

# Life after the beat

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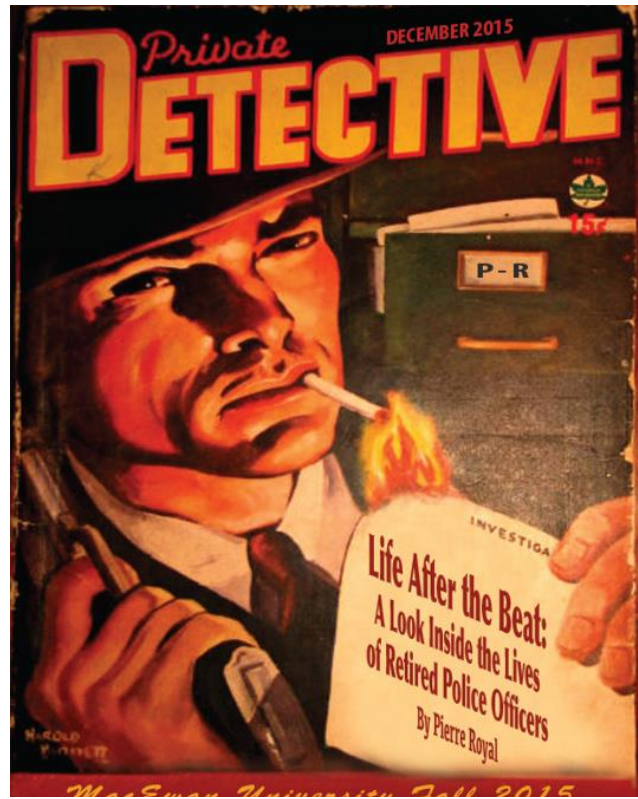
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*By Pierre Royal*

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E HAVE  
ALL heard stories  
about post-  
traumatic stress  
disorder –

soldiers returning from combat,  
firefighters after 9/11, refugees from war-  
torn countries, police officers on the job.  
What we rarely hear about are the things  
that linger in the mind and heart after a  
police officer retires from years in an  
occupation that is stressful and  
dangerous, and often thankless. Do they  
have trouble adjusting to civilian life? Does the ugliness of the job stay with them?



*(Photoshop composite illustration by  
Pierre Royal)*

Oh it's still there," retired Edmonton Police detective Ralph Godfrey says. "There's definitely been some cases that will stay with me forever. One example of where the job really hit me was when we were at a wedding a little while ago. There was a little boy there who was the ring-bearer, and he was so happy to be wearing his new little tuxedo. He refused to take it off after the wedding and wound up going to bed in it. When we went up and saw the little guy ... it reminded me of seeing a child on the autopsy table years back."

Godfrey retired at the age of 47 in 2004. While he worked in many departments, his major focus was in polygraph technology – running what the public thinks of as the lie-detection machine for "every division, from the crime scene examinations unit to major crimes." Now, he's a contractor for the Edmonton Police recruiting services, and he

administers polygraphs to every recruit. Though he only works a 30-hour week – “compared to 65-plus hours when I was on the job” – he says his days as a police officer are never very far below the surface of his consciousness.

“This job kind of stays with you,” he says. “Another case I had was working with arson investigators in a fire that resulted in the death of a small child and her babysitter. Well, what happened eventually when we performed the autopsy is that the babysitter had bullet holes in her head. She had been murdered and the four-year-old child she was taking care of died as a result of smoke inhalation. The child fell asleep and never woke up.



Like most organizations of its kind, the Edmonton Police Service is a macho culture, Godfrey says, in which toughness is valued. (Courtesy Sangudo/flickr Creative Commons)

“These kinds of cases stay with you – especially if you don’t close the file.”

A major contributing factor to PTSD among police officers is the macho culture of the field. Godfrey says there was no program to deal with PTSD when he was on the service, and there’s very little in the way of help for retired officers now.

“There isn’t much of a support system in place for us retired officers,” he says. “There really should be, as the job takes a toll on you.”

Keep your distance from the job and don't let it consume your life is Godfrey's survival advice for the recruits he tests. It's easy for young officers to build their lives around a job they find exhilarating and fulfilling, he says. But over the years it will wear you down, if you don't have a life outside the service.

Yet, even today, he says, some of his fondest memories are of being young on the job.

"When I was just starting out, we were young, we had a tight crew," he recalls. "About eight to 10 guys. We felt like we could take on the world."

Over the years, Godfrey worked on many high-profile crimes, some of which got under his skin – one so much that he couldn't let himself retire until the case was closed. That was the high-profile murder case of six-year-old Corrine "Punky" Gustavsson, who was abducted from her home in 1992 and found sexually assaulted and smothered to death two days later. The case is one of Edmonton's most unsettling crimes. Godfrey even appeared on an episode of A&E's *Cold Case Files* to discuss it.

"That was a bad one," he recalls. "I couldn't feel right about retiring until after the file was closed. The Punky case was huge. I was involved in everything from actually searching for her to interviewing the suspect," Clifford Sleigh, who was convicted in 2005 of first-degree murder, kidnapping and sexual assault. He is serving a life sentence with no chance of parole for 25 years. Godfrey retired a year earlier, right after Edmonton police arrested Sleigh.

