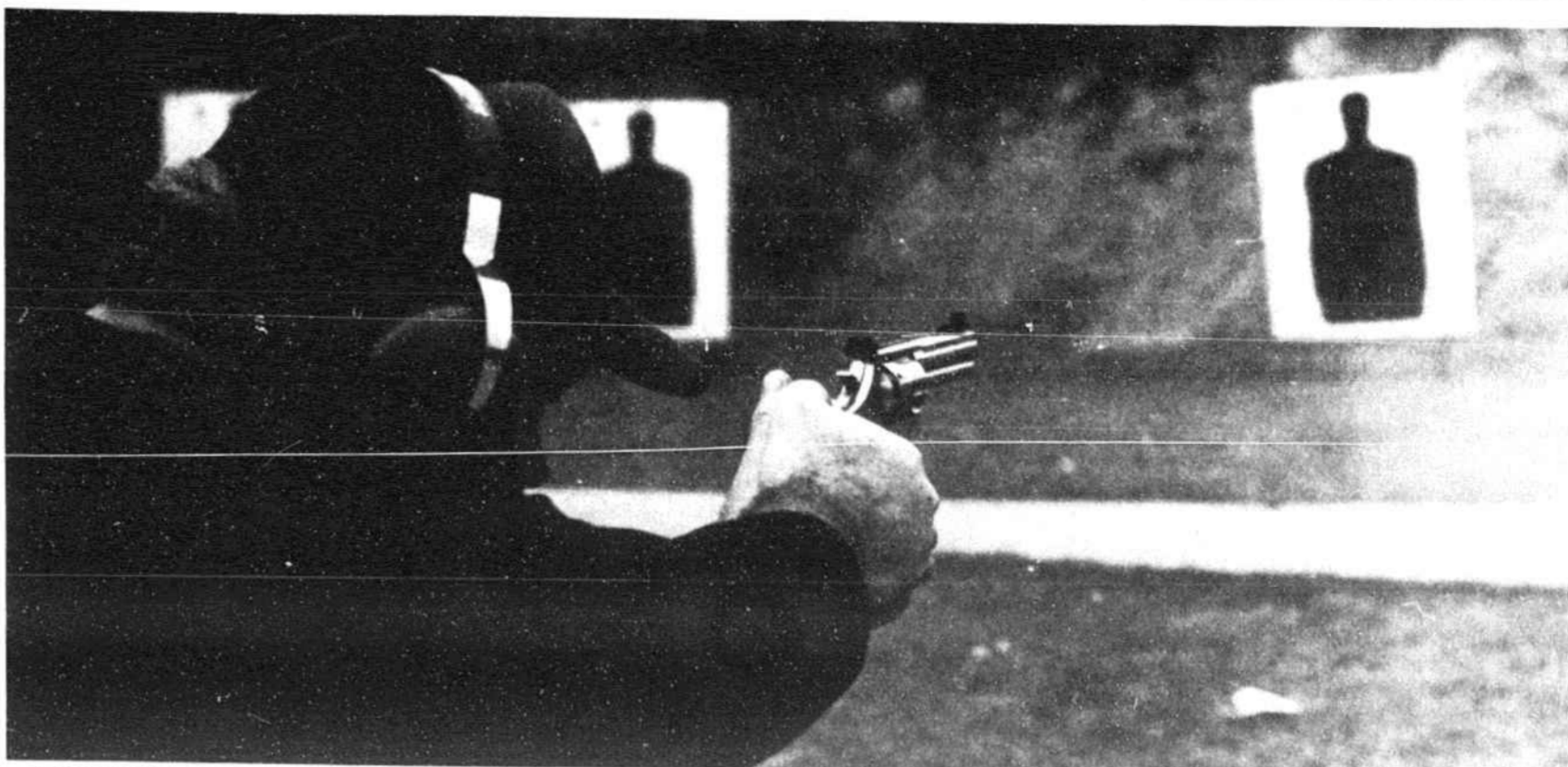




SHELLS FLY from the pistols of Bald Head Island Police Chief Don Troutman (left) and Ocean Isle Beach Officer Jerry Bass in photo above. In photo at right, Rick Shupe prepares for competition by using a special lighter to blacken the sights and reduce the glare on his Smith & Wesson revolver. Below, Brunswick County Sheriff's Detective Bill Hughes (standing) checks off each hit with chalk while Trooper Jerry Dove of the N.C. Highway Patrol adds up the points.



