



Stop & SMELL THE ROSES

TOMMY L. MERRIWEATHER

September 26, 1963 - January 21, 2013

On January 21, 2013, Tommy L. Merriweather died of pancreatic cancer contracted as a result of his work on the rescue and recovery from the World Trade Center attacks. His death was declared "in the Line of Duty" by the New York Police Department and the New York City Police Pension Section.

With Merriweather's passing, many hearts were broken. "I miss him so much," says Det. Carey Billingsy, Tommy's former partner and one of his closest friends.

Tommy Merriweather was born in Demopolis, a small town of only several thousand people in west central Alabama, and moved to Brooklyn when he was a baby, where he was cared for by his Aunt Christina. "They were like two peas in a pod," says Tommy's mother Robertha. The Merriweather family grew to include four younger sisters — Vera, Michelle, Patricia, and Maria — and a younger brother Anthony, as well as a God-sister Tiffany.

When Tommy was five years old, he moved back to Alabama to live with his maternal grandfather. His mother, better known as Bertha, and his father Thomas, both had deep southern roots and Bertha's father wanted to instill some of that heritage in his grandson. "My father loved Tommy so much," says Bertha. Nealy Simmons bred and trained horses, and he enticed his grandson south by buying young Tommy his own mount, little cowboy boots, and taught him how to ride and hunt for deer. Both Tommy and his horse acquired the same nickname 'Mane.' "For a long time, Tommy was the only boy in the family, so

he was the family's 'little man.'" With a deep southern twang, both words are pronounced virtually the same.

Eventually, Tommy moved up north, but when his grandfather became ill, Tommy insisted upon moving back to Alabama to take care of Nealy. "I have to go back and take care of 'daddy,'" he told his mother. In Linden, in the central part of the state, he continued to ride and learned how to drive. "He drove his grandfather all over," says his mother, "and when he was just 16, he got a job driving a local school bus. He passed his driving test the same day he took it, and he drove that bus for two years," she adds.

Eventually, Nealy became too ill and was moved to Tommy's Aunt's home in Cincinnati, where he passed away. Tommy also moved north once again. His family lived in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. Tommy spent his senior year at Boys & Girls High and graduated in June of 1981.

In May of 1982, Merriweather enlisted in the United States Army, serving in the Infantry. He was stationed outside of New York, but during one of his trips home, he walked into a local McDonalds and met a high school teenager named Jacqueline Myers from Brownsville. She was only two-and-a-half years younger than Tommy and was instantly smitten by the handsome, stylish soldier's laid back manner, his charm, and his irresistible, winning smile. The two started dating, and as Tommy was transferred to various locations from Colorado to Korea, they kept in touch by mail and phone, and saw each other during leave. Jackie found him to be immensely romantic

and caring, and they were married August 16, 1986. In 1988, while stationed in Germany, their eldest son Tommy III was born.

During his eight year military career, Merriweather earned the Army Service Ribbon, the Good Conduct Medal, an Army Achievement Medal, the Non-Commissioned Officer Professional Development Ribbon, an Overseas Service Ribbon, and Expert Marksmanship Badge (Rifle), and an M16 Expert Marksmanship Badge (Grenade). By the time he left the Army, he had attended a number of advanced training courses and held the rank of E-5 Sergeant. He spent several years in the Army National Reserves, but eventually reassigned to the New York National Guard where he was promoted to E-6 Staff Sergeant.

In July 1989, he joined the New York Police Department. His first commands included the 28 and the 77 Precincts, but soon he was tapped for Undercover work in OCCB Narcotics. Undercover work is dirty and dangerous, and, says Billingsy, "there has to be something that draws you to it." He sums it up in the simplest way: "I grew up in New York City. I'm a product of the streets. You want the streets clean. All you want to do is lock up the bad guys."

Despite his small town southern roots, Merriweather felt strongly the same way. "His biggest secret," says close friend and fellow former Undercover Det. Morris ("Mo") Weathers, "was that Tommy was the biggest buff you'd ever want to know. He really, really loved the job."

