

# COMMENTARY

## "The most dangerous convict"

After he has been in prison nearly 24 years,  
some still cannot forget Frank Wetzel

By JOHN DRESCHER

• Second of two parts.

On the night of Nov. 5, 1957, Highway Patrolman W.L. Reece switched duty time with another trooper so he could be at his Rockingham home for dinner to celebrate his oldest daughter's birthday. After dinner he returned to his job. Two hours later he lay dead on a highway, an innocent victim of an escaped prisoner's bullet.

Two months later, amid swooning bobbysoxers and a vengeful crowd in Rockingham, the handsome and suave Frank Edward Wetzel, a 36-year-old escapee from a mental hospital in New York, was convicted of killing Patrolman Wister Lee Reece and was sentenced to life in prison. Later he was convicted in the murder of the other patrolman, J.T. Brown, and was given another life term. Immediately he was sent to maximum-security Central Prison in Raleigh.

For more than 20 years—while considered the most dangerous prisoner in North Carolina—he has sought various transfers to lower-security prisons that would end in his parole. Each time an outcry against his transfer arose from prison officials and the public. Nearly 24 years after the murders, Frank Wetzel is a legend—a legend that, especially to some, continues to live.

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Susan Reece turned 13 the day her father was killed. "The rest of the night, my sisters, ages five and 10, and I huddled, frightened in our parents' bed waiting for the killer to come and kill us too," she recalled 23 years after the fact. Now she is Mrs. Susan Giles, mother of three, secretary at the First Methodist Church in Roanoke Rapids and possessor of a nightmare that won't leave.

"After all these years, it seems like something I read in a book," she said in a telephone interview from her office. "It still doesn't seem like it could have happened to me."

For years, in fact, until Tuesday, she had never talked to the media about the incident. Her mother's lawyers had recommended that they not speak about the subject. There was another reason too.

"It's something I haven't talked about because it hurts," said Mrs. Giles, now 36. "People were in shock that anyone would kill Bill Reece. He was a good, kind man."

A recent rash of newspaper stories appearing about Wetzel's alleged involvement in an escape from Caledonia Prison prompted her to write a letter to a local paper. "According to reports... and officials inside Central Prison, he does not regret his crimes of murder—only that he committed them in 1957, a time when 'cop killing' was considered a heinous crime," she wrote.

She said in the interview Tuesday that Wetzel apparently was not sorry he

committed the murders. "He's never been in touch with my family," she said. She is not against parole and she believes in rehabilitation—she even did volunteer work in a nearby prison—but she feels, based on discussions with prison officials, that Wetzel has not been rehabilitated.

"It scares me to pieces to open the paper in the morning to see this man," she said. "I try to be fair and say he deserves rights but it's very hurtful."

"I feel like the man deprived me of a father and my children of a grandfather."

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After his conviction, Wetzel was sent to Central Prison, where he became the most guarded man in the state. Because

son officials found a pistol, loaded and ready for use, smuggled into Central for Wetzel and four to seven other of the most dangerous convicts in Central to use to overpower guards and escape.

The sister of Thomas Callahan, a close prison friend of Wetzel's, was convicted of smuggling in the gun and bullets. Prison officials to this day do not know how it was accomplished. Wetzel was never charged but for years that plot remained the rationale for refusal to transfer him to a medium-custody field unit. There, officials said, he could earn minimum-custody status and be transferred to a unit where escape is easy.

For months after the incident, Wetzel was shuttled back and forth between an isolated cell at Central and the state's

in prison chapel service each Sunday, was associate director of the prison Jaycees and a member of Alcoholics Anonymous. He passed a high school equivalency test and several college courses and compiled a \$2,000 savings account from his tiny prison earnings.

"At one time I was mentally not of the right mind as to society and law," he said in a 1974 interview. "But I've completely changed in my thinking. I am striving to show that now."

Prison Chaplain J.P. Moorman in 1974 called Wetzel's change "spectacular." "They say he's the most dangerous man in North Carolina, but it's hard to say that if you know Frank. Frank has made innumerable contributions to the betterment of the prison community. The only way he can prove himself is in prison, in the surroundings available.

"I am sure all Frank wants to do is get out of prison, get married, settle down and make a contribution to society."

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In February 1981, Wetzel, 58, won a four-year legal battle to be transferred from Central to the Caledonia unit. Although he had received medium-security status through good conduct six years before, the transfer was held up because he was regarded as a high risk by prison officials. He had been the only medium-security prisoner at Central.

Then, in June, another bizarre chapter in the Wetzel chapter was authored. On June 2, a Caledonia prison guard said he overheard Wetzel plotting to escape from the prison with fellow inmate George Harp. Wetzel was stripped of his medium-security status, shipped back to Central and put in solitary confinement.

Wetzel, since returned to Caledonia, has appealed the ruling by the prison authority. The guard who overheard Wetzel was in a tower about 50 feet away and 15 feet in the air. An aerospace engineer at N.C. State has said "it would be highly unlikely" that an outdoor conversation from that distance would be intelligible.

It also would seem unlikely that Wetzel, prison-wise after 23 years, would discuss an escape plan in front of a highly visible guard. Wetzel's appeal is currently being reviewed.

Wetzel feels he was set up and that prison officials, and the public, refuse to forget crimes he committed nearly a quarter of a century ago. Undoubtedly, his legend remains alive in the hearts and minds of many North Carolinians. For some it is a legend that won't go away.

"I don't see how you can forget about his past and the life he's lived," Mrs. Giles said. "It still hurts very much when I see an officer has been killed and what his family has been through."

"If you knew what these people had been through, you wouldn't forget."

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of his cunning intelligence—Wetzel has an IQ over 130—and leadership abilities, prison officials were especially wary of Wetzel. They called him "potentially the most dangerous convict" in the state prison system, which housed 11,000 prisoners.

"In this case you've got a man who is highly intelligent but he maneuvers his intelligence in a criminal manner," said Warden K.B. Bailey in 1963. But for more than two years, Wetzel appeared to be a model prisoner, with only minor infractions. Then, on Oct. 9, 1960, pri-

"Little Alcatraz," Ivy Bluff Prison in Caswell County.

"We didn't want him to get set," said Prison Director George Randall in 1963. On June 28, 1961, Wetzel made his last trip from Ivy Bluff to Central and remained in a single cell in a cell block that houses the most dangerous and troublesome inmates.

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After the smuggled gun incident, Wetzel again became what was often called "the model prisoner." He participated