

'I KNEW IT WAS OUT THERE SOMEWHERE'

Spotsy man finds beloved car stolen 17 years ago

BY JAMES SCOTT BARON
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Tommy Cook never lost hope he'd one day recover his beloved 1969 Hugger Orange Camaro that went missing 17 years ago.

"I never wrote that car off," Cook said. "I knew there would be a day and a time when I would get that car back. I didn't know where, but I knew it was out there somewhere."

Cook and his vintage sports car were finally reunited in Spotsylvania County this week, when the vehicle arrived at his auto repair shop after being found in an auto shop in Maryland. The last time Cook had possession of the Camaro was in 2003, when the motorless muscle car was stolen from his auto repair lot in Woodbridge.

Cook immediately reported the vehicle as stolen on Sept. 11 of that year, and moved from Arlington to Spotsylvania shortly after the theft.

As time marched on, Cook began to realize his stolen car would not remain on law enforcement's hot sheet without his input. He had to regularly

renew the Camaro's missing status through the mail to keep the cold case open.

"The letters [to renew] came periodically," said Cook. "I'd fill it out, put a stamp on the envelope, send it back. But I didn't get a letter this year."

Cook contacted Prince William County police seeking his missing notification, but was told the agency would no longer send renewal notices due to a software upgrade in the agency's theft reporting system. The new system would no longer generate the recurring letter, but the police were able to update Cook's case over the phone.

One of Cook's acquaintances,

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who was on the lookout for a 1968 Camaro, asked Cook to respond to a Maryland man's social media advertisement for a blue 1968 near La Plata. When Cook arrived at the shop to look over the prospective purchase, he noticed a hoodless 1969 Camaro sitting in the corner of the garage.

The seller told Cook the pseudo-Rallye Green '69 was originally Hugger Orange, the same color as Cook's missing car.

"It was kind of a hokey green they had painted it, resembled the [Rallye Green] they had on a '69," said Cook. "I thought to myself, maybe someone's trying to hide a stolen car."

The seller also told Cook the green '69 was built in California. Cook knew all first-generation Camaros were either built in Norwood, Ohio, or Van Nuys, Calif., at what Cook and collectors call "The Los Angeles Plant." Cook's missing car was a California car that he transported on a flatbed truck from Arizona to the East Coast in 2001.

"I looked inside on the dash at the [Vehicle Identification Number] and it had an N code, indicating the car was built in Norwood," said Cook. "You can't have a Norwood [Vehicle Identification Number] if the car was made in California."

Cook sensed something wasn't quite right.

"So now, we've got an orange car, we got a California car, we've got a car with a hinky VIN number on it," said Cook. "I was beginning to think, this is looking a lot like my car."

Although the car didn't have a motor when it was stolen, someone had installed a 350-cubic-inch engine along the way. The

vehicle was also missing the nose panel, the hood, the cowl screen and its seats. Cook peered inside and noticed factory-installed brackets to accommodate a fold-down rear seat. Oddly, less than 2 percent of the 250,000 Camaros built in 1969 had that option.

"By now, I'm pretty much thinking it's my car, and I've looked at a lot of '69 Camaros in the last 17 years," said Cook.

Cook went on to vehicle's engine compartment where he found another VIN, carefully hidden by factory workers under the cowl screen. Cook said it appeared body plastic had been smeared over the plate, but the digits in the VIN were visible.

"It was a California VIN," said Cook.

That evening, Cook compared the Camaro's VIN to his stolen vehicle report and discovered the car in La Plata was indeed his car that went missing 17 years earlier.

Cook patiently weighed his options. He wanted to purchase the advertised 1968 Camaro he went to see, but he didn't want to jeopardize the chance to recover his long-lost '69.

Cook contacted Maryland's Charles County Sheriff's Office and was immediately put in touch with a detective.

"He was amazed that I would still be looking for the car after 17 years," said Cook. "He said, 'We'll go get that car right now, give me an hour.'"

After reviewing the stolen vehicle case, the detective called Cook back and told him he was ready to recover the Camaro. Cook asked the detective to wait to make the recovery, due to his pending purchase of the blue '68.

At 6 p.m. that day, Cook and his friend arrived to load and take away the blue Camaro. After the purchase, Cook contacted the detective, who went to recover Cook's Camaro. The vehicle was towed to a storage lot to hold until Cook had it delivered to his Spotsylvania business.

"[The seller] was cooperative and there were no problems," said Cook. "He's an innocent victim; he bought the car from somebody. He didn't mean anybody any ill will."

Cook later learned his Camaro changed hands four times over the course of 17 years.

"Some people had put money into it," said Cook. "It was better than it was when it was stolen, but it's still an ugly green."

Cook, who operates Corvette Repair at 139 Fleming St., calls the 1969 Camaro "iconic." While the model year isn't mechanically much different than the first generation 1967 and 1968 models, new sheet metal gave the 1969 a more aggressive, desirable look.

"They're right in line with a '55 Chevy and a '32 Ford," said Cook, who's clearing out an appropriate area in his garage to accommodate the new arrival.

