

Van Arnum calling it quits after 40 years

By Kathryn Reed

Name any of the significant criminal cases to have occurred on the South Shore in the last four decades and Pete Van Arnum was likely involved.

Van Arnum is turning in his badge Dec. 26, three days after he turns 61. He is retiring from the El Dorado County Sheriff's Department, where he has been lieutenant of the Tahoe substation since March 2012.

His start in the field was a bit ominous. While he was at the Nevada Highway Patrol Academy he was assigned to Incline Village where Gary Gifford was going to be his trainer. They never met. A man who had robbed a bank in Round Hill killed Gifford near Cave Rock.

"That was a wake-up call for me ... that this is serious stuff," Van Arnum told *Lake Tahoe News*.

It was the beginning of a lot of seriousness.

One thing he won't miss is the work of coroner. That is the job of the sheriff's department. And for five years he was the coroner. In an area as small as the South Shore invariably he had to make death notifications to friends and acquaintances.

A harrowing case Van Arnum remembers is when three convicts escaped from state prison in Nevada and they came to Tahoe in a stolen vehicle. They broke into a home of the Edgewood Tahoe golf pro in Round Hill and took his wife hostage and stole her car.

"They came to a roadblock and opened fire on us and pushed through the roadblock," Van Arnum recalled. "She was in the

car. We didn't know it at the time. She was tied up on the floor."

Five Douglas County sheriff's vehicles chased the bad guys east toward Spooner Summit.

"They were firing guns at us the whole time. We were returning fire. We shot out all of the tires. We ordered them out of car at gunpoint. They were wounded. The wife came rolling out. Luckily she was not injured," Van Arnum said.



Pete Van Arnum will retire Dec. 26 after 40 years of being in law enforcement. Photo/LTN

Before Douglas County built the current facility for DCSO in Stateline there was a substation in Zephyr Cove that could house about a dozen inmates.

They were all in one room that was overseen by a dispatcher. If there were a hanging or fight, it could take a while for a deputy to come to the station to deal with it. Van Arnum said

it was so unpleasant that it acted as a deterrent for repeat offenders.

Van Arnum worked the Harveys bombing in the 1980s. In the late 1980s he went undercover for a year with the FBI and DEA for Operation Deep Snow that netted Mayor Terry Trupp and about 20 others in a drug trafficking and money laundering case.

“I remember sitting in on a wire tap and the mayor said the local cops are too stupid to catch him,” Van Arnum said. “That is what got the FBI office up here. They realized the need to have federal agencies up here because of all the drug trafficking.”

The most rewarding part of the job was when he worked at South Tahoe Middle School as the gang prevention officer. A wilderness program was created as well as a boxing program. Van Arnum still sees some of those kids – now with their own children.

Obviously he has seen a lot of changes in his 40 years.

“It’s definitely a lot more technical. I consider myself old school. We flew by the seat of our pants then,” Van Arnum said. “All reports were hand written. We didn’t have computers. The threats now are from active shooters. We never even thought about that when I started. Now I’m the SWAT team commander. You have to train and practice for a crazy person going into a school and shooting kids. It scares me to have to think about that for my grandkids.”

What he’ll miss when he leaves in two months is the people he works with.

“I think it’s going to be a loss because of his history. He knows the history of 40 years of working in Tahoe,” Douglas County Sheriff Ron Pierini told *Lake Tahoe News*. “One thing in law enforcement is gaining relationships. We know Pete, we can call him, we trust him and we know he will follow through.”

Van Arnum credits Pierini for keeping him in law enforcement. After graduating from CSU Sacramento, Van Arnum got a job with the Nevada Highway Patrol.

“I worked for NHP for three years and decided the work was not what I was interested in. I basically got a little irritated with NHP and just went down and quit and came home and told my wife I had quit,” Van Arnum said. “I was going to go into construction. Pierini called me up; he was captain at the time. He said come to work for him. He talked me into taking a job with him. It was probably a good move in the long run.”

He was with DCSO until 1984, and then went to South Lake Tahoe Police Department for 15 years before joining EDSO as a deputy.

“I want to personally thank him for his dedication and assistance in perseverance of the vision of the El Dorado County Sheriff’s Office and in my administration,” Sheriff John D’Agostini told *Lake Tahoe News*.

A replacement for Van Arnum has not been named.

Van Arnum will soon be busy hunting and fishing. Next summer he may put the uniform back on, though, but only to work the boat patrol.