

08-20-2020 Brenden P Unitt- LEO – Swimming / Boat Accident

Ranger Brendan Patrick Unitt



Larimer County Department of Natural Resources, Colorado

End of Watch Thursday, August 20, 2020



BRENDAN PATRICK UNITT

Ranger Brendan Unitt drowned while responding to a distressed boater on Horsetooth Reservoir near Soldier Canyon Dam at about 9:30 pm.

Ranger Unitt had been conducting a foot patrol at the campgrounds on the west shore of the reservoir when a strong-wind event occurred. He was dispatched to assist a distressed boater, but when he returned to his boat he discovered it had been blown off of the shoreline. It is believed that he removed his flotation device in an attempt to swim to the boat to retrieve it.

A massive search was undertaken when he failed to arrive at the distressed boater call or respond to dispatchers. His body was located at approximately 3:30 am the following morning.

Ranger Unitt was a U.S. Marine Corps veteran and had served with the Larimer County Department of Natural Resources for six months

BIO

Age 27

Tour 6 months

Badge P246

INCIDENT DETAILS

Cause Drowned

Military Veteran

Body Of Park Ranger Brendan Unitt Found After Overnight Search At Horsetooth Reservoir

<https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/crime/body-of-park-ranger-found-after-overnight-search-at-horsetooth-reservoir/ar-BB18exSo>

August 21, 2020 By Dillon Thomas

LARIMER COUNTY, Colo. (CBS4) - S4 – The body of missing Larimer County Department of Natural Resources ranger Brendan Unitt was found early Friday morning. The search had been happening all night at Horsetooth Reservoir.

Unitt, 27, is from La Salle. The Larimer County Coroner said his cause of death was an accident due to fresh water drowning.

The Larimer County Sheriff's Office communications center took a call at 9:18 p.m. Thursday that a ranger was missing after a strong wind event on Horsetooth Reservoir. Unitt's boat was found on the water, but he was missing.

Authorities immediately launched a massive search. Several agencies were involved, including the Larimer County Sheriff's Office, Poudre Fire Authority, Colorado State Patrol, the Larimer County Department of Natural Resources, the Denver Police Department helicopter, and others.

"I feel devastated," said Gerald Boese, a witness to the search. "I did see quite a few officers talking and hugging. Seems like it is hitting them pretty hard."

Boese told CBS4's Dillon Thomas he was falling asleep in his tent when he heard the response start. It began with a park ranger driving quickly with lights and sirens on.



credit: Poudre Fire Authority)

Shortly after more rangers arrived, and eventually at least one helicopter joined in the search. Poudre Fire Authority said it was the Denver Police Department's helicopter that was being used to search from above.

"We were sitting around getting ready for bed. We heard the helicopters," Boese said. "(The helicopter) came right over and shined the search light right on my tent. It was flying around with search lights, searching for somebody."

Drones were also used to look for Unitt.

Around 3:30 a.m. Friday, Boese said he saw more rangers gathering at the southwest corner of Horsetooth Reservoir. That was also around the time that Unitt's body was found, according to the Larimer County Sheriff's Office.

"I did see that the chaplain and the sheriff's office was here," Boese said. "There were tons and tons of rangers."

There were strong winds around Horsetooth Reservoir at the time Unitt went missing. Winds stayed around 30 mph for more than an hour straight.

Unitt disappeared while responding to a search for a missing boater. There is no update on the original search, or whether it was related to the boat parade organized by supporters of Pres. Donald Trump that took place at the reservoir Thursday afternoon.

Boese said, knowing Unitt died while on duty serving others, he was thankful for the sacrifice the ranger made.

"He is a hero," Boese said. "It is sad. I feel for his family. I feel for his family and everything, and all the other rangers out here today. It must be tough for them to be out here working again after all of that. I can only imagine.