"I'm going to put it in the shop, cover it up and see what transpires," he said.

PAIR ASSISTS STRANDED MOTORIST IN STAFFORD

Local woman thanks floodwater rescuers

BY JAMES SCOTT BARON
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Maria Edgar is adding two Good Samaritans to her Christmas list this year, after the pair brought her safely to shore last week along a flooded southern Stafford County road.

“These men bent over backwards to help me,” said Edgar. “I’m getting them a nice early Christmas present.”

In a heavy downpour Nov. 12, Edgar, 74, left her Marlborough Point home in her Toyota Prius at 10 a.m. for a doctor’s appointment. As she traveled west along Brooke Road, she came upon an orange “road closed” sign just before the low point in the road’s S-curves, where high water always accumulates during heavy rain.

Proceeding slowly, Edgar noticed pickup trucks and other vehicles making it through the high water and decided she’d give it a try herself.

“I thought I’d try it real slow,” said Edgar. “It’s like it sings out to you, ‘come further, come further, you’re doing good,’ and by the time you realize it, it’s way too late.”

Soon, Edgar’s 3,000-pound Prius was floating uncontrollably in the current.

“I said, please God, let it turn around,” said Edgar, hoping the car would change course away from the deeper pool of water, and float back to higher ground, but she wasn’t so lucky.

“I realized the water was starting to come in. I could hear it, and kept screaming for help, someone to call 911,” said Edgar. “The water was so cold. It was freezing cold.”

Edgar lowered her window and swam head-first out of her vehicle into the murky water. As soon as she was out, the current began pulling her away from her car, but she grabbed the rear door handle and held on.

Unbeknownst to Edgar, she was followed into the flooded road by Joseph Sirko, an off-duty FBI agent.

Just moments before, Sirko had been traveling east on Brooke Road in his Toyota 4Runner, returning to his Marlborough Point home,

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when a pickup truck and Edgar passed by him slowly heading west.

“I saw her car and thought, she’s not going to make it,” said Sirko. “I made a U-turn, and when I came back, I saw her vehicle was in the ditch, nose down, turned sideways. I stopped and stood on my running board to call out to her as I saw her exit the vehicle.”

Sirko yelled to Edgar to check if she was OK, asked a nearby motorist to call 911, then ventured into the water to rescue her.

“[Sirko] told me to stop, I’m coming in to get you,” said Edgar. “He walked through that cold, filthy water to come get me. He had a jacket to put on me.”

After Sirko got Edgar to safety, retired Army 1st. Sgt. Rick Rowell waded out to the Prius to recover her purse, vehicle registration and other personal items that he saw floating near the submerged car. He returned all of the items to Edgar.

Rowell, who lives nearby on Camp Gearsy Lane, owns a lifted Jeep and makes it a point each time Brooke Road floods to go to the area to assist stranded motorists. During the summer, he helped pull a Mercedes from the water.

“I’ve got nothing better to do to,” said Rowell. “I just go hang out in my Crocs and board shorts.”

Once safely in Sirko’s vehicle, Edgar was put at ease, and contacted her husband by phone. Edgar said the pair of men empathized with her during the entire ordeal as if they were lifelong friends.

“[Sirko] was just thinking of me and my comfort and me not

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—MARIA EDGAR

having to do anything,” said Edgar. “It was like, I was his wife or a good friend. Both of those men treated me like that.”

Sirko said, “She’s a real sweet lady, and she was scared. It’s just the right thing to do.”

It wasn’t the first time a vehicle has been swept away on Brooke Road. About 300 homes are situated along the flood-prone stretch that parallels Accokeek Creek, from Andrew Chapel Road to the canoe launch at Crow’s Nest Natural Area Preserve. Even more residents live farther east at Marlborough Point and the road is frequently traveled by visitors heading to Aquia Landing Park. Residents in the area say the roadway floods every time it rains, and the problem has gotten worse with each passing year.

Like clockwork, Brooke Road flooded last week when the Fredericksburg region received more than 2 1/2 inches of rain.

Kelly Hannon, communications manager for the Virginia Department of Transportation’s Fredericksburg district, said VDOT regularly removes debris, leaves and soil buildup from drainage pipes and culverts in the area to help minimize flooding, but Edgar said those efforts are not enough.

“We want something done meaningful,” Edgar said. “It’s only a matter of time before something happens to someone down there.”

In mid-September, county supervisors tapped into reserve

money from the transportation fund to repair the culverts on Brooke Road, but Hannon said that work is still in the planning phase.

“They’ve got to do something fast,” said Edgar. “Whatever they did in the way of drainage didn’t do any good at all. I’m afraid a mother is going to have a baby in there, or someone who is handicapped. ... At least I could get out through the window.”

Edgar said as a result of her experience last week, she will work with her neighbors in the area to permanently resolve the ongoing flooding situation on Brooke Road. Already, more than 600 members of a social media group called Friends of Brooke Road are fighting the same battle.

