

*THE HISTORIC STRATER HOTEL PRESENTS*

# ROOM 217: CORPORAL RICHARD CARL EDSTROM

## FALLEN HERO

Corporal Richard Edstrom, 42, was shot and wounded about 9:15 pm on Saturday, September 19, 1959, in Durango. He was one of numerous officers trying to apprehend two escapees from San Juan County Jail in Aztec, NM: J.L. West (alias Aldane M. Bartlett), and Barbara Stephenson Foster (alias Janice Wilson). They were in a car driven by Walter Duncan headed north towards Durango when they passed La Plata County Sheriff Herb McKinsey near the Highway 160 junction. The sheriff was headed south to set up a roadblock when he spotted the escapee's car and turned to pursue it. The chase went into Durango with Durango Police Captain John Garnand and Office G.L. Stephens joining the pursuit. Speeds of 70 mph were reached on several streets before the pursued car turned into an alley west of Main Street across from the Strater Hotel and stopped.

Duncan exited the vehicle and put his hands up while Foster remained in the car and also surrendered. West ran from the scene, ran through a café and then down 7th Street and entered a vehicle. Cpl. Edstrom observed this and immediately stopped the vehicle. As he confronted the suspect, gunshots rang out and both men fell to the ground. West died at the scene while Cpl. Edstrom was taken to Mercy Hospital by State Patrolman Herbert Louma, where emergency surgery was performed. His condition went from serious to critical before a second operation was performed on Sunday.



**On September 19, 1959, Corporal Edstrom was wounded during a gun battle with three fugitives from New Mexico. The fleeing car crashed through a Durango roadblock on U.S. 550. The chase was terminated when the wanted car went down a dead-end alley. The driver, Walter Duncan, and passenger, Barbara Foster, jumped out with their hands up. However, a second passenger, J.L. West, ran, and Edstrom stopped him as he tried to get into another car. During the ensuing gun battle, Edstrom was hit twice. It was determined West had been shot five times. He died instantly. Edstrom was hospitalized at Mercy Hospital in Durango and later died on October 28, 1959, from complications of the gunshot wound. Corporal Edstrom had entered the Patrol May 21, 1951.**

*Source: Colorado State Patrol office web portal  
<https://csp.colorado.gov/about-csp/colorado-law-enforcement-memorial/colorado-fallen-heroes-biographies>*



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Cpl. Edstrom had been shot twice. The first bullet struck him in the chest; the second struck him in the back below the left shoulder, traveled through the chest area and lodged in his stomach. It was originally believed that Cpl. Edstrom was going to recover from his injuries. Friends even arranged to have a TV set up in the hospital room by October 2nd, so he could watch the World Series. (Dodgers beat the White Sox in 6 games).

When interviewed at the hospital, Edstrom stated he was at the CSP office when he learned about the wild chase through town. He drove to set up a roadblock on the bridge over the Animas River. Upon hearing that the pursued vehicle had been stopped by the Strater Hotel, he proceeded to the scene and spotted West entering a pickup truck. Cpl. Edstrom activated his lights, and the pickup stopped. As Edstrom exited his patrol car, he drew his pistol while West approached him. When West pointed a pistol at him, Edstrom grabbed it and attempted to push it aside when West pulled the trigger. Edstrom only remembered being shot once and believed that he had fired his gun just twice. Afterwards it was determined that Cpl. Edstrom had fired four shots from his gun, all striking West.

An inquest was held on Monday, September 21st, regarding the death of J.L. West. Testimony included the fact that Edstrom had been shot twice but the gun used by West (stolen from the jailer in Aztec, NM) had only been fired once. Patrolman Louman and La Plata County Deputy Carl Likes had arrived at the scene and witnessed the shooting. Louma testified that he did not fire his weapons but that Deputy Likes fired twice. Likes testified that he “fired while running up to the scene of the shooting.”

Cpl. Richard Edstrom subsequently died 39 days later at 5:15am, Wednesday, October 28, 1959. It was thought he was recovering well from his surgeries and was about to be sent home from the hospital, and was even scheduled to return for a final surgery two weeks later. Unfortunately, he died unexpectedly from a blood clot that had migrated from his leg to his lungs.

Richard Carl (Dick) Edstrom was born in Cleveland, Ohio on November 7, 1916. He moved to Colorado at the age of 18, working as a tool maker and truck driver before joining the Army Air Corp in November 1924. He was discharged from the military in February 1946 and worked in construction before joining the Trinidad Police Department on February 1, 1949. He had also joined the U.S Air Force Reserve and was a Master Sergeant at the time of his death. On May 21, 1951, he became a patrolman with the Colorado State Patrol with his first post at Colorado Springs. On June 2, 1952, he transferred to Springfield where he worked for 7 years and where he met and married Helen Irene Wheeler. He adopted her sons, Gene Harold and Jimmie Daryl. On May 1, 1959, he was promoted to corporal and was transferred to Durango in September.

Cpl. Edstrom was survived by his wife Helen and adopted sons, Gene and Jimmie. Also surviving were a brother, Harold, and a sister, Alice, and their families.

**Sources:**

*Written by Keith Dameron, Historian- Colorado Law Enforcement Memorial*

*The Colorado State Patrol*

*Durango Herald-New- Sept. 20, 21, 22, 23, Oct. 2, 11, 19, 28, 29 and Nov. 2 1959*

*Baca County Plainsman Herald- Aug. 27, Sept. 24, Oct. 1, 29 and Nov. 5 1959*

*US Census Records- 1930 & 1940*

