

STORIES

10 Officer Down

Anonymous¹

The Governor General Award of Canada and the Most Venerable Order of the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem—these are some of this country’s highest forms of recognition in the profession of policing. These are just a couple of the awards that I have gotten for my outstanding work in policing—and at great peril to myself. But the good also has come with the horrendously bad.

After 30 years of service, I quit my profession one week before my retirement because of intrusive, violent thoughts of killing a police officer and myself while working at Headquarters. But when the healing I had hoped would follow from quitting the police force didn’t come, five years after quitting I devised a plan to die at the hands of my fellow police brothers, it would be a ‘suicide by police.’ I wanted to end the living hell of trauma, alcoholism, and homelessness!

¹ At the author’s request the story is being presented anonymously.

Below you will find some of the experiences that led to my Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and alcoholism, which eventually left me homeless and broken. The time line is very fragmented as my mind recalls these events in a fractured fashion.

Coffee Time

I admit it was my turn to buy coffee and doughnuts. I held out long enough and my fellow officers were right, I was chronically cheap. While I was in the coffee shop I could hear the beeping of a car horn; I turned and saw my partner waving for me to come out to the car. I knew something was up because he had the red emergency lights on. I ran and jumped into the scout car. My partner advised me that there had been a robbery near our location and that the suspect was armed with a handgun. We received information from dispatch highlighting the perpetrator's description and clothing.

We then started patrolling, looking for his possible escape routes. I ordered my partner to stop and let me out while I patrolled on foot and he cruised the area in the squad car. The alley I picked to go down led me to a side street where I came face-to-face with the suspect. To my surprise his clothing did not match the description given to us by dispatch, but his body language gave him away. He motioned like he was going to grab a firearm from beneath his jacket. Before he could reach his weapon I beat him to the draw. I screamed, "Freeze!" He then turned and ran to the nearest house and booted in the door. It flew right open and he ran inside.

I followed in pursuit. A strange thing happened to me then: my senses were heightened, my vision sharpened and cleared. I became almost superhuman. I ran and didn't get winded, colours became greatly enhanced—red became ruby red and green became emerald green. My hearing became hollow and it sounded like a giant drum was over my head. All of my senses worked in concert to improve my physical performance. It was like time had slowed down and was being stretched. I didn't know it then but I was experiencing physiological and psychological effects which would later manifest as PTSD.

I came to the front door and had my gun and sights on the suspect. I could see a gun in his hand and started to pull back on the trigger on my own gun. It felt like slow motion. Just as the hammer was about to fall, a teenage girl

jumped out from one of the rooms between me and the suspect, directly in the line of fire. She had heard a commotion in her house and came to see what was causing it. Miraculously I pulled up the barrel of the gun and released the trigger pressure without firing. She never knew how close to being shot she had come. The next thing I knew my hearing had returned and I heard a loud bang. The suspect had run out the back door; the loud bang had been the screen door when it slammed.

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I ran through the kitchen and kicked the screen door with my foot, and as my foot hit the ground afterward I acquired a line of sight. In an instant I could see the suspect was running in front of a cinderblock wall. In a microsecond I knew if I shot that my bullets wouldn't hit a civilian, they would be absorbed into the wall. I fired and much to my amazement I could see my bullet scream past the armed suspect and slam against the wall. It made a small puff of dust and chipped cement. I fired off two more rounds in rapid succession and I started to see the suspect fall in slow motion. As the suspect lay on the ground, I could see pulsating crimson blood squirting onto the lawn with every beat of his heart. I approached him with my weapon trained on him for another shot and I could hear him crying out for his mother. As I continued closer I realized he was actually in the next yard. This surprised me because I felt he was in arms reach, but in fact he was approximately 18 yards away and there was a fence between us. I didn't even see the fence and I suspect it's because my instincts ruled it irrelevant. I quickly holstered my weapon and jumped the fence, pulled my gun and reacquired the suspect. He was chest down and I put my knee into the small of his back and started to search for the handgun, which I couldn't find. I felt something on his back and lifted his shirt and found he was wearing a bullet proof vest. He was fortunate, the bullet had hit him in between the butt cheek and the hamstring, shattering the femur and clipping the artery. I say fortunate because he could have very easily bled to death but I performed first aid, grabbing a tea towel off a nearby clothesline and applying a tourniquet. I believe I saved his life. The incident was later timed by investigators—the whole event took approximately 30 seconds. Upon his conviction in court I found out that I had crippled him for life.

