSvcid=220479&GRid=34241925&>

**Birth:** 1952  
**Death:** Aug. 1, 1985  
Cheyenne  
Laramie County  
Wyoming, USA

Deputy Sheriff Laramie County, WY Sheriff's Dept. (Cheyenne Wyoming). Killed in the line of duty, 8/1/1985 while attempting to rescue a girl from floodwaters.



National Law Enforcement Officers  
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**ROBERT ARTHUR VAN ALYNE JR**

<http://www.nleomf.org/officers/search/search-results/robert-arthur-van-alyne-jr.html?referrer=https://www.google.com/>

Rank: Deputy Sheriff  
Panel: 30-W: 15  
Department: Laramie County, Wyoming, S.D.  
End of Watch: August 1, 1985  
Cause: Drowning  
Age: 33  
Years of Service: 1  
Description: Deputy Van Alyne drowned while attempting to rescue a family during a flood.

**Freak Storm Ravages Cheyenne**

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1985/08/03/freak-storm-ravages-cheyenne/64fa3399-5663-4d6d-8890-1a08c81692d2/?utm\\_term=.53cbf7c1f555](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1985/08/03/freak-storm-ravages-cheyenne/64fa3399-5663-4d6d-8890-1a08c81692d2/?utm_term=.53cbf7c1f555)

August 3, 1985 By T.R. Reid

A savage summer storm that slammed this capital city Thursday night with tornadoes, floods, lightning and hail left at least 12 people dead, more than 30 injured and up to eight reported missing.

The four-hour meteorological frenzy, a once-in-100-years storm, hit downtown Cheyenne with simultaneous fire and flood and washed cars by the dozen down a riverbed that usually lives up to its name: Dry Creek.

Some of the dead and injured had the misfortune to be driving near the creek bed when a wall of water swept them away. Other victims had sought shelter from the tornadoes in their basements and were engulfed by raging flood waters.

Cheyenne resident Peter Pacheco said he fled first to his basement, then raced up two flights of stairs with water rising behind him. When he finally jumped from a second-story window, he landed unhurt in chest-deep hail.

The National Weather Service issued another severe storm warning for the area for this evening but said that the predicted storm would not approach the ferocity of Thursday night's onslaught.

That storm, which stalled over the city, dropped 6.06 inches of rain on Cheyenne in 3 3/4 hours. The average annual rainfall here on the Wyoming plains is 12 inches. "It was like somebody opened a faucet right above our city and kept it open at ultra-high pressure," said Don Erickson, mayor of this town of 53,000. At the height of the storm, residents said cars, fences, trash trucks, and trees flowed through a residential neighborhood toward the city center.

Jan Jensen used a metaphor echoed by other residents to describe the water pouring into his Cheyenne house: "It looked like they were shooting fire hoses through all our windows."

An early evening rainstorm is an almost daily occurrence here on the eastern fringe of the Rockies, but these nightly rains rarely last more than 15 minutes. The storm here looked normal when it started, just before 7 p.m., but warning sirens blared when a tornado was spotted southwest of town. Devastating hail hammered at cars and smashed the windows of houses and businesses. Lightning started several fires.

The weather service said the storm failed to move away because an unusual thermal inversion held it rigidly over the center of Cheyenne. The mayor said it rained so hard that "you'd sort of expect it to stop after two or three minutes, and it went on three hours."

The confluence of bad weather played havoc with Laramie County's sophisticated disaster alert system.

The 911 emergency lines went out early in the storm. A fire broke out at police headquarters, and when officers moved across the street to the civil defense office they found it had been flooded.

Today, the Union Pacific railyards at the center of town looked more like a harbor than a rail depot. Whole neighborhoods in the northwest section of town took on a wintry face as several inches of hail blanketed the yards.

Erickson said the hail made this the only August day in Cheyenne's history on which the city had to send out snowplows to clear the streets. The stunning force of nature's power was in evidence everywhere. At one street corner, a yellow Pinto had pulled up neatly next to the gas tank at a gas station -- on its roof.

The county coroner was uncertain about the death toll and the causes of the fatalities tonight. Sheriff's deputies said that most of those lost had evidently been swept from their cars by raging water.

