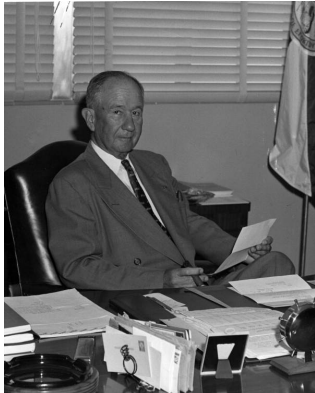


Colonel Neil Kirkman: Father of the Florida Highway Patrol

David Brand, Florida Sheriffs Association



Colonel Neil Kirkman was the first commander of the newly created Florida Highway Patrol in 1939 and, as the state population grew along with the Patrol, remained Car 1 until his retirement in 1970. Thus, ending a remarkable career as an Engineer, Soldier, State Trooper, Statesman, and Visionary.



Colonel Neil Kirkman

The Engineer and World War I Doughboy

Henry Neil Kirkman, Sr. was born in Greensboro, North Carolina February 19, 1892, but considered Palatka, Florida his home. He began his career as a private sector bridge builder in Florida. Five years later, after World War I broke out in 1917, he enlisted in the U.S. Army as a private. Due to his engineering experience, he was assigned to Company B of the 17th Engineering Regiment. When the Regiment arrived in Great Britain, they were greeted by the King of England.

Company B deployed to the Port of Nantes on the west coast of France with the mission of rebuilding the Port to receive the ships and soldiers from the American Expeditionary Force.¹ Later, according to David Kirkman, his grandson, they rebuilt the French railways having to switch the narrow-gauge French tracks to wider tracks to support large American locomotives and rail cars. Returning to the U.S. as a 1st Lieutenant after the war, Colonel Kirkman went back to building bridges but stayed in the Army Reserves.

The evolution of the Florida Highway Patrol

In 1931, 12 weight inspectors were hired under the administrative control of State Road Department engineers followed by the creation of a Division of Traffic Enforcement, with law enforcement authority, in 1934. For reasons lost to history, Governor Fred Cone dissolved the Traffic Division in 1937. The function of the weight inspectors would later become “Weights Troopers.”

Mr. Richard “Dick” Ervin was the attorney for the State Road Department in 1939. He authored legislation that was passed during the 1939 legislative session creating the State Department of Public Safety. Two divisions were developed: the Division of State Motor Vehicles Drivers Licenses, and the Florida Highway Patrol.² Dick Ervin was also instrumental in creating the Florida Sheriffs Bureau in 1955 that eventually segued into the Florida Department of Law Enforcement.³

Those searching for the first commander knew they would have to find someone with a wide range of experience who had the political ability to bring all the potential players to the table for a common purpose. At the time, Colonel Kirkman was an executive with the Luten Bridge Company of Syracuse, New York, living in Palatka, and building bridges in Florida and nearby states. He was well known and respected in government and industry having built not only bridges, but professional relationships. He didn’t just network; he visited, hunted, fished, and played golf with government and business luminaries. They liked and trusted him.⁴

Citizens generally distrust government overreach. When the FHP was formed, there was a certain skepticism among local governments that saw a state police force as a threat. The Patrol needed someone who could sell the idea and whose ethics were above question. On October 1, 1939, Governor Fred P. Cone appointed Colonel Kirkman to head the Florida Highway Patrol.

In November, 1939, the first training school was held in Bradenton, Florida consisting of 40 recruits with 32 graduating. 20 were issued Ford cars with sirens and bullet-proof windshields. The other 12 were issued Harvey Davidson motorcycles. By the end of 1940, the FHP had 59 officers.



Another trumpet sounded

When the winds of war swept across Europe in 1940, Commander Kirkman was called back to duty. Deploying once again to England, he served as the United States District Engineer constructing airfields and buildings. Meanwhile, back in Florida, many of the officers enlisted to fight the war. Those remaining patrolled the state's 1,197 miles of coastline looking for illegal aliens coming ashore. FHP officers also assisted FBI agents with investigating German nationals and seizing weapons and explosives.⁵

Colonel Kirkman in his World War II Uniform



On August 15, 1945, Colonel H. N. Kirkman returned from the war and was installed as the Director of the State Department of Public Safety by Governor Milliard Caldwell and the Florida Cabinet.