27-Year-Old Ranger Drowns After Losing Boat In High Winds, Colorado Sheriff Says

<https://www.sacbee.com/news/nation-world/national/article245235625.html#storylink=cpy>
August 25, 2020 BY DON SWEENEY AUGUST 25, 2020

Officials trying to reconstruct the last moments of Brendan Unitt's life think the 27-year-old ranger had beached his patrol boat Thursday on the shore of Horsetooth Reservoir in Colorado. Unitt, a Larimer County Natural Resources ranger, may have been planning to check boat-in campsites on the western side of the lake, said Sheriff Justin Smith in a video briefing posted on YouTube. A radio call to rescue some boaters sent Unitt back to shore, where sheriff's officials suspect he discovered his patrol boat had drifted away in 35 mph winds at the lake near Fort Collins.

Rangers received some broken radio traffic from Unitt, then nothing more. He never showed up to help rescue the boaters, who were assisted by other rangers, Smith said. Searchers found Unitt's body at 3 a.m. Friday. Unitt, who was not wearing a life jacket, had drowned, The Denver Post reported. His life jacket was found on shore about 12 feet from where searchers found his body in the water.

Smith said Unitt may have taken off his life jacket to swim after his patrol boat. The jacket would have inflated in the water, hindering his ability to recover the boat. "We don't know exactly how it happened, but we believe that when he took that vest off and got into the water, he himself became in distress and eventually was dragged off the shore and pulled under, and it was at that point that he lost his life," Smith said in the video. Ken Brink, patrol captain for the Larimer County Department of Natural Resources, said in the video that Unitt died serving the public. "That night, he was looking out for other people and trying to save people's lives when he unfortunately lost his life," Brink said. Before becoming a ranger six months ago, Unitt served in the Marines, according to Brink.

Unitt's supervisor, Corporal Trevor Knight, described him as "selfless" and said he had "a great sense of humor" in the video.

Officer Down: Park Ranger Brendan Unitt Was Trying To Rescue Distressed Boater When He Drowned

<https://www.lawenforcementtoday.com/rescue-workers-are-searching-for-missing-officer-after-his-boat-capsized/>
August 26, 2020

FORT COLLINS, CO – We've now learned that a Park Ranger may have died a hero. [Law Enforcement Today](#) reported on the tragic death of Larimar County Natural Resources Ranger on August 21st.

Ranger Brendan Unitt, 27, was believed to have been forced out of his patrol boat due to an extreme high wind event in the area.

Now, reports are coming in that he may have drowned while trying to get to the aid of a distressed boater.



Larimer County Sheriff Justin Smith provided a press release via [YouTube](#) in which he says that Unitt was patrolling the area of Horsetooth Reservoir on August 20th when he received a call for assistance for two citizens who were reported to be in distress near the Solider Canyon Dam.

Prior to the call for help, Smith said that they believe Unitt had beached his patrol boat to check on campsites on the western side of the lake.

Fellow rangers in the area reported hearing broken radio traffic from Unitt as the high wind event hit, but they could not determine what was being said.

Unitt never responded back on the radio and other park rangers were dispatched to assist the two people were in distress.

Once those people were secured, and after repeated attempts to contact Unitt on the radio failed, search efforts were launched to find him.

Responding units were able to locate Unitt's boat fairly quickly but could not locate him anywhere in the area.

Once the boat was located, the rangers issue an alert and called all available units to the area to conduct a search for Unitt. Multiple agencies responded and assisted with the search.

Smith said that there were search and rescue efforts, both by air and on foot, which only initially was able to locate a life vest similar to what is issued by the Park Ranger service.

The life vest was found "almost directly across from the beach" on the other side of the reservoir where they believe Unitt had been checking the campsites.

Shortly after 3am, Smith said that searchers from the Colorado Parks and Wildlife had a boat in the water which had a side scan sonar. The sonar picked up what was referred to as a target near where the life jacket was located. Upon inspection, Unitt's body was located in "approximately 12-13 feet of water" and searchers were then able to recover his body.

Smith said that they may never know exactly what happened, however, based upon the evidence, they have a theory.

He explained that Unitt's boat was found with the motor off and the keys removed, indicating that he had beached the boat. Smith believes that Unitt had left his boat on the shore to patrol the campsite area when the dispatchers notified the rangers of the two people in distress.