A Trip To McDonalds

While at the height of my addiction because of PTSD, I decided to go to McDonald's with my two young daughters. The kids always loved going to the playroom after their meal and I was truly happy to act as their personal centurion and defender while they played. I myself had a completely different experience than they would each time we went. To me it was a journey into hyper-vigilance and paranoia, not family fun and good times. Around every corner I felt a huge threat of danger. Behind every smile, a sinister mind conspiring and plotting against me.

As I pulled up to the restaurant I scanned the parking lot for suspicious characters and their vehicles. With one visual swoop I discerned multiple threat scenarios and derived offensive tactics. It happened in a split second,

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as it always had before. My training and repeated exposures to danger had instilled in me my motto—overwhelm threats with superior violence. I was more than willing to execute any means necessary to protect my children and uphold my motto. I was once told by a fellow officer who also suffered from PTSD that shooting someone in

the head is like writing a parking ticket, and I agreed with his philosophy. In fact, I always had multiple firearms and edged weapons on my person just in case trouble found me. This was the way I approached every public situation. McDonald's was no different.

I processed information and threats as if I was the Terminator: cold, automatic, detracted and lethal. When I opened the doors of the restaurant I again repeated my visual scan. I knew everyone in there was a potential threat as well as hostage. I felt that hostages, if taken by a would-be threat, were not my primary concern. My family was, and I was more than willing to make hostages 'limited occupation expendables.' As I stood in line keeping a clear view of my children in the playroom, I would blade anyone in my vicinity. Blading is tactical term for standing on the ready to attack or defend just like boxers do. Also, another benefit to blading would-be attackers is that anyone within 30 feet of my kill zone would be neutralized by the commando knife hidden on my waist. I picked the line that would give me an optimal view of the terrain within the restaurant. After securing the premises I ordered two

kids' Happy Meals and a Big Mac meal for myself.

Seating was another mission altogether. I imagined myself in each available seat and then calculated the best way to protect myself and my children from threats. Windows and doors were never at my back or out of my vision. I decided on the seat that provided a vista of all exits and entrances. I scanned again for body language before digging into my burger.

The only time I really felt relief was when I was back in the vehicle and the doors were locked. This was because along with my firearms and edged weapons I now was in control of a 2,000-pound SUV ramming weapon. I was always confident in my SUV because of my police training in pursuit driving—safe and aggressive.

I relayed this story to my family physician when I was beginning to understand that I wasn't well and before I ever became homeless. My physician stated that normal people don't think like this. He told me at that moment I should never go back to policing. I dismissed his recommendation and went back to work.

Bloody Mary

I was contaminated by human blood during a struggle with a homeless street prostitute who had intentionally harmed herself. She had spent her welfare cheque and was trying to stage a robbery so she could get another cheque cut. I saw what she was up to right away and challenged her on her story. I had seen this many times before and could discern a real robbery from a fake one. She started flailing uncontrollably and screaming obscenities at me. Blood was all over the both of us from her self-imposed cuts.

When the ambulance arrived I worked hard to restrain her with my recruit and the paramedics. We finally got her on the stretcher. I was wearing my tactical gloves: Kevlar with a leather outer layer which work well when assailants attempt to stab you—you can grab the blade and gain a second or two to shoot and defend. I noticed that my gloves were sopping wet with her blood. I threw my gloves to the ground and examined my hands and could see her blood on some open cuts I had on my hands.