Visionary and Growth

One exemplary example of Colonel Kirkman's vision was related to the author by David Kirkman, Colonel Kirkman's grandson. He recalls traveling down the new Florida Turnpike that, at the time, was surrounded by cattle ranches and citrus groves. His grandfather remarked that one day both sides of the Turnpike would be populated with homes and businesses.

As a businessman, both he and civic promoters thought that Florida had a lot to offer for future growth. In the 1920s, he had been stationed with his company in Syracuse, New York where the Carrier Air Conditioning Company was. He knew that to grow, Florida needed two things: cars and air conditioning along with good roads, bridges, and traffic enforcement. To leave visitors with a good impression, the Highway Patrol needed to be both professional and courteous. As a result, "Courtesy" became the corporate philosophy of the Patrol.⁶

Governor Leroy Collins was present on July 5, 1958, along with members of the Cabinet and Legislature, to dedicate the Neil Kirkman Building on Apalachee Parkway in Tallahassee. There have been additions

to the four-story building, but it stands in the original place and houses the Headquarters of the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles.⁷

Remembrances and reflections

Jim Hawkins began his career with the Highway Patrol after receiving a letter of recommendation from Haydon Burns, the mayor of Jacksonville and later governor. Two months later, he received a letter from Colonel Kirkman to report to Tallahassee to take the entrance exams. When he began the 21st academy class, Colonel Kirkman spoke on the first day. He assured them that politics aside, they would have to pass the academy to become troopers. At the time, the academy was held in an old, World War II army barracks at the former Dale Mabry Army Air Corps base in Tallahassee. The recruits were transported by bus three times a day to a cafeteria at Florida State University for their meals. Later in his career, he was assigned to drive Colonel Kirkman for a week.



Retired Trooper Jim Hawkins

Walter Glass was hired in 1965 and attended the academy in 1966 where he met the Colonel. Years later, while working in Winter Garden, Colonel Kirkman met with him briefly and remembered him from his academy class. Trooper Glass always respected the Colonel because he treated everyone equally. Mr. Glass is considered a legacy trooper with several family members becoming troopers including a brother, Ted Glass, who later became the sheriff of Levy County, a brother-in-law, and a son, Mark Glass, who is with the Florida Department of Law Enforcement.



Retired Trooper Mark Glass

William Grubbs began his career in 1971 and was later a traffic homicide investigator. He was stationed in Palatka for awhile and remembers the Memorial bridge that Colonel Kirkman built in his early years. During his career, he was aware of the influence and vision that Colonel Kirkman had brought to the Highway Patrol.



Retired Trooper William Grubbs

Present day



Colonel Gene Spaulding

According to Colonel Gene Spaulding, the Florida Highway Patrol Director, Colonel Kirkman's legacy can be felt throughout the Patrol. He built the Patrol from the ground up which is reflected in the current structure and philosophy. The military style uniforms were sharp, and the Troopers were courteous. He also, due to his military background, created the Highway Patrol Auxiliary and modeled it after the American Legion.

Today's Patrol is funded for 1,982 Troopers and 515 support personnel. They investigate an average of 14,000+ traffic crashes each month.⁸

Colonel Kirkman would be proud!

¹ Kirkman, David Correspondence June 16, 2022

² www.fhp.state.fl.us

³ Brand, David *The Sheriffs Star* "The Florida Sheriffs Bureau: Where It All Began" Volume 65, Issue 4, 2021

⁴ Kirkman, David Correspondence June 16, 2022

⁵ Kleinbert, Eliot The Palm Beach Post "Florida History: German spies, sabotage and conspiracy" June 11, 2020

⁶ Kirkman, David Personal interview June 20, 2022

⁷ Tallahassee Democrat July 9, 1958

⁸ Spaulding, Colonel Gene Personal interview June 24, 2022