There were heroic efforts to save the drivers. Sheriff's deputy Robert Van Alyne swam into Dry Creek and pulled two people from a submerged auto, went back for the third passenger, a girl, 3.

Before he could reach safety, the deputy and the girl were swept away. Their bodies were recovered a mile downstream this morning.

Two victims died of heart attack, the sheriff's office said. One was bailing water from his house, and the other was shoveling hail away from his door.

The storm literally washed out a banquet at a Chinese restaurant. Chairs, tables and patrons were swept out into the street by the wall of water, but there were no fatalities there.

A team of Federal Emergency Management Agency investigators was en route from Denver tonight to determine whether the city qualified for federal disaster assistance.

Contrary to earlier reports, dams on reservoirs west of Cheyenne were not endangered by the storm, the mayor said.

Ironically, the tornado warnings that led some residents to danger in their basements turned out to be unnecessary. The weather service said the nearest tornado touched down several miles outside the city limits

## **Cheyenne Flood Kills 12; 70 Hurt : Record Rain Sends Walls of Water Through Streets**

[http://articles.latimes.com/1985-08-03/news/mn-3219\\_1\\_cheyenne-flood](http://articles.latimes.com/1985-08-03/news/mn-3219_1_cheyenne-flood)

August 03, 1985|From Times Wire Services

**CHEYENNE, Wyo.** — A record six inches of rain in less than four hours sent five-foot walls of water crashing through the city, trapping persons in swamped cars and in basements where they had sought shelter from tornadoes, officials said Friday. At least 12 persons were killed and 70 injured, two of them seriously.

Authorities estimated that damage would reach millions of dollars.

"It happened so fast," said Lois Nordberg, a north Cheyenne resident who had climbed to her roof to avoid rising waters. "I was watching through the kitchen window, and the water was flowing down the street . . . I walked into the kitchen, and there was water coming through the door. In five minutes, it was everywhere." The storm struck at nightfall Thursday with widespread lightning, which ignited several fires, and two inches of hail that piled into drifts up to six feet high.

Mud, trees and other debris covered the city Friday, Sheriff's Lt. Dan Broyles said. Some older houses had collapsed under the pressure of the mud and water. Sheriff's Capt. Walter Vanatta said that 100 deputies and police officers and 40 National Guardsmen searched homes and piles of debris in a hunt for victims. He said that the search probably would last through today.

The flooding was at its worst near the downtown train station along Crow Creek and on the city's north side along Dry Creek. However, extensive flooding occurred throughout the city because an unusual atmospheric condition held the storm over Cheyenne throughout its fury.

"If that was the 100-year flood, I don't think Cheyenne should have another one for 2,000 years," Mayor Don Erickson said.

Laramie County Coroner Roger Radomsky said that an elderly man suffered a fatal heart attack when cleaning up debris and that the other victims had drowned. Erickson said that 70 persons were treated at hospitals but only two remained hospitalized.

Among the dead was a sheriff's deputy, Robert van Alyne Jr., 33, who had tied himself to a utility pole to help three persons trapped in a sinking car. He got two of them out but, when he was trying to rescue a young girl, the rope holding him broke, sending him and the child into the torrent.  
Trapped in Basement

Another victim was a 73-year-old woman who had told her children by telephone Thursday night that she was going to her basement after hearing tornado sirens. Rescue workers Friday found her body in the basement under eight feet of water. The storm spawned three tornadoes, but no damage from the twisters was reported.

Erickson said that most of the deaths occurred on the city's north side along Dry Creek, which normally lives up to its name. On Thursday night, however, a wall of

water raced down it, sweeping away persons in their cars and inundating basements and first floors of homes.

Deputy Police Chief Larry Marsh said that residents participated in rescue operations throughout the night. "There are a lot of heroes in Cheyenne this morning," he said.

### **Communications Out**

Rescue efforts were considerably slowed because floodwaters washed out emergency communications in the police department and the basement of the county courthouse. The emergency room at Cheyenne Memorial Hospital, one of two in the city, was flooded, forcing doctors to work on the injured in the cafeteria. Several areas had been blacked out, but, by midday Friday, power was restored to most of the city, the second largest in Wyoming, with 47,000 persons.