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"He was the one who really showed me how to be an Undercover," says retired Det. Linda Eaton-Lewis, who started working with Tommy in 1992.

Billigy was also one of Merriweather's UC partners, and for a long time: they met in 1991 and worked together, on and off, through the years — in the 28 and Manhattan North Narcotics, where they turned out of the Armory on Fifth Avenue.

"Tommy could flash his smile and instantly make you his friend," Billigy says.

Eventually Billigy was sent to the 34 Team in Manhattan North, which turned out of the same building, but he and Merriweather would see each other every day and would volunteer to go out together as partners as the calls arose. "We worked with great people in Manhattan North Narcotics," he says, "the greatest people in the Department."

There's a strong bond amongst Undercovers — they're protective and look after each other. "Uncles" are not allowed to go anywhere by themselves, they have to be watched at all times. There was one instance, however, when Merriweather violated that rule and tempted the fates. Long-time colleague Weathers, who also started working with Merriweather in 1992, tells of the time in the late 1990s that Tommy was in Queens, and witnessed a little boy having his bicycle stolen by a thug who was one of "The Supreme Team" gang of drug peddlers. Merriweather decided he was going to stand up for the child.

"But to give you an idea of how fair and square a guy Tommy was," says Weathers, "he approached the perp, showed him his gun, and then put it back in his pants. He wanted to fight the guy the old fashioned way — with his fists. So he did." But soon other gang members started jumping the Undercover and before he knew it, they had almost taken out Tommy's eye and left him for dead in the middle of the street. But in the end, the child got his bike back. The

perps were later arrested and went to jail. Merriweather had a detached retina that required surgery to repair and took a considerable amount of time to heal.

"He thought he would give the punk a fair chance, but they could have killed him. I told him, 'Tommy, you weren't too bright on that one,'" Weathers says. Tommy thought about it and conceded. "He said, 'Yeah, Mo, maybe you're right on that one.' Tommy didn't let me win too many arguments, but he let me win that argument. But people don't know what a fair and stand-up guy he was. Tommy was in the Army, but I did three years in the Marines. I probably would have just shot the punk." It turns out that in all his 20 years on the job, Merriweather never had to fire at anyone.

By the end of December 1992, he had earned his gold shield. It was shortly thereafter in 1993 that wife Jackie joined the NYC Housing Bureau Police, which merged into the NYPD in 1995, but the couple never worked in the same command.

It was also around 1995, when Bill Taylor was the Commanding Officer of Narcotics, that the question arose as to what would be the most successful way to purchase drugs at a housing complex. The answer was more obvious to the Undercovers than it was to management: live there.

"In all honesty, we were scared every day. And we'd talk about it every day. And we'd try to relax over a beer every night. And it was in a bar where we came up with the idea for what eventually became the "Good Neighbor Team."

At first, the Department was reluctant to institute anything quite as radical as "The Good Neighbor" idea, but Taylor, then an Inspector, told them, "If you can make it happen, we'll do it." He gave the Special Investigation Section the green light, and Detectives Merriweather, Billigy, Eaton-Lewis, and others teamed in Brooklyn North, creating the illusion they moved into

the Cypress Houses in the confines of the 79 Precinct. They rented a truck with furniture and posed as a "family," moving in with fellow Detectives Harold Thomas, Andre Stennett, and Tony Gordon, to name a few. They successfully took down a van full of subjects at a time.

"We'd lock up six to 18 people a night," Billigy says. "We'd fill up the van. It's the most honest form of work you can do, getting the drug dealers. We knew exactly who to lock up, too." By springtime of 1996, in three months the indictment toll reached 179 subjects, all of whom copped pleas rather than go to trial.

The team repeated its success in Marcy Houses in Brooklyn and other locations, but Merriweather and Billigy and others left Brooklyn for the Bronx in 1997. They persevered in that Borough through two other large narcotics cases, and then looked at the Vanderveer Houses back at Brooklyn. By this time, Jackie Merriweather had transferred to Applicant Processing and in October of 1997 son Teron was born.