Smith believes that Unitt "quickly" returned to his boat so that he could assist the two that were in distress when he noticed his boat had been pulled off shore by the high wind event. They believe that Unitt removed his vest, knowing that it would inflate when it hit water, which would hamper him swimming to his boat.

Although they may never know exactly what happened, they believe when Unitt entered the water he somehow was pulled into the water, possibly by some type of rip tide, which caused him to drown. The Medical Examiner has ruled Unitt's death accidental.

Larimer County Department of Natural Resources Captain Ken Brink, introduced himself on the video as the patrol captain for the rangers.

Brink said: *"That night, he was looking out for other people and trying to save people's lives when he unfortunately lost his life."*

Boat Procession Honors Ranger Brendan Unitt On Anniversary Of His Death

<https://www.reporterherald.com/2021/08/20/boat-procession-honors-ranger-brendan-unitt-on-anniversary-of-his-death>

August 20, 2021 by Will Costello wcostello@prairiemountainmedia.com Reporter-



Larimer County Ranger Brendan Unitt is pictured on duty on Horsetooth Reservoir last summer. Unitt drowned during a storm at the reservoir west of Fort Collins while on patrol on Aug. 20, 2020. (Larimer County Department of Natural Resources)

Larimer County honored the one year anniversary of Ranger Brendan Unitt's death Friday with a parade of boats on Horsetooth Reservoir, where Unitt drowned trying to save swimmers endangered by a sudden storm.

The 27-year-old Colorado native was remembered as having an irrepressible energy and a commitment to serve. An award for outstanding service to the county bears his name.

After chatting among themselves and paying their respects at Unitt's memorial, a collection of friends, family and fellow rangers climbed aboard a handful of boats on the shore of Horsetooth's South Bay, before leading dozens more in a procession around the reservoir.

"He was an absolute concentration of energy and fun," said Garrett Helzer, a childhood friend of Unitt's and classmate at Windsor High School. "Every day was its own story. He was easygoing and had a huge impact on everyone around him at the same time."

His friends described a man totally willing to make a fool of himself for a laugh, and his antics usually involved costumes, like when he wore a suit made entirely of neon duct-tape to a school dance, or dressed as a leprechaun to help promote a Fort Collins bar on Saint Patrick's Day.



The Larimer County Department of Natural Resources on Wednesday dedicated a bronze ranger hat and plaque in honor of Ranger Brendan Unitt, who died last summer while responding to an emergency during a sudden storm at Horsetooth Reservoir west of Fort Collins. (Charlie Johnson / Larimer County Department of Natural Resources)

Helzer and a handful of others who had known Unitt for years prior to his death milled around a memorial in his honor at the Horsetooth Reservoir Information Center on Friday afternoon.

"On August 20, 2020, Larimer County Ranger Brendan Unitt died while rescuing distressed swimmers during a severe storm on Horsetooth Reservoir," a plaque on the memorial read. "His service and sacrifice to Larimer County Department of Natural Resources visitors and the citizens of Larimer County will never be forgotten."

Prior to his work as a ranger, Unitt served as a Military Police Officer in Afghanistan after graduating high school, and received a degree in psychology from Colorado State University in 2019 with an emphasis in addiction and substance abuse counseling. He volunteered at the Rocky

Mountain Raptor program and was days away from starting training at a police academy.

"He did more in the quarter century he was alive than most people could do in decades and decades," Helzer said.

The Ranger Brendan Unitt Community Service Award is accepting nominations until August 31, and the recipient, who "honors the commitment to community that embodies the spirit of Ranger Unitt," according to the awards description, will be announced on September 30.

All three members of the Larimer Board of County Commissioners were present Friday afternoon to honor Unitt, and Commissioner Jody Shadduck-McNally said that she would be accompanying a county delegation to Washington, D.C. this fall to recognize him at the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial.

"I think Mr. Unitt embodied the spirit and the commitment of the rangers, to keep our visitors safe and our natural resources preserved," Commissioner John Kefalas said. "He was an example of somebody who went above and beyond."

"He served his country and his county with honor," Commissioner Kristin Stephens said. "I wish I could've known him."