

SAFETY AND HEROISM

SCOTTIE COGGINS, DAVID HALL, JOE HENDERSON, GARRET MCFALLS, AUSTIN PHILLIPS, & CHRISTOPHER STRADER



Department of Transportation and State Highway Patrol

*Sgt. Joe Henderson, David Hall,
Scottie Coggins, Austin Phillips,
Garret McFalls, &
Christopher Strader*

Whether it's managing traffic incidents, designing erosion control plans, or enforcing traffic laws, Department of Transportation employees Scottie Coggins, David Hall, Garret McFalls, Austin Phillips, and Christopher Strader and State Highway Patrol Trooper Joseph Henderson spend their workdays ensuring that North Carolinians can travel safely on our state's over 100,000 miles of public roadways. On September 26, 2024, these six employees went well beyond the scope of their duties to save numerous lives.

As Hurricane Helene battered the western part of our state, the Pigeon River – which flows along I-40 in Haywood County – reached a record peak of nearly 26 feet. The rushing torrent ripped away large amounts of soil from the banks of the rising tide. With such sudden erosion, portions of the interstate crumbled, stranding drivers as the eastbound lanes of the highway disintegrated. Trooper Henderson, McFalls, and Strader responded to the harrowing scene and devised a plan. As Trooper Henderson and Strader ushered eastbound traffic closer to the concrete median separating the two sides of the highway, McFalls quickly reached the nearest metal barrier gate where he discovered panicked drivers had already opened it to allow one car to pass through at a time. As the three shepherded motorists to the safety of the westbound lanes, the Pigeon's violent waters swallowed more segments of the road.

While the gate's opening was wide enough to guide passenger vehicles away from imminent danger, tractor trailers were too big. Coggins, Hall, and Phillips joined McFalls to open a larger section of the gate as quickly as possible. From there, all six men directed the enormous vehicles to the westbound lanes with critical precision. The roadway failed all around them, meaning even the slightest miscalculation could send a tractor trailer plummeting into the Pigeon's churning depths.

Four miles of I-40 washed away that day. Yet, thanks to the courageous actions and steadfast guidance of Scottie Coggins, David Hall, Trooper Joseph Henderson, Garret McFalls, Austin Phillips, and Christopher Strader, every motorist made it safely off the eastbound lanes of the road. The State of North Carolina commends these employees.