TOP GUN Rick Shupe of Southport, an auxiliary deputy with the Brunswick County Sheriff's Department, shows off his winning form.

TOP GUN

Local Lawmen Vie For Shooting Honors

TEXT AND PHOTOS
BY ERIC CARLSON

Once prehistoric man first learned to toss a stone, it probably wasn't long before the first rock-throwing contest was held. Olympic athletes have been heaving spears in competition for 2,000 years. Archery tournaments are as popular today as in the days of Robin Hood and William Tell.

So in Brunswick County, with its large sheriff's department and 12 town police squads all carrying sidearms, it should come as no surprise that local officers occasionally like to square off and see who is the best shot?

They call it the "Top Gun" competition and it's held each year at the Brunswick County Law Enforcement Association pistol range. And while the shooters take the competition quite seriously, it's mostly a day for local police to get together and have a good time.

This year nine officers took part in the contest, shooting 120 rounds at silhouette targets from various distances and positions.

They began at seven yards, firing 12 shots and reloading once in 25 seconds. Moving back to 15 yards, they shot six rounds kneeling and 12 standing—half with the left hand and half with the right.

At 25 yards, the officers were given 90 seconds to shoot 24 rounds and reload three times. Six shots each were fired from the prone and sitting positions, then six standing with the gun on the left side of a barricade and six with it held on the right.

They finished by firing six rounds in 12 seconds while standing unsupported at 25 yards. Then they did it all over again.

It came as no surprise that auxiliary sheriff's Deputy Rick Shupe of Southport was the man to



A STEADY GRIP is one of the keys to accurate pistol shooting. Like most officers, Brunswick County Sheriff's Detective Kevin Holden prefers to use two hands.

beat. A veteran of 14 years on the Fayetteville Police department, Shupe has been a competitive target shooter for many years and often shoots in national championship matches.

His first round score: 599 out of a possible 600, with 47 out of 60 shots in the center "X" ring.

The final placings were divided into revolver and semi-automatic classes, with the "Top Gun" prize going to the best overall shooter. Competing

with a revolver, Shupe easily took the big prize with an average two-round score of 598.

Sheriff's Department Lt. Carl Pearson won first place in the semi-automatic division, followed by Ocean Isle Beach Police Officer Jerry Bass and Bald Head Island Police Chief Don Troutman. In the revolver class, it was auxiliary Deputy Marshall Evans, followed by Deputy Sgt. Don Stovall and Deputy Johnny Earp.



Brunswick Detective Crocker Winning His Battle Against Cancer

BY ERIC CARLSON

Last spring, Lt. David Crocker was sitting on top of the world. Then he got a look over the edge.

As head of the Brunswick County Sheriff's Department Narcotics Enforcement Unit for eight years, Crocker loved his job. He didn't mind the long hours, the all-night stake-outs, the dangerous undercover operations and the arrests of armed cocaine traffickers. It was all part of being an officer in the war on drugs.

Then in May, he started noticing a tightness in his stomach. Occasionally he had trouble breathing. He sometimes lost his appetite and often felt full after just a few bites of food.

On July 12, things got worse. Crocker suffered an alarming shortness of breath and went to the emergency room. He thought it might have been something he ate. Certainly nothing worse than a kidney stone.

"They ran a bunch of tests. Then the doctor sat me down to talk. I was relieved when he said it wasn't a kidney stone," Crocker said. "Then he told me I had the biggest tumor he had ever seen. All I could do was grab my wife and hold on."

Crocker learned there was a growth the size of a small watermelon attached to his stomach. A biopsy revealed that the tumor was malignant. But it was too large to be surgically removed.

"I've done a lot of things in my life. And a lot of them were dangerous. But all of a sudden I was in a different kind of fight," he said.