The National Weather Service said that a record 6.06 inches of rain fell in only 3 1/2 hours on ground already saturated by 10 days of rainfall. The previous record for a 24-hour period in Cheyenne was 4.7 inches, set on July 15, 1896, forecaster Christopher Scott said.

### **Terrifying Flood Leaves 11 Dead In Cheyenne**

[http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1985-08-03/news/8502200639\\_1\\_wyoming-gov-cheyenne-lightning-strikes](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1985-08-03/news/8502200639_1_wyoming-gov-cheyenne-lightning-strikes)

August 03, 1985|By James Coates, Chicago Tribune.

**CHEYENNE, WYO.** — A freak hail and thunderstorm that hovered over Wyoming's capital city for three terror-filled hours has left at least 11 people dead while transforming the local streets into what an embittered victim called "white Christmas in August."

Four people were missing, officials said late Friday.

Wyoming Gov. Ed Herschler asked President Reagan to declare the famous Western city a federal disaster area as a result of the storm, which brought major flooding.

Most of the victims "were literally sucked out the windows of their cars in raging torrents of water," said Mayor Don Erickson.

Deputy Sheriff Robert Van Alyne, 33, was drowned with a 3-year-old girl he was trying to save from a submerged pick-up truck while he was tethered to a telephone pole with a lariat.

The rope snapped, sending the deputy and the child beneath the debris-choked floodwaters, said Lt. Dan Boyles, spokesman for the Laramie County Sheriff's Department.

An unidentified 27-year-old woman and her 6-year-old son died in another car that was caught up in the rushing floodwaters, officials said.

Among the other victims were Christy Hernandez, 6; Kumi Mostert, 7; Joelle Renee Padno, 16; Rose Scott, 17; James Jenkins, 18; and Alice Paulson, 73, the Laramie County coroner announced.

Authorities declined to identify the remaining dead and missing until their relatives were contacted.

Signs of devastation were everywhere in this city of 53,000--Wyoming's second largest--near where the state lines of Wyoming, Nebraska and Colorado meet. Cheyenne lawns were covered with white blankets of hail and hundreds of cars were cloaked with weeds, muck and debris marking where the waters had passed over their roofs.

An 8-foot-high drift of hailstones was still spread across a two-block area on the city's East Side as the sun set Friday.

Rain meters downtown recorded 6.06 inches of rain, of which 3.5 inches fell in a 3-hour period starting at 8 p.m. Thursday.

Normally Cheyenne only gets 12 inches of rain in an entire year, and the largest single rainfall ever recorded here previously was 1.7 inches in 1896. Jack Dashler of the National Weather Service said the storm probably was the worst single downpour to hit southeastern Wyoming since the time of Christopher Columbus.

"This is a storm that you'll find in this area only once in 500 years," he told reporters.

The Cheyenne deluge also was the worst rainfall ever to hit anywhere in the state of Wyoming, at least since records were started in the 1880s, weather service officials said.

Mayor Erickson and others vividly described the terror of those three hours as the grinding black thunderheads stalled over the city, relentlessly peppering the ground with dozens of lightning strikes.

Behind the lightning came a huge hailstorm followed by two tornados and finally an 8-foot-high wall of water that raged down a drainage canal called Dry Creek, claiming most of the lives.

"We had an 8-foot-high wall of hailstones pushed right down Dry Creek by the floodwaters," said the mayor, an eyewitness.

"The lightning strikes set off some of our civil-defense sirens, and then we set some others off after the first tornado was spotted."

Mrs. Paulson drowned when she went into her basement for shelter and it filled with water, the mayor said.

“They most definitely gave us a bum steer when they told us to get into the basements,” said Kevin Elsasser, whose home was destroyed when floodwaters, chocked with debris that included several Volkswagens and a heavy Oldsmobile Toronado, caved in the basement walls of his house.

Elsasser, a brick mason, and his wife, Karen, escaped the flooded basement by swimming. “So we went over to Steve’s (Elsasser’s brother-in-law’s) house, and it was White Christmas in August there,” he said.

The brother-in-law, Steve Averill, recalled “looking out our living room window and watching the four-lane street turn into a river.”

