

Trooper demoted after wreck

THP says he drove off, later lied to investigators; he will appeal

07/21/07

By BRAD SCHRADE
Staff Writer

A Tennessee Highway Patrol lieutenant is fighting his demotion after hitting a parked car in his state-issued pickup truck and driving off, state records show.

Lt. Clement Jarrett, 52, is accused of backing the truck into a 2003 Mustang at Hickory Hollow Mall on April 15, then leaving the scene. Department of Safety officials say he lied to internal investigators probing the matter.

His bosses have recommended that Jarrett be busted down to sergeant, a move that would cut his \$70,356 annual salary by about \$10,000.

Jarrett, who has worked for the department since the early 1980s, has been in trouble in the past, but hasn't had any problems in the past decade, which factored in to the agency's decision not to fire him, Safety Commissioner Dave Mitchell said.

"I look at the totality of the situation," Mitchell said. "In this particular situation, I found it to be a serious situation, a serious incident and a serious violation, but I did not feel it warranted termination."

But Jarrett's lawyer, David Raybin, said the punishment was too severe.

"It's not hit-and-run if you don't know you hit somebody," Raybin said. "He didn't know he had backed into the lady. He thought he might have. He got out and didn't see any damage."

Mall trip unauthorized

On the day of the accident, Jarrett had gone to Hickory Hollow Mall to pick up his wife from work. It's a violation of policy to use state vehicles for such a purpose.

While there, he backed the truck into the parked car of one of his wife's co-workers, who was not in the car. He and his wife then drove off.

The car owner later called police, who pieced the incident together from witness reports.

Metro police chose not to charge Jarrett, because he agreed to pay to repair the approximately \$1,000 in damage to the red Mustang.

When Highway Patrol officials opened an investigation after learning of the incident, Jarrett was accused of failing to report the incident to the department, leaving the crash scene and using the vehicle for non-official business.

He was also accused of making untruthful statements to internal investigators — claiming he was on duty at the time of the crash and that he had only gone to the mall to talk to his wife.

Raybin, Jarrett's lawyer, said the trooper got out of the truck after hearing a loud noise but didn't see any damage to the Mustang and thought the noise was the sound of an air compressor in the back of the truck.

As for the allegation that Jarrett was untruthful, Raybin said Jarrett was confused about what investigators were asking.

On June 28, THP commander Col. Mike Walker recommended Jarrett's demotion and transfer out of the investigations division.

In his fight to avoid demotion, Jarrett enlisted a powerful ally. Former state Attorney General Paul Summers, for whom Jarrett worked as a driver and bodyguard for much of Summers' nearly eight years in office, testified as a character witness at a July 12 disciplinary hearing. Summers is an honorary colonel of the highway patrol.

"I feel like Lt. Jarrett is a credible individual and a person of good character, and that he should not be demoted," Summers told *The Tennessean* this week.

Jarrett was advised Friday that his appeal was denied by the safety commissioner.

Jarrett has indicated he will appeal to the next level, as civil service rules permit him to do.

He was suspended in '87

This investigation is not the first he has faced since joining the department.

State records show that Jarrett was suspended for five days in 1987 after he illegally acquired license plates and placed them on his personal vehicle. He also initially misled internal investigators in that case, state records show.

Two years later, a one-day suspension was recommended for Jarrett because of a wreck involving his patrol cruiser, according to records.

In 1990, while working undercover, Jarrett was investigated when \$881 in state buy money issued to him went missing. Jarrett was asked in a polygraph test whether he ever used the funds for personal expenses, and whether he lied about certain facts related to the money. The polygraph report stated that "Trooper Jarrett was attempting deception (was non-truthful)."

THP spokesman Mike Browning said that investigation was inconclusive and that Jarrett was not disciplined.