Crocker's battle against cancer began immediately. Doctors felt the only way to attack the tumor was with a program of aggressive chemotherapy. In just three months, he was given the dosage normally administered over three years.

"It's an intense treatment that attacks the cancer by killing all your white blood cells," Crocker said. "It feels like someone put acid into your body. It breaks you down completely. You lose all your hair—and I mean ALL of it. It wracks your nerves. You become extremely weak. You get headaches. It makes you nauseous. You don't want to eat anything. Some people throw up for days after each treatment."



LT. DAVID CROCKER is back to work at the Brunswick County Sheriff's Department following five months of treatment for cancer.

Over the next several months, Crocker and his wife Lucille made five trips to Chapel Hill for the injections. Each time, he was confined to a bed for five days of intravenous chemotherapy. During the interim two-week

periods at home, Crocker rode to Wilmington twice a week for more injections.

"I've been probed with a total of 99 needles," he said.

The physical effects were bad enough, Crocker said, but the mental battle was even tougher. It taught him a lot about the value of friends, family and forces beyond our understanding.

"I'll tell you what got me through it...My wife," he said. "She never left my side. She was with me all the time. I'd wake up in the hospital bed and she'd be sitting right there next to me. She forced me to eat. If I got depressed, she would literally grab me and get me to snap out of it. She would only talk about the future, not about my condition. She was the light that kept me going."

Crocker said he also grew much closer to his 8-year-old daughter Beth. He started going back to church. He fought to maintain a positive mental attitude toward his disease. And he found out just how many friends he had at work and in the community.

Several Brunswick County residents who had undergone similar treatments called him up to offer support. One day he read in the paper that the mother of a local highway patrolman had died of cancer. Under the description of funeral arrangements it said, "In lieu of flowers, please send donations to help Lt. David Crocker."

"I never realized how many friends I had," said Crocker.

Last September, local businessmen Floyd Kirby and Paul Dennis organized a benefit golf tournament and dinner to raise money for Crocker's medical and travel expenses. Hundreds of people, including law enforcement officers from across the state, showed up to express their support.

Guests couldn't help feeling uneasy about Crocker's appearance. He still had the same piercing eyes and friendly smile. But his skin was ashen, his face gaunt. He walked with slow, tentative steps. His clothes hung limply on a body that had wasted away from 172 pounds to 128 pounds.

"When I saw that picture of myself in the *Beacon*, I

couldn't believe how frail I had gotten," he said. "A lot of people thought I wasn't going to make it."

Not anymore. Today his weight is back up to 150 pounds. He eats like a horse. He's working half days at the sheriff's department and he should return to full-time duty next month. Not only that, but his hair is growing in again. (The female deputies who come by the drug office can't resist the urge to remove his baseball cap and rub his fuzzy head.)

"I'm back and I'm feeling good," Crocker said last week. "I still get tired easily and there are side effects from the chemotherapy—numbness in my extremities—that should wear off within six months. But my prognosis is looking good."

By October, the chemotherapy had done its job. The tumor was down to the size of a softball, small enough to be removed surgically. The five-hour operation was a success and doctors found no signs of additional malignancy.

All the same, he said "You're never out of the woods with cancer." So for the rest of his life Crocker will have to be checked regularly for a possible recurrence. But he is expected to recover fully from his ordeal.

Even so, Crocker said he will never be the same. He has grown to appreciate family and friends more than ever before. And he is already reaching out to give help and hope to other local cancer patients.

"I've been talking to Chris Stanley, a surveyor from Brick Landing who's been diagnosed with cancer," Crocker said. "I've never met him, but I've talked to him on the phone. He'll be going through the same thing I did at Chapel Hill and I can only wish him the best of luck. He needs to be in everybody's prayers."

"Thanksgiving really got me thinking about how much I wanted to thank all the many friends and supporters who did so much for me," Crocker said. "Especially Floyd Kirby and Paul Dennis for the wonderful golf benefit. And many, many thanks to all the law officers from everywhere—especially here at the sheriff's department. They really helped me get through this."

"Now I'm going to have the best Christmas of my life!"