## **Twenty-five years ago today, massive storm devastated Cheyenne**

[http://trib.com/news/state-and-regional/twenty-five-years-ago-today-massive-storm-devastated-cheyenne/article\\_327dec19-3af5-5f33-92d6-95df04256b3e.html](http://trib.com/news/state-and-regional/twenty-five-years-ago-today-massive-storm-devastated-cheyenne/article_327dec19-3af5-5f33-92d6-95df04256b3e.html)

Aug 1, 2010 By JEREMY PELZER - Star-Tribune capital bureau

CHEYENNE -- When Dave Gill left for work the evening of Aug. 1, 1985, he had a vague feeling that something wasn't right.

"My wife even said to me, 'You're uneasy tonight,'" said Gill, then the director of the Laramie County Emergency Management Agency. "And I said, 'Well, I just got a feeling that things are going to be different tonight.'"

During the next several hours, a massive thundercloud parked over Cheyenne, dumping a record 6 inches of rain in less than four hours and sending walls of water up to 5 feet high rushing through the city.

Twelve people died, almost all of them drowned in floodwaters. Damage totals exceeded \$61 million, from flooded businesses and collapsed houses to cars buried in 6-foot-high drifts of hail.

Twenty-five years after the worst flash flood in Cheyenne's history, the city has taken steps to ensure such a disaster doesn't happen again. Flood channels have been diverted, new construction in flood plains is regulated by the city, and massive retention ponds dot neighborhoods.

But even with the changes, what will always remain are the memories of those who survived that summer night in 1985.

"The bottom line is that you always remember August 1, 1985," said Jonathan Downing, the executive vice president of the Wyoming Contractors Association who as an 11-year-old sat out the flood in his parents' basement.

'An ugly, ugly night'

While no one could have predicted the devastation that would take place the night of Aug. 1, that afternoon anyone looking at the sky to the west could see trouble was coming.



**Cars float down the street during the height of the flooding in Cheyenne on August 11985 (AP Photo/The Wyoming Tribune Eagle file)**

"The thunderhead that it came out of was just astounding," said Byron Rookstool, who was Cheyenne's police chief at the time. "I mean, it was huge, and when it started raining, it just kept going."

And when it reached Cheyenne, the storm stopped in place, thanks to an unusual atmospheric condition.

Dry and Crow creeks, on the north and south ends of town, respectively, turned into rivers. Any part of town on low ground – downtown, Holiday Park, the Dell Range flood plain – quickly filled with several feet of storm water.

With the rain came the tornado sirens, and residents headed down into their basements and storm shelters.

But as people huddled down below, the waters kept rising. Alice Paulsen, 73, was later found dead by divers in the basement of her Seventh Avenue home; she wasn't able to escape before floodwaters poured into her house.

Meanwhile the usually aptly named Dry Creek turned into a raging torrent, washing away cars – along with their drivers – who tried to cross the channel on bridges in north Cheyenne.

Two teenagers, James Jenkins and Joelle Pando, were in the back seat of a friend's car on College Avenue when the water swept over and into the car. The two people in the front seat escaped; Jenkins and Pando didn't.

"They couldn't get out," said Leo Pando, Joelle's father. "It just swept them right off into that ditch. That was an ugly, ugly night."

Deputy Sheriff Robert Van Alyne tied a rope to himself and dove into the swift-moving water to save a little girl; both drowned.

Emergency authorities quickly found themselves overwhelmed. The basement of the Cheyenne Police Department filled with water, knocking out the city's 911 system.

A new impromptu operations center was hastily set up in a Winnebago on higher ground.

"If you have an operations center, you have a pretty good chance of getting your operation under hand and being able to direct emergency services to where the needs are," Gill said. "But when you lose your center, it takes some time to re-establish that network."

By the morning of Aug. 2, the waters began to recede, and residents emerged from their homes to a new and chaotic world.

Muck was piled up on downtown sidewalks. Cars were floating around in the water and, in a couple of cases, had drifted into nearby buildings.

By Carey Junior High School, the water had collected hailstones in huge, lava-like mounds, with the rear ends of submerged cars sticking out of them.

When Gill surveyed the damage that morning, he saw damaged houses and wreckage everywhere.

"Some (people) were sitting out on their front porch – their basement was completely full of water," he said.

