

10-28-1991 Miami FL – Donald D Thornbury – LEO Everglades Patrol Airboat Accident



## OFFICER DOWN MEMORIAL PAGE

REMEMBERING ALL OF LAW ENFORCEMENT'S HEROES

<http://www.odmp.org/officer/270-wildlife-officer-donald-dante-thornbury>



### Bio & Incident Details

<b>Age:</b> 26
<b>Tour:</b> 8 years
<b>Badge #</b> 103
<b>Cause:</b> Drowned
<b>Location:</b> Florida
<b>Incident Date:</b> 10/26/1991

**Wildlife Officer  
Donald Dante Thornbury  
Micosukee Tribal Police Department, Tribal Police**

**End of Watch: Monday, October 28, 1991**

Wildlife Officer Donald Thornbury drowned following an airboat accident while he was patrolling in the Everglades in Broward County. His body was found two days later floating in a canal on the south side of Alligator Alley near the 46-mile marker, approximately 21 miles west of the Fort Lauderdale toll booth.

The Micosukee Tribal Police Department had only ten officers at the time of Wildlife Officer Thornbury's death. They had recently started a wildlife law enforcement program within the agency.

Wildlife Officer Thornbury had served with the Micosukee Tribal Police Department for 10 months. He had previously served, in Indiana, as an auxiliary officer with the Markleville Police Department for three years and with the Edgewood Police Department as an officer for four years. Wildlife Officer Thornbury was survived by his parents and brother.

**Ptl. Donald D. Thornbury  
26 years old  
Micosukee Police Dept.  
Miami, FL**

**Off. Thornbury was drowned accidentally on 10-28-91 while on routine patrol in the Florida Everglades on the Micosukee Indian Reservation, when his airboat flipped. He was missing for 3 days before his body was found.**

## THE EVENT

Miccosukee Police Officer **Donald Thornbury**, 26, drowned after an airboat accident that occurred while he was on patrol duty in the Everglades on Oct. 26, 1991. Officer **Thornbury** became the first member of the Miccosukee Police Department (organized in 1976) to be killed in the line of duty. The Department consisted of only ten men at the time of **Thornbury's** death.

On Saturday, Oct. 26, 1991, Officer **Thornbury**, who had joined the Miccosukee police 10 months earlier, was alone on airboat patrol on the Alligator Alley reservation in Broward County. **Thornbury** was also a Wildlife and Game Officer and his co-workers reported him missing Saturday afternoon. A "massive two-day search" was conducted by "land and air" (i.e., helicopters) that involved U.S. Customs, the Metro-Dade Police Aviation Bureau, the Broward Sheriffs' Office, the FL Fish and Game Commission and many volunteers.

On Monday, Oct. 28, **Thornbury's** body was found floating in a canal on the south side of Alligator Alley near mile marker 46, approximately 21 miles west of the Ft. Lauderdale toll booth. The airboat was found submerged at that location. Police investigators believe that the airboat flipped over in 12 feet of water and that **Thornbury** drowned.

## THE PERPETRATOR

There was no perpetrator in this case. The Broward Medical Examiner's Office, the FL Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission and homicide investigators from the Broward Sheriff's Office concluded that **Thornbury** had

suffered accidental drowning as a result of an airboat accident.

## THE OFFICER

**Donald Dante Thornbury**, 26, was born in Richland, Virginia, on May 14, 1965, to **Donald** and **Nancy Thornbury**. He was the second of two children (**Barry L.** and **Donald**). **Dante** was raised in the Dayton, OH, area and attended C.F. Holiday and Harold Snell Elementary schools, West Carrollton Jr. H.S. and West Carrollton H.S. He participated in track and football in high school and graduated in 1983.

**Donald** attended West Carrollton Joint Vocational School in his senior year and also for a year after H.S. After H.S. he worked at the City Office Building in Carrollton before the family moved to Indiana in 1983.

**Thornbury** first became interested in police work in Indiana as he served as an auxiliary (volunteer) police officer in Markleville, IN, from the age of 18 to 21 (from 1983-1986). He attended the Noblesville Reserve Police Academy for the Reserve Basic Law Enforcement course.

In 1986 he became a full-time police officer for the Edgewood, IN, Police Dept. and was sent by that Dept. to the Indiana Law Enforcement Academy in Plainfield. During his tenure in Edgewood (1986-1990), he attended the Indiana Law Enforcement Academy for DWI enforcement, the emergency services first responder course, the occult mind control and Satanic cult activity course, the police officer self-defense course, and the Doppler radar operation course.

**Thornbury** moved to FL in 1990 and joined the Miccosukee force on Dec. 18, 1990. He attended the Broward County Police Academy and received his FL police certification on March 29, 1991. **Thornbury** had a total of 8 years of law enforcement experience at his death. During his tenure in FL he completed the U.S. Dept. of Interior Fish & Wildlife Service certification course, the U.S. Interior Special Police Deputation course, and the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs Deputy Special Officers course (from the Miccosukee Dept.).

The Miccosukee tribe had only recently begun a wildlife program and, in Sept. of 1991, **Thornbury** had volunteered to work as a wildlife officer.

