

2008 Officer Vern Heltemes – Distinguished Service Award

On Wednesday, March 26, 2008 Officer Vern Heltemes was dispatched to a male on the Main Avenue Railroad Bridge above the Red River. From the description provided by the caller, officers knew it was a suicidal male they previously admitted to a local hospital for a mental health evaluation.

Officer Heltemes was the first officer on scene and made attempts to communicate with the male. Officer Heltemes entered the railroad tracks and began walking toward the male. Officer Heltemes looked to the east and saw a westbound train approximately 17 blocks away bearing down on both the officer that the distraught male. The male was laying on his stomach on the same tracks that were being used by the westbound train. Officer Heltemes continued to yell at the male to get off the tracks. Officer Heltemes also notified dispatch and requested the train to be stopped.

As Officer Heltemes drew closer, the male began to slowly comply with the repeated verbal commands given by Officer Heltemes. The train was making every effort to stop. The male was only a 12 inches from harms way when the train past the officer and the male. Officer Oksendahl was the second officer on the scene and observed Officer Heltemes and the male from 4th St. Officer Oksendahl believed the male was going to be struck by the train.

As the train continued its attempt to stop, its momentum carried it into the City of Fargo. The distraught male turned back towards the tracks as if he was going to return to the occupied tracks. Officer Heltemes deployed his X26 Taser on the male. The male fell to the ground and was unable to move toward the moving train. Officer Heltemes, with the assistance of Officer Oksendahl were able to secure the male with handcuffs. The male was transported back to a local hospital for a mental health evaluation.

The train conductor was shaken from witnessing the incident and believed he had struck the male as they passed by the location of the event. Because of Officer Heltemes, the male was unable to harm himself as intended. Officer Heltemes valued the male's life and placed his own life in jeopardy by entering an occupied railroad track and performing these heroic actions.