Once I got to the hospital I was told by the physician that I was at serious risk of contracting Hepatitis A, B and C, as well as HIV. He handed me a prescription for the AIDS cocktail. He gave me strict orders to commence treatment immediately, before the HIV virus takes hold. He also told me it was very time sensitive and would only work if I took the cocktail immediately. I had a 24-hour window to start the cocktail. Little did I realize how difficult filling my prescription would be.

All I remember was walking to the police station from the pharmacy crying. I was in tears. The pharmacy wanted to be paid cash up front, or by credit card. But by this point, due to my PTSD and related alcoholism, I had lost everything, and my personal finances were in shambles. I couldn't buy the cocktail and now it looked like I was going to lose my life. I approached my employer to have them pay for the AIDS cocktail and they refused saying: "Use your medical benefits." I advised them that I had declared bankruptcy and had no financial means to pay for the costly medical treatment. I asked them if they could pay it for me and then I could reimburse them afterward, when I received payment from my police health insurance. They refused. I was crushed. They told me to go after the police association, which I was more than desperate to do. Didn't they understand? I couldn't fuck around with paperwork while this insidious disease worked in my veins to infect me. I only had 24 hours to start the drug regimen.

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I turned to my association, which fought on my behalf. This took three days and finally the association paid out of its pocket and I received the drugs—better late than never. I did the drug regimen until I was told otherwise. I later learned that because of this incident, procedures and regulations have changed. They now have an in-house credit card available for officers to use in situations similar to mine. Unfortunately it was at my mental and physical expense, and it greatly increased my PTSD.

A Brave Officer

During my time in uniform there was one brave officer; he had no rank, but had the true concern of a friend and officer. He was unique. He wasn't like the rest of my colleagues who would always, to the detriment of personal

health and safety, uphold the thin blue line. That was what we were taught—protect the integrity of the police no matter what, even if it wasn't in our personal best interests.

He swore out a warrant for my arrest under the Mental Health Act. He understood that I was in a deep depression brought on by my PTSD and that I was capable of inflicting harm on myself. He had picked up on my desperation and called for my arrest. He somehow knew that I was held up in a fleabag motel drinking 40 ounces of rye a day. I felt, at that time in my life, that my only way out of my misery was through drinking myself into oblivion. On top of that, I wasn't taking care of my health. I wantonly neglected to take my heart and psych-meds. This was a conscious decision that I made hoping I would just die and the sad chapter that was my life would end. This made for a very dangerous and volatile milieu. I was slowly killing myself because I was unable to cope with life on life's terms. My reaction was simply to hide in a bottle.

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The warrant found its mark. I was escorted to a local hospital by police. The hospital I was taken to had its own in-house psych ward and I remember as we drove up to the emergency doors that I felt absolutely nothing. I was empty and emotionless; I knew at that point I was damaged goods. I knew I should have felt something but my PTSD had robbed me of any sort of normal emotional response. Looking back now with two years of sobriety and a semblance of stability, I can see that the officer who called for my arrest was in fact a caring and compassionate person who bravely defied the sub-culture of policing and I can safely say he probably saved my life.

On the hospital gurney, I was curled up in the foetal position. My legs were tucked into my chest and my head was hidden, covered by my shirt, which was pulled over my head. It was kind of like an ostrich does. I remember thinking: if I can't see them they can't see me. That's when my brave officer friend came and lightly tapped me on my shoulder with my arrest warrant and said, "I love you man." He turned and walked away. I wasn't really capable of any type of response. I was then placed in a psychiatric cell and received treatment.

The Gift

I was homeless, having no source of income, and I found myself unable to function in the real world. I was an alcoholic with no future because I could not stop living in the past. I had lost everything and everybody: my wife, my children, my home, my friends and my family. Most of all, I had lost myself in mental illness. My family and fellow officers were sick to death of my emotional outbursts of violence and anger. I had become menacing to the police and the public. I had been arrested numerous times under the Mental Health Act and had been hospitalized a number of times, totalling at least eight months in a mental hospital for alcoholism, trauma and PTSD. I had also been arrested for causing a disturbance after an emotional outburst—an explosion of anger—at my daughter's school. I was yelling obscenities and screaming at staff about me shooting people. The school went into lockdown in fear, knowing that I was trained in violence and that I was behaving like an obvious lunatic.