A Miccosukee Wildlife Officer has the same law enforcement powers as a Miccosukee Police Officer granted in Florida State Statute 285.18. All Miccosukee sworn law enforcement officers regardless of their designation as a wildlife officer, upon application, receive commissions as Special Officer of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Special Police Deputation U.S. National Park Service. Both of the Commissions are granted by the Secretary U.S. Department of the Interior and have the full force and authority to investigate and prosecute violations of federal criminal law. (Letter from Miccosukee Police Chief Anthony G. Zecca, 11/21/1995)

**Thornbury** was working as a wildlife officer when the accident occurred. He loved the outdoors and often commented to his fellow officers, "It's almost a sin to get paid for doing this job."

On Oct. 20, 1991, a memorial service for **Donald Thornbury** was held at the Fred Hunter Funeral Home in Davie, FL. The service was held with full police honors and included a police honor guard. The **Thornbury** family attended the service as did hundreds of uniformed police officers from throughout FL.

The closed casket was shipped to Virginia for the funeral and burial. Viewing of the body was at the Grundy Funeral Home in Grundy, Virginia, on Nov. 1, 1991, with the funeral the next day at the Rosedale, Virginia, Church of Christ. The service was attended by Miccosukee Officer Woodward Brooks, who had shared an apartment with Officer **Thornbury** in Miami, FL; Miccosukee Police Chief Anthony G. Zecca, Miccosukee Tribal Assistant Chairman Jasper Nelson and Councilman Jimmy Bert; representatives of the Virginia State Police; and members of the Edgewood (IN) Police Department. "Chief Zecca presented to the parents, a plaque containing Officer **Thornbury's** badge #103 now retired in his name forever."

The **Thornbury** family wanted the funeral service to be a celebration of the life of **Donald Thornbury** rather than a time of mourning. Minister Clarence Greenleaf, who performed the wedding ceremony for Donald's parents and knew **Donald** from birth, spoke of his life and Christian faith. Four of Donald's best friends from high school spoke about their memories of **Donald** followed by the song, "That's What Friends Are For." His two nieces, Erin Marie, 10, and Dana Leigh, 5, told of their memories of and love for their uncle and sang, "This Little Light of Mine." Donald's brother spoke of the good times that he had shared with his younger brother. Several in attendance, including Minister Greenleaf, told the **Thornbury** family the service was the most moving they had ever attended.

Burial was at the Clinch Valley Memorial Cemetery in Richland, VA. Officer **Thornbury's** grave sits atop a hill overlooking the beautiful Clinch Valley. Ironically, Dante **Thornbury** selected the site for his own burial as he had visited the site where his uncle was buried years earlier and told his family he wanted to be buried there. His marker reads:

**DONALD DANTE THORNBURY**

1965 - 1991

ABSENT FROM THE BODY  
PRESENT WITH THE LORD

The **Thornbury** grave marker also includes a replica of badge #103 of the Miccosukee Police Dept.

**Donald Thornbury** was survived by his parents, **Donald** and **Nancy Thornbury** of Anderson, IN; a brother, **Barry L. Thornbury**, 30, of Pineville, LA.; his nieces, **Erica Marie Thornbury**, 10, and **Dana Leigh Thornbury**, 5, of Pineville, LA; his grandparents, **Ray** and **Esther Thornbury** of Lebanon, VA; and his maternal grandmother, **Tina Welch** of Melbourne FL.

A permanent memorial to **Donald Thornbury** is located at the east side of the Tamiami Trail headquarters of the Miccosukee Police Department. It was constructed by young Miccosukee Indians after the Miccosukee General Council provided the funds to cover the cost

of construction. The memorial is maintained by the same young men who built the memorial. It reads:

IN MEMORY

WILDLIFE OFFICER

**DONALD DANTE THORNBURY**

MAY 14, 1965 - OCT. 26, 1991

THE FIRST POLICE OFFICER TO  
GIVE HIS LIFE IN THE SERVICE OF  
THE MICCOSUKEE TRIBE OF  
INDIANS OF FLORIDA  
BILLY CYPRESS  
TRIBAL CHAIRMAN

The name of **Donald D. Thornbury** is inscribed (Panel 87-Right-26) on the Memorial Wall of the American Police Hall of Fame Museum at 3801 Biscayne Blvd. in Miami. His name is also inscribed (West Wall, Panel 49, Line 18) on the National Law Enforcement Memorial in Washington, D.C. and is read each May at the Dade Police Memorial Service in Tropical Park in Miami.

The **Thornbury** family has attended memorials at the Miccosukee Dept., in Miami (the Dade County service and the Police Hall of Fame), Tallahassee (the FL service), and in Washington, D.C. A year before his death **Donald Thornbury** had told his parents about the National Law Enforcement Memorial in Washington, D.C., which was scheduled for completion in 1991 and said that he planned to visit the memorial wall during his vacation the next year.

The memorial wall was dedicated by President Bush on Oct. 15, 1991, eleven days before **Dante's** death. He became the first officer in the U.S. to be killed after the dedication of the new memorial and his name was added to the wall in 1992. His parents made the visit for him in 1992 and saw their son's name on the wall he revered.

**SOURCES:** Miami Herald, Oct. 28,29, 1991; PBA HEAT, Feb., 1992; Ft. Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel, Oct. 28,29,31, 1991; Letter from Chief **Anthony Zecca**; and interviews with **Nancy Thornbury** and **Sgt. Woody Brooks**.