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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Oct. 5, 2021

Roseburg Police officers recognized for rescuing drowning woman

ROSEBURG, OR – Three Roseburg Police officers were recognized Tuesday, Oct. 5, for their heroic actions rescuing a drowning woman from the South Umpqua River last week.

Roseburg Fire Chief Monte Bryan awarded Roseburg Fire Department challenge coins to Roseburg Police Sgt. Jeff Eichenbusch and officers Dawson Batsch and Brandon Halter in an informal ceremony Tuesday morning at the end of their overnight shift. Sgt. Eichenbusch, who supervises the two officers, also presented Batsch and Halter with official lifesaving commendations after the two jumped in the river to save Brittany Rose Shepherd, 24, of Roseburg.

“The Fire Department would like to recognize Sgt. Eichenbusch, Ofc. Batsch and Ofc. Halter for their lifesaving actions. We are fortunate to be partnered with such dedicated law enforcement professionals,” Bryan said.

The north bank of the South Umpqua River was steeped in darkness when Sgt. Eichenbusch pulled his patrol car onto the bike path under the Stewart Parkway bridge shortly after 4 a.m. Wednesday, Sept. 29.

Sgt. Eichenbusch was first on the scene just minutes after Roseburg resident James Smith called Douglas County Emergency Communications for help after Shepherd went skinny-dipping but couldn’t make it back to shore. The sergeant had a flashlight, but there was no moonlight to guide him as he ran down to the riverbank to try to find Shepherd and Smith, who had been on a date.

“I didn’t see anybody,” Sgt. Eichenbusch said later.

In the predawn dark, he could hear only gasping and coughing coming from somewhere out on the South Umpqua.

“I could hear what I assumed was her,” he said. “It sounded like somebody struggling in the water.”

He began pushing through wild, overgrown trees and brush blocking his way down a steeper embankment to the river when Smith called out to him, saying Shepherd was closer to the bridge. Smith had told dispatchers he was unable to help Shepherd.

“I actually never saw him. I just listened to his directions,” the sergeant said.

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Sgt. Eichenbusch ran another 100 yards down to the river's edge and scanned the river for Shepherd using his flashlight. Officer Brandon Halter arrived on the opposite riverbank with another flashlight. The beams of light zeroed in on her at the same time.

"All we can see is just her face," Sgt. Eichenbusch said. "You can't even see her whole head. She's just looking up at the stars. She's not looking toward the shore -- which led me to believe she was struggling so hard, she was just trying to keep her face above water."

Officer Halter sped in his vehicle over to Sgt. Eichenbusch, whose position by the bridge was closer.

At the same time, Officer Dawson Batsch arrived and found Smith about 50 to 70 yards upstream. The officer, who competed on Roseburg High School's swim team from when he was a sophomore until graduating in 2012, wondered why Smith was completely dry, but didn't ask because Smith was shaken up and clearly grateful the officers had arrived. To the officer, Smith seemed unconfident in his swimming ability.

Together, Batsch, 27, and Smith forced their way through the brush to the riprap rock-strewn riverbank. In the extreme darkness, they could barely see anything.

Just as Batsch got a good sight on Shepherd and told Smith he was going in to get her, Roseburg firefighters arrived with a rescue throw bag. Batsch and Smith tried to throw the rescue bag and rope to Shepherd, but the rope got caught in the brush.

Shepherd was so focused on treading water that Batsch knew she wouldn't grab the rope even if it hit her. Batsch quickly slipped off his external ballistic vest, belt, gun and other gear, grabbed a lifejacket from a firefighter and got into the water.

Further away, Sgt. Eichenbusch saw the rope get hung up on bushes and told Officer Halter, "Watch my stuff. I'm going in." But Halter told his sergeant, "No, I'll do it," quickly removed all his gear, advanced along the riverbank to get closer and picked up an orange life preserver to assist Shepherd.

The air temperature was in the low 50s. Batsch, who'd worked as a lifeguard at the YMCA in Roseburg, didn't just dive in because he didn't know how deep the river was. He walked in until it was too deep to walk and began swimming.

"It was crisp. That water was not warm," Batsch said later. "It wasn't extremely cold. It wasn't like wintertime."

As he swam 25 to 30 yards, he kept his eyes on Shepherd and saw her sink underwater a couple times. But she kicked and brought herself back up each time. Batsch thought to himself that she was not going to last another 60 seconds.

As a lifeguard at the Y, Batsch rescued one other person: a little boy who was starting to go under. But that was in the middle of the day in a swimming pool with other lifeguards there.

This was 4 in the morning, in the river, in the dark.

On shore, Sgt. Eichenbusch also saw Shepherd losing strength. He could see she was exhausted – so exhausted, she was no longer able to cough the water out of her throat. Just before the officers reached her, she stopped making any sound.

"I had no doubt in my mind that in a few more seconds she was going under water. As a supervisor, I was thinking it was going to be a recovery, not a rescue. You could tell she was very much struggling to stay up," Sgt. Eichenbusch said.

The water was too deep for any of them to touch the river bottom where Shepherd was. And Shepherd, by all accounts, was tiny. And intoxicated. Batsch sidestroked beside her so he could come up behind her as he'd been trained, grabbed her and supported her with the side of his body – making sure her shoulders, face and head were completely out of the water. Halter swam right behind Batsch with the life preserver/buoy.

“When I got there, I don’t know if she even realized that I was there,” Batsch said. “She was completely gassed. She just had no fight in her. She just kind of went limp when I grabbed her.”

Batsch towed Shepherd back to land. Halter stayed with them. As they made it to shore, a firefighter said, “Good job, gentlemen.”

Four firefighters grabbed Shepherd, who was shaking and cold. They put her in the closest police car and cranked up the heat to keep her warm and protect her privacy until the ambulance and gurney arrived. She was treated at the scene by medical personnel.

Sgt. Eichenbusch visited Shepherd after she'd been transported to Mercy Medical Center, where she was covered in warming blankets. She didn't talk about the circumstances that led to her near-drowning. He had a short conversation with her about safety. The following day, Glenn Frick, a wildland firefighter who said he raised Shepherd, called the sergeant at RPD to thank the officers for saving her life.

Looking back, Batsch said he never thought he'd be jumping into the river to save someone when he joined the Roseburg Police Department. He's glad he could use his swimming skills to help someone in the community.

“Everyone should know how to swim,” he said. “I just think I was in the right place. Any one of us -- any law enforcement officer with us or the county -- would have done the same thing.”

Sgt. Eichenbusch, who supervises the team working the graveyard shift from 9 p.m. until 7 a.m., said he's not aware of anyone else nearly drowning in the river at night throughout the 25 years he's been on the force. And he couldn't be more proud of Batsch and Halter.

“It was almost like a proud-dad moment knowing that was my team,” said Sgt. Eichenbusch. “I have zero doubt that every single one of our officers would do that. That's what I believe sets us apart from other professions: How many other professions are going to risk their lives at a moment's notice to save someone they don't even know? That's what gives us a sense of pride.”

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