Says Billigy, "We were like a travelling roadshow," always battling the dealers during the height of the crack wars. "The money the dealers made in those days was phenomenal," he adds.

DEA Secretary Ken Sparks can attest to both Merriweather's buffed-out work ethic and the power of Merriweather's smile.

"When Tommy, Carey and Linda first got to Bronx Narcotics in 1997, I was an Investigator and the DEA Delegate at the time," Sparks says. "I knew Carey for a long time, but I really didn't know Tommy then. But one day, Tommy comes up to me and asks me for one of the Department cars: a black Toyota 4Runner SUV. I said I didn't want that car going out on any buys. It was too nice. So Tommy says, no, he was just going to get something to eat. I said, okay but bring it right back. The next day Chief Mike Tiffany calls me and says Merriweather

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On Promotion Day, March 23, 2001, from left, Detectives Harold Thomas, Tommy Merriweather, Linda Eaton-Lewis, and Carey Billingsy. In the background, the Twin Towers. Seven months later, the Towers were gone.

conjunction with the proliferation of narcotics throughout the years, the City experienced an uptick in illegal firearms. The Department asked both Merriweather and Billingsy to transfer to the Firearms Investigations Unit. While Merriweather decided to go, Billingsy turned it down.

"Firearms are even more dangerous than narcotics," says Billingsy. "There are a lot of locations where guns can't go with the perps or the Undercovers, such as a nightclub or some other spot where bodies are frisked," he says. "But with firearms investigations, you know you're dealing with perps who always have a gun, and the odds are it's loaded and the perp's finger is on that trigger." But in 2002, Merriweather transferred to that Unit, as did Detectives Roscoe McClenan, and Mo Weathers, despite its dangers. Merriweather and Weathers both went in as Investigators, but after Undercovers James Nemorin and Rodney Jay Andrews were shot and killed during a buy and bust on Staten Island on March 10, 2003, Weathers says, "We sat down with then-Captain Vincent DiDonato and volunteered to go back to being UCs." The former DEA Delegate from FIU who retired as a first grader in 2007 adds, "Tommy was a real cop."

Merriweather's wife Jackie retired from the Police Department in April of 2004 after she suffered injuries in an automobile accident. Tommy was promoted to Detective first grade on May 26, 2005. Eventually, Merriweather was flipped back to Investigator. And after 20 years with the Department, he retired out of the FIU in July 2009.

With more time to devote to his wife and children, Merriweather indulged in some of

needs that black SUV again. I asked what for, and the Chief says Tommy needs it to go make another buy! I was steaming mad ... but Tommy came up to me with that huge, huge grin and hugs me and says, 'Aaawwwwww, bro - .' And he would just get over that way. He just had to look at you with that huge, happy, silly smile and he'd get over. We used to call it getting B and B'ed - buy and busted!"

Det. Tony Gordon, who retired in 2008 out of Manhattan North, laughs while reminiscing that one of the Team's pet nicknames for Merriweather was "Big Willie," because, he relates, "Tommy would go down to the Property Clerk's Office and sign out flashy jewelry that had been confiscated in drug cases. He would work undercover wearing big necklaces, bracelets, and rings to give the appearance of being a big time, hot-shot dealer. He loved to look the part. He was intense when he was working, but we had a lot of fun laughing about it afterward."

"The streets were my stage," Tommy Merriweather said.

DEA Chairman of the Board of Trustees, Det. Brian Hunt, conferred, "Tommy was an excellent Detective. I knew him for a long time and we worked on the same team, even though I wasn't an Undercover. We went back as far as 1992, even when I was the PBA Delegate, and later the Manhattan North Narcotics Delegate. We all got our

gold shields around the same time, in the early 1990s. These were very scary, tough times with dangerous assignments, and although Tommy was the strong, silent type on the outside, inside he was a big, teddy bear. And he was a great team player and he took his work very seriously."

"Some of our colleagues used to ask us why we were working so hard, and they'd tell us we were never going to get grade," says Billingsy. But by the time Taylor was a Chief, he made sure his innovative team received more than verbal accolades for their hard work. On March 23, 2001, Merriweather, Billingsy, Eaton-Lewis, among others received second grade. Harold Thomas received first grade.