I had had enough and at the age of 54, on a day roughly four years ago, I put the plan into action. I had just consumed a 40-ouncer of liquor and taken an overdose of the antipsychotic drug Seroquel. I decided I was going to lure a S.W.A.T. team into ending my life. I phoned the police and threatened to kill young untrained officers for being weak and unaware. I did this knowing they would ping my phone and locate me. They'd be forced to send in a S.W.A.T. team to come and get me. After they found me, I was going to lure them into armed confrontation.

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I wanted the nightmares to stop; to end the horror of my mind in my dream shattered sleep. I wanted to die like a warrior. I was armed with an Aboriginal blade made of bone and obsidian, a stone-age weapon, and I had magazines and newsprint as body armour. I was well trained in knife fighting, and at close quarters, if I was tasered by the police, my armour would be adequate to stop me from being immobilized and I could move into their

killing zone. I wanted to give them *the gifts* of trauma and alcoholism that would come from shooting one of their own to death. I didn't want to kill them but I wanted to destroy their psyches, their minds and their spirits. If

the police didn't kill me, I would die from the overdose—one way or another I was going to end the nightmares.

But time conspired against me and in favour of the police. They arrived when I was so sedated that I posed no threat, yet early enough to forestall my suicide attempt. I was arrested and placed in a provincial jail to await trial. I was put in a special cell for the suicidal mentally ill. I was kept there for about three days. The cell was filled with human fecal matter and all sorts of biological waste. There was shit on the floor, the bed and walls; the floor was sticky with urine and other dried body fluids. I had no soap or toilet paper. When I asked the jail guards for these items I was told: "Too bad you got yourself arrested. What do you expect?" For days, I wiped my backside with the bread that I was given for food. I asked several times for soap and toilet paper and never received any. I was filthy. I asked for basic cleaning supplies to clean up the dried blood and shit and was refused until a jail advocate attended the cell. I advised her that the cell I was living in was a biohazard. I also asked the guards if they had ever received training in biohazards because they were living and working in it, potentially exposed to Hepatitis C and other diseases. Finally, by constant complaining, and with the intervention of the jail advocate, I received soap, toilet paper and a bucket of water with bleach, rubber gloves and a scrub brush. I disinfected my cell and never felt so relieved. Although totally dehumanized by this treatment, I felt safe in jail and with my PTSD I knew I couldn't hurt anyone and no one could hurt me. I could live in custody for the rest of my life and not deal with the outside world.

At trial, I was released on the conditions that I report regularly to a probation officer and see a psychiatrist. After years of trying to get help, the help I needed came in the form of this court order. I renewed my connection with Alcoholics Anonymous, and it is through my AA sponsor that I now have a sofa to sleep on. One step at a time, I have been on a path to wellness, although I need constantly be on my guard to avoid triggers. I know my healthy boundaries; I have learned to build up safe boundaries. I cannot watch or read news of any type of violence—watching a hockey game that breaks out into a fight, I can feel the hair on my back go up. I can't attend any movie or play video games out of concern that I will be triggered. The sounds of sirens in the distance or the

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raising of voices spark a response of vigilance. I am hyper-vigilant. I feel the need to arm myself. *Never, never put your back to the door.* I have used up my personal resources just trying to keep sober and the PTSD under control. I have tried to work but I find it so difficult mentally that I find myself homeless and broke.

So how is it that a man who has had many years of distinguished service as a police officer, should come to the point of devising a plan to die by police suicide? I began my career, as do many, as an idealistic young officer, wanting to help. Many, many traumatic events, and without resources and supports to process them, and within a culture of policing that requires officers to ‘man it up,’ stole my idealism and my life.