Although Edgar’s Prius was written off by her insurance company as a total loss, she said one of her biggest fears the day of the incident was returning home and finding out if she had received a traffic citation as a result of passing through a “road closed” warning sign.

Edgar contacted Stafford Sheriff’s Deputy Bill Walker, the responding officer at the scene, to discover her fate.

“I called, and that nice police officer told me, you have bigger problems than this right now to worry about,” said Edgar. “He probably could have given me at least two tickets. Those two men and that deputy were absolutely wonderful.”

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Emergency workers respond with care

BY JAMES SCOTT BARON
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Working from home in the midst of the COVID-19 outbreak is not an option for first responders.

In fact, staying on the job around the clock, healthy and at full physical strength, is one of the biggest priorities for the region's fire crews and law enforcement officers as they continue to protect and serve the needs of an uncertain public.

"My worry is about something spreading among us and our co-workers and our volunteers," said Aaron Hoover, a member of Stafford County's Potomac Hills Fire and Rescue unit. "We're taking precautions and we don't want to spread it or take it home."

Like those in the fire and rescue field, Stafford County Sheriff's Deputy Christopher Lee said

law-enforcement officers take similar personal protection precautions when they begin their shifts, relying on credible sources for the latest official information regarding the coronavirus pandemic.

"There's a lot of misinformation out there that's causing some of the uproar," said Lee. "We have all been given resourc-

es to check information that's a bit more valid, through the CDC and the Virginia Department of Health websites."

Hoover said one of the first steps is ensuring the right safety gear is in place to help prevent exposure to the virus and that responders know what to expect

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SOURCES USED BY EMERGENCY RESPONDERS

To help combat the COVID-19 pandemic, regional fire and law-enforcement agencies have adopted policies and procedures to treat individuals they come in contact with based on recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Virginia Department of Health, the Office of Emergency Medical Services, the Virginia Department of Emergency Management, the Rappahannock Area Health District, and local hospitals.

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when they arrive. Although dispatchers have always prescreened callers, they now ask about specific symptoms related to the coronavirus to warn responding crews of any potential health risks they might encounter.

Callers are asked if a fever is present, or if there are any signs or symptoms of respiratory illnesses, has there been contact with COVID-19 positive friends or family members, as well as their individual travel history.

Once on scene, even more questions are asked. Depending on the responses, responders may increase their level of protection.

"When we get there, the first thing I ask when I get to the door is, have you had contact with [a coronavirus patient] and have you been out of the state?" said Jayne Poellner, of Stafford's Aquia Harbour Volunteer Rescue Squad.

Unless it is an emergency, both firefighters and law enforcement officers throughout the region maintain a distance of at least six feet from people they come in contact with. Some prefer even greater distances.

"In nonemergency situations, it's best if they meet us outside instead of us going into the environment," said Faith Gelinis, of Aquia Harbour Volunteer Rescue Squad.

Social distancing is also demonstrated in King George County, where Sheriff Chris Giles said his officers may request a home's occupant to step outside to speak with officers once they arrive. If entry into the home is necessary, the deputy will also inquire about the health of those in the home.

When treating patients, Fredericksburg Deputy Fire Chief Mike Jones said his department uses as many disposable products as possible, including gloves, masks and certain breathing devices.

"Anything that we can use that effects the respiratory system, if it's disposable, we use that versus something we would have to clean and reuse," said Jones.

Even when not responding to calls, first responders are actively focused

on the cleanliness of the equipment they use in daily operations.

In addition to cleaning vehicles after every call, fire and rescue personnel have adopted a premixed bleach solution to wipe down gear to help combat COVID-19, as opposed to ordinary antiseptic wipes.

"We do a detailed spot cleaning in the morning, more so than in the past," said Hoover. "There's more of a focus on that than before."

Hoover also said disposable plastic covers and duct tape has been added their unit's inventories to cover and protect equipment.

"If we have a COVID-19 patient, we cover equipment we're not going to use during the call, including the entrance to the driver's compartment," said Hoover.

Sheriff's deputies and police officers conduct a detailed pre-shift and a post-shift checklist on their vehicles. Any time an individual is transferred, the vehicle is thoroughly cleaned.

"It's a rule of thumb for law enforcement in general," said Lee.

Law enforcement officers also wear disposable gloves when coming in close contact with individuals, have masks ready in their vehicles, frequently wash and sanitize their hands, and change out of their uniforms before going home after their shifts. The Fredericksburg Police Department and other agencies have issued protective gowns and masks to patrol officers in case they have to transfer COVID-19 patients.

Area public safety agencies have even limited the amount of foot traffic in their buildings, closing lobbies and restricting access to areas that were previously open to the public. The Orange County Sheriff's Office said it was restricting access by people who had traveled to high-risk countries or areas of the United States in the past 14 days and suspended fingerprinting of the public.

Both fire, rescue and law enforcement officials said callers can help them respond to calls more efficiently by answering the questions about possible exposure or symptoms.

"That's the first conduit for getting us the most accurate information," said Lee.

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