

John Lobach's Death and Implications for Wittenberg Security Force

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In 1969, John Lobach lost his life less than a month before he was to graduate from Wittenberg University. This is the story of his death and its repercussions for Wittenberg Security. Born 28 July 1947 in Pennsylvania, John graduated from high school in the top fifth of his class. While in high school he participated in athletics, theatre, and choir. At Wittenberg, John was a history major and a member of the Phi Kappa Psi fraternity.¹

On 9 May John and two of his fraternity brothers, Theodore Winzeler and Allen Mitchell, drove to an off-campus party. Following the party, the three friends drove back to campus, parking near the women's dorm, North Hall. Lobach decided to climb the side of the three story dormitory (which has a number of terraces and ledges) so that he might knock on the window of a fraternity brother's girl friend.² Both Winzeler and Mitchell advised, unsuccessfully, against scaling the wall. In climbing the side of the dorm, Lobach may have rattled a window pane as he neared the second floor of the building. Sophomore Amy Cunningham reported that she heard "a window rattle" and saw "a shadow."³ Disturbed by what she saw and heard, Cunningham quickly reported her observations to a resident assistant, Diane Smith. In turn, Smith immediately alerted the dormitory housemother, Mrs. Wirna Benson, of the situation.⁴ After receiving Benson's call at 2:22 A.M., security responded by dispatching the two officers on duty to the scene. Arriving on the scene in a security cruiser, officers Frank Lytle and Chester Phillips instructed John to remove himself from the ledge. At the approach of the officers, Lobach's friends slunk away unnoticed. As was the standard operating procedure, one of the officers, Lytle, proceeded inside the building to call the head of security, William Lockman. Meanwhile, Lobach, showing "no physical resistance," was placed in the patrol car.⁵ In the cruiser, Lobach told Phillips that he was an eighteen-year-old high school student named James Carson, and that he lived at 801 North Fountain Street.⁶ While Lytle was inside,

Lobach fled from the car, running north along the side of North Hall towards what is now Bill Edwards Drive.⁷ Jumping out of the car, Phillips ordered Lobach to halt four or five times. Finding Lobach unresponsive to his shouts, Phillips drew his newly-purchased .357 magnum revolver and fired a warning shot into the air.⁸ With Lobach still not responding, Phillips fired "aiming at his legs."⁹ The bullet penetrated Lobach's back. Unaware of what was going on outside, Lytle hurried out of the building after he heard the shots to find Phillips calling for "the police and an emergency car."¹⁰ When the emergency squad arrived on the scene at 2:56 A.M., Lobach was already dead. At age twenty-one, with thirty-six days left until he would graduate, John Lobach was killed by a Wittenberg security officer.

Lobach's death compelled the University to rethink its approach to protecting students. A review of the policies and procedures of the security office by the Torch staff revealed Phillips' actions to be in violation of the "Manual of Operating Procedures."¹¹ Of the twenty-two "responsibilities and job requirements" listed, Phillips disregarded the regulation detailing the proper use of lethal force. It states that "Fire arms, shall only be used for self defense or for the protection of human life."¹²

Despite such a clear mandate, Wittenberg University chose to retain Phillips, transferring him to a new position.¹³ However, Wittenberg did revamp its security department. In the fall of 1969, new policies were adopted that addressed some of the issues raised by Lobach's death. For example, officers were only permitted to carry .38 caliber weapons (not the more powerful .357). Additionally, officers would only carry weapons from 8 P.M. to 5 A.M. or when transferring money. Before any officer could carry a gun, s/he was required to complete a 120-hour basic training program by the Springfield Police Academy.¹⁴ Thus, the tragedy of a student's death compelled Wittenberg to change its security policies.

Endnotes

¹ "Wittenberg Student Killed by Guard" *The Springfield Daily News*, 10 May 1969, 1.

² *Ibid.*, 1.

³ *Idem.*

⁴ *Idem.*

One can judge the speed of this interaction by the police reports cited in the *Daily News*. Lobach's friends reported that they arrived back on campus at 2:20 a.m.

⁵ Martin Curdes, "Wittenberg loses civil suit" *The Torch*, 10 October 1974, 1.

⁶ "Wittenberg Student Killed..." 1.

⁷ "Death Opens Security Study," *The Torch*, 16 May 1969, 1.

⁸ Dialog with Robert Cherry, then director of the Upward Bound Program at Wittenberg, February 27, 1997. Cherry spoke with Phillips two days prior to the shooting. Phillips told Cheery of his new, more powerful .357 weapon.

⁹ "Death opens security study," 1.

¹⁰ Curdes, 1.

Both the Curdes article and a later 29 April 1976 article assert that Lobach died three to five seconds after being shot

¹¹ "Wittenberg security department subject to rules and regulations," *The Torch*, 16 May 1969, 1.

¹² *Idem.*

¹³ "Death opens security study," 1.

¹⁴ "Security staff is reorganized; increased staff has eight men," *The Torch*, 3 October 1969, 1.

Bibliography

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