"That was a great day," says Eaton-Lewis, recalling how her whole family loved Merriweather. My mother doesn't take to everyone," she says, "but she really loved Tommy. My mother used to tell his mother Bertha, if you ever want to give him up, I'll take him! He was a hard worker, but he was a loving and fun-loving guy."

After the terror attacks of 9/11, Merriweather logged in many hours at the Staten Island Landfill, sorting through the remains of the victims who were in and around what was once the World Trade Center.

When the job resumed its regular assignments, changes were in store. In

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his favorite past-times, including barbecuing and grilling home-cooked meals, but relaxing didn't preclude him from also maintaining a private investigative practice. He was a family man and as of 2007, had been a Scoutmaster for the Boy Scouts of America, and the first African-American leader of Troop 43 of the Sagtikos District of the Suffolk County Council. It was a great source of pride for the Merriweathers that son Teron made Eagle Scout in the fall of 2012, the centennial year of the Eagle Scout rank. The godson of Det. Billingsy, Teron also continues to maintain his National Honor Society grade point average in school. It's also a tremendous source of pride to the Merriweathers that son Tommy III followed in his father's footsteps and joined the United States Army. Merriweather's brother Anthony also served 20 years in the United States Navy.

In 2005, while still on the job, Tommy Merriweather was appointed the National Coordinator of the Robinson Pauley Aldridge Family Reunion. The large family gathering originated out of Marengo County, Alabama and as a structured national organization, they've met annually for more than 30 years, thus far in about 10 different cities in nine different states, allowing the family branches to maintain strong ties and preserve family history. The annual event is a three-day extravaganza that spreads out to multiple hotels and lodges, and it's indicative of the kind of family bonding that was important to Det. Merriweather. In July 2012, Tommy stepped down from his post as his health issues grew increasingly critical.

They began in the winter of 2010 when Merriweather started losing weight. At first, it simply appeared he was trying to reduce; he had always been a formidably sized man. His primary doctor mistook his symptoms for diabetes, but the prescribed treatment had a negative effect. Eventually,

an endocrinologist confirmed that diabetes was not the problem, and a cardiologist also confirmed that neither was his heart. On June 10, 2011, while Tommy was accompanying his wife to her own doctor's appointment, the Merriweathers were given the startling news that Tommy had pancreatic cancer. After seeing an oncologist, additional testing revealed Tommy's tumor was attached to a major artery and surgery was not an option. The doctor was holding out

noted, the birthday of his goddaughter, Danielle, Carey Billingsy's teenaged daughter. A videographer captured the celebration, where friends and relatives, speaking from the heart, called Tommy "a true original" and "the salt of the earth."

But it was Merriweather who advised those around him that "life is short" and to "make the most of it," as he was trying to do, as "he faced the biggest challenge" of his life.



Jackie and Tommy Merriweather at the 2012 Robinson Pauley Aldridge Family Reunion in Mobile, Alabama.

hope that chemotherapy treatments would shrink the tumor away from the artery so that eventually surgery could be performed. But that didn't happen.

In the final year of his life, Tommy's uplifting spirit and positive outlook were formally commemorated several times: his colleagues threw him a 10-13 party at a VFW in Long Island in the spring; and as his birthday approached in September of 2012, Jackie threw Tommy and his sister Michelle a large party, complete with a disc jockey, buffet, and dozens and dozens of guests, young and old, who danced the night away. It was also, as Merriweather sentimentally

"Life throws you curveballs," he admitted, "and to get hit with the news you have cancer was something that was hard to suck in on a Saturday morning visit to the doctor's office. It's easy to fall into a depression. But it was made a hell of a lot easier to take because of the support given by my family and friends. I'm going to give this one hell of a fight!" he vowed, greeted by a rousing chorus of "Amens!" from the adoring crowd.

"Party your butt off!" he also advised. "You hear the expression 'stop and smell the roses?' But when you go down the road I'm going, you really do need to stop and smell the roses."

