

Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department
Memorial Torch Relay Run

Lighting the First Flame
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Los Angeles Sheriffs' Museum

From 1850, when Los Angeles County was first formed, until the beginning of 1970, less than 300 law enforcement officers from agencies throughout the county had been killed in the line of duty. In the early 1970's, there was a dramatic increase of the number of officers killed. In just a five year period between 1970 and early 1975, 12 Los Angeles County Sheriff's Deputies were killed in the line of duty. During one traffic stop in 1970, four CHP Officers were all killed by just two suspects.

Near the end of April of 1975, Sergeant Lee Stahl, assigned to the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Training Bureau, wanted the public to be aware of the brave deputies who sacrificed their lives protecting the public. Borrowing an idea from the Olympic Torch Run, his idea was to conduct a relay torch run from one sheriff's station to another. This would be the perfect way to make the public aware of the heroic deputies who died in the line of duty for the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. The plan was for runners to travel between each sheriff's station to the other until all 16 stations were visited. This involved all stations except for Avalon on Catalina Island.

Sergeant Stahl submitted a memo suggesting the idea to Captain Richard Foreman of Training Bureau. Captain Foreman thought it was a great idea. After a discussion with Sergeant Stahl, it was decided that since the next memorial service was just two weeks away there was not enough time to plan the run for 1975. If they waited until the following year, they would have twelve months to plan the event. The memo was forwarded from Captain Foreman through channels to Sheriff Peter Pitchess. The Sheriff also thought this was a wonderful idea. In fact, he was so enthused about the idea, he insisted that the first Torch Run be hastily organized and take place before the ceremony only two weeks later.

Because there was such a short time to plan the event, the entire run was conducted by members of the Training Bureau staff. There were 24 runners who traversed the 291 miles. Some of the original runners from the Training Bureau included Captain Richard Foreman, Sergeants Lee Stahl and Pat Connolly as well as Deputies Ray Baytos, Ed Hitchcock, Don Swift, John Kolman, Lynn Vannoy, Julie Cabe and Rudio Lovio.

The first Memorial Torch Run began on May 13th, 1975 and took place over 3 days. Each runner ran 6 miles at a 10 minute pace. The torch that was designed for the run was very heavy. Because of its weight, runners had to constantly change the torch from one hand to another.

Prior to the first Memorial Torch Relay Run, a teletype was sent to all law enforcement agencies whose jurisdiction the Memorial Torch Run would be passing through. The Los Angeles Police Department was very helpful and provided traffic control when the Torch Run passed through their city.

The first Memorial Torch Run began at the Hall of Justice in downtown Los Angeles. Runners proceeded from station to station until all 16 Stations, excluding Avalon, were visited. Although only one runner ran at a time, runners from a station area would join the Training Bureau runner as they passed through that area. In many cities contracting police services with the Sheriff's Department, the Mayor and city officials declared the run a significant city event and were on hand to cheer on the torch bearer as they passed through their town.

A motor home was donated for the run and was used by runners to rest before they began the next leg of the run. On rough or steep terrain, some of the stronger runners ran longer or ran more than one leg of the relay. The runners were also able to make quick stops at some of the sheriff's stations in order to take showers. Academy recruits were used to drive the pace cars.

Two years prior to the run, Detective Don Schneider and Detective Sergeant Carl Wilson, assigned to Lakewood Station, were shot and killed when they attempted to apprehend a suspect who murdered two people. The Captain of Lakewood Sheriff's Station, Ken Cable, wanted to honor the two detectives for their dedication. He worked with the city to plan a special welcome to their station. Prior to the runners arriving at midnight, the street lights along the route were turned off. Bleachers were set up near Lakewood Sheriff's Station and filled with city employees from the surrounding contract cities, including council members, mayors and their families. As the runners approached Lakewood Station, Deputy Pat Connolly was running with the torch. The run stopped for a short ceremony honoring the deputies killed in the line of duty. The color guard marched into place just before Captain Cable gave a short speech honoring his fallen deputies. Afterwards, Pat Connolly passed the torch to Julie Cabe. The Sheriff's Helicopter involved in the Skynight Program, which patrolled the City of Lakewood, flew along with its spotlight lighting Julie as she received the torch and left Lakewood Station. Everyone cheered for the runners. It was a spectacular sight! The runners continued on traveling from station to station until they completed the run at 10 AM on the third day.

The Los Angeles County Peace Officer's Memorial Service took place at Biscailuz Center at 10 AM on May 15, the third day of the run. During the Memorial Service, Sergeant Lee Stahl ran up the hill with the torch and handed it off to Sheriff Pitchess. This was a perfect ending to the first Memorial Torch Run for the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department to honor all of the deputies who gave their lives while protecting the citizens of Los Angeles County.

This first Memorial Torch Run established a long tradition. The run has started each year at Sheriff's Headquarters. Sheriff's Headquarters was located at the Hall of Justice until it closed in January 1994 and was moved to Sherman Block Sheriff's Headquarters in Monterey Park.

Through the years, changes have been made to the route and times of the Memorial Torch Run. When new stations were added, the route and times of the run were changed. Because of a major fire that damaged mountain roads, the route of the run was altered for five years. On occasion, the run was diverted to pass by a location where a deputy was killed. This has been discouraged since it changes the route of the run to the next station and also effects torch handoff times for all of the stations that follow.

Today, the Memorial Torch Relay is coordinated by the Los Angeles Sheriff's Athletic Association and consists of 56 legs, each five to ten miles long, and travels to each mainland Sheriff's Station in a circuit totaling 313 miles. During the same weekend, Avalon Regional Sheriff's Station conducts a Torch Relay Run in the City of Avalon on Catalina Island. The Memorial Torch Run has now expanded with numerous runners running at a time. Each station provides runners for their leg of the run. Many of them run with their station flag displaying their station logo. All department members, sworn and professional staff, all other police agencies, as well as family members and friends are invited to participate in any leg of the relay.

The Annual Memorial Torch Relay and its participants proudly honor the memory of those brave and dedicated individuals who have sacrificed their lives in the performance of their duties in service to the citizens of Los Angeles County.

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