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The Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine — A nine-year veteran of the Portland Police Department died of injuries after his handgun discharged in what police described yesterday as a tragic accident. Sergeant Robert Johnsey was apparently preparing his duty weapon for his next shift when it accidentally discharged late Monday at his home in Westbrook, wounding him in the leg, investigators concluded. Johnsey died a short time later at Maine Medical Center in Portland.

Portland's police chief, Timothy Burton, made the announcement, calling Johnsey's death a sad and tragic moment for his department. Westbrook's police chief, William Baker, whose department led the investigation, said evidence at the scene clearly indicated that Johnsey's Smith & Wesson semiautomatic handgun went off accidentally. "Our preliminary assessment led me to conclude that Sergeant Johnsey was doing something that all of us in law enforcement do 240 times a year – that is, getting our duty belts ready for the next day of work," Baker said.

After a 911 call from Johnsey's wife about 11:30 p.m., Westbrook officers arrived and found the officer unconscious. They administered first aid until an ambulance arrived and transported Johnsey to the Portland hospital, where he died just before midnight. Burton said it was likely that the bullet hit an artery. The state Medical Examiner's Office will still investigate the death. Routine procedure calls for the medical examiner to classify such deaths as suspicious and for Maine State Police to investigate, he said.

At the time of his death, Johnsey, 37, was assigned to the department's directed patrol unit and was supervisor of the canine unit. He served as a member of the honor guard and the crisis intervention team. Officers in uniform and plainclothes lined the back of the auditorium at police headquarters during the news conference in which Burton said the department had lost a kindhearted friend. Johnsey's death occurred as his department was dealing with the emotional trauma arising from the fatal shooting of a felon by Officer Nicholas Goodman during a traffic stop Saturday night. Police said the motorist tried to drive away, dragging Goodman and injuring his backup officer. The attorney general's office is investigating the shooting.

Burton said the officers are deeply affected by the tragedies but understand that as professionals they must continue to devote themselves toward their goal of providing for the safety of people in Portland. "We face this together, we console ourselves, and we move forward," the chief said.

Johnsey leaves his wife, Carol, and their two children, Rachel, 12, and Alexander Joseph, 9.