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Merriweather, a deeply religious man who belonged to the First Baptist Church, took that philosophy to heart, playfully submitting to friends who accompanied him to chemotherapy treatments with video camera in hand, filming as he stoically accepted his intravenous while fellow NYPD cronies shot the breeze and the footage. They later titled it "A Day in Chemo from the Male Perspective."

"When I go to cancer treatment centers," Merriweather said, "and I think I have it bad, believe me, there's always someone there who has it worse." Tommy made a point of reaching out to other patients at the facilities, who were deeply touched by the tender-hearted Detective in their midst.

All in all, Tommy Merriweather spent 19 months and 11 days battling pancreatic cancer. He was honored for his bravery and service at an awards gala called "Standing On Our Father's Shoulders" on June 18, 2012, by U.S. Congressman Ed Townes, who for 30 years represented Brooklyn. The Congressman submitted his honorees biographies, including Det. Merriweather's, to the Library of Congress for permanent record.

Wife Jackie nurtured him while they fought his condition, and family and friends joined in as well taking care of Tommy, especially during his last two weeks while he was in Hospice. Linda Eaton-Lewis recalls that when they would talk, Tommy would wind up consoling and comforting her, instead of the intended other way around. "He was always there for you," she says.

"Even family members from out of town from the Robinson Pauley Aldridge Family Reunion came to New York" to pay their respects, related his mother. "Everybody was concerned about him, and family came from near and far to see about my child. He always used to say, we've got to stick together as a family. That's how we survive.

He was a wonderful, wonderful son," she says.

"Tommy tried to remain in good spirits to the end," Jackie says, "but on the final morning, he knew. Every day that Tommy was in Hospice, our sons and even our dog visited their dad. During the weekend, they'd stay from Friday to Sunday. On the morning of his death, Tommy's eyes were glossy and he was speaking to me. He asked me to rub his belly and then he asked me not to cry.

"While Tommy was in Hospice, he had three seizures. He had one on the morning of his last day. After that, he was unable to speak. The doctor gave him medication to try to stop or slow the seizure down. But about 30 minutes later, Tommy started hemorrhaging from the nose and mouth. I began wiping up the blood and feeling his chest for a heartbeat. I continued wiping him until the nurse gave me a time of death. It was 12:56. The nurse waited for me to repeat it back to her, to make sure I understood what had happened. I finished cleaning Tommy and laid him on his back, pulled the sheets and the blankets up to his chest and crossed his hands, and I kissed him. My eldest son, Tommy's mother Robertha, Tommy sister Vera, and friend Preston were all present when Tommy took his last breath. His friend Mo missed him by 30 minutes."

It was hard on everyone, and Tommy's father, Thomas Merriweather, passed, too, just three months and three days after his son, on his grandson Tommy III's birthday, April 24, 2013.

Today, Merriweather's former partner Det. Billiny, is no longer on the streets. He retired from the NYPD at the end of January 2014 after years of teaching new, younger Undercovers by conducting classes for OCCB on the art of executing search warrants, making buys ending in busts, car stops, and other finer points involved in navigating the debilitating world of the narcotics trade.



The Merriweathers' last formal family portrait, taken in November 2011. Tommy III, Tommy, Teron, and Jackie.

"I always hoped Tommy would join me," he says, "We used to call it "making monsters." Today, there are approximately 170 Undercovers in the Police Department. "He'd tell me, 'Train 'em right. Keep them straight on the street.'" It is a matter of life and death. And in many ways, it is hard to believe that the laid back, easygoing Tommy Merriweather made it physically, relatively unscathed, through all those monster years of the '80s and '90s crack wars, and past the wilding and rampaging of trigger-happy gangbangers, only finally to be felled by sifting through debris from the World Trade Center.

But on his sister Patricia's birthday, January 26, 2013, after a morning funeral service at the First Baptist Church of Bay Shore, the much beloved Tommy Merriweather, whose first shield number was 2601, was laid to rest at Pinelawn Memorial Park and Garden Mausoleums in Farmingdale, New York.

He was 49 years old.