**J**OANNE McCARTNEY spent years of her life trudging through some of the seediest and most unpleasant aspects of life in the city. Now, she works to help victims of the crimes she once fought.

It was McCartney who, in the late 1990s, brought to public attention the alarming number of prostitutes who were going missing in Edmonton.

“No one really cared for these women because of their occupation,” she says. “I was proud that I finally got a lot of people’s attention to the matter. But that took a toll as well.”

Between 1988 and 2005, there were 13 reported unsolved homicides involving prostitutes. McCartney’s investigative team eventually made an arrest. The former vice detective retired in 2002 at the age of 61, got herself a master’s degree, and now runs a counselling service for former prostitutes and people who have been sexually exploited.

“My connections through being a vice detective – and being a woman – led me to become a counsellor for the sexually exploited,” she says.

McCartney worked in the Edmonton Police for 27 years, mostly as a vice detective. For the most part, she says, she has fond memories of the variety, challenge and adventure of the job.

“It wasn’t like going to a job that you would be doing the same thing every day,” she says. “Whole new game every day.”



*Though they serve and protect a city of only 1 million, Edmonton Police officers are faced with a range of big-city crimes. (Courtesy Dale C/flickr Creative Commons)*

At the same time, she says, she wasn't as keen on the way women were marginalized in an all-male and very sexist police service – something she says persisted almost until her retirement.

“Women were still seen back then by male police as homemakers, and that ticked me off constantly. It wasn't until Chief (Michael) Boyd came along in 1994 – as his wife was a police officer in Ontario – that women started making some ground in Edmonton in regards to police work.”

As much as she enjoyed aspects of her life as a police officer, seeing the underbelly of the city, day in and day out, took a heavy psychological toll. The trip back to the life of an ordinary citizen can be a long one for someone who was on vice – so she had to make a clean cut from her old life when she decided to retire. And that was one area where being a woman was an advantage.

“A lot of people, when they retire, continue to hang out with other retired officers, or even active ones,” she says. “Because I was a woman, and we were marginalized back then, I didn't have the same connections to other officers. I mean there's probably one or two I still keep in contact with, but that's it. Keeping outside connections makes for easier times.

“You really have to watch your behaviour coming back into civilian life, and the more connections you have outside the police department, the easier the transition will be.”

Now, McCartney runs a counselling centre for people she describes as “sexually exploited,” is something she says she was well prepared for, thanks to her career as a police officer.

“That basically means they’ve been trafficked, assaulted and exploited,” she says  
“Some of my clients are former prostitutes. Some are trafficked children. The list goes on. Being from vice, I knew how to deal with these kinds of people.

“It really prepared me for what I do today. And that’s how I deal with the disturbing things I saw while on the job.”



COUPLE WHO are also RCMP members have formed their own support group in a way. Though Chuck, 50, is retired, Liz, 46, is still an active corporal in Fort McMurray. She has been a Mountie for 14 years, and is now working as a narcotics officer in Fort McMurray – a job she describes as trying to hold back a wave of crime in what was until recently a boomtown. It’s a town where the demand for drugs, and the money to pay for them, is rampant.

“The best thing about the job is helping people,” she says. “But, seeing as I’m in the drug unit, I don’t really have much opportunity, so to speak, at actually helping people. It’s our job to get drugs off the street, period.

“What I don’t like about the job is ... the powerlessness you sometimes feel. Like, when you know someone is doing something wrong but your hands are tied, it’s very frustrating.”

After 25 years with the RCMP, Chuck had risen to the rank of sergeant before he retired in 2006. Now, he’s the manager of surveillance for Alberta Energy in Fort Mac, a job for which his police experience prepared him well. He says the RCMP taught him how to communicate with people to resolve conflicts without violence – and it’s the threat of violence that he misses least from his old life.

“I used to send five or six guys out on a drug bust – a kick as we call it – and I’d worry if I didn’t get a call right away when it was done,” he says. “These guys are putting their lives on the line based on my orders.



“I don’t have to deal with that any more. When my guys go up to Suncor or the oil sands, I’m nowhere near as worried as when I was with RCMP. Those were life-and-death calls sometimes, very stressful.”



*As well as serving as national police, RCMP officers perform a lot of the same tasks as city police – with the same stresses. (Courtesy RCMP/flickr Creative Commons)*

Like the other officers interviewed for this story, Liz and Chuck admit that police work takes a heavy toll, and that people who go into this line of work are mostly left alone to deal with the stress and depression that often comes with it. The culture tends to discourage people from seeking help, Liz says.

“It was only last year, when I decided to get a counsellor. The things that we have to do and see aren’t pleasant by any means, and it’s not like you can complain to fellow officers. They need to see you as strong and, if you start buckling under the pressure—

“You can’t appear weak.”

Chuck says he developed a set of coping mechanisms that helped him deal with the job, and not all of them were healthy. One of the socially acceptable ways of dealing with stress in the police culture, he says, is drinking.



“Alcohol was definitely a factor,” he says. “I may have drank a bit too much when unwinding after particularly bad days. I think, especially in the RCMP, the drinking circles are there. They exist unfortunately. If you don’t partake with your fellow officers or even superior ones, you could easily miss out on a promotion – as an extreme example.”

The era in which Chuck and Liz were raised also contributed, Chuck says. In some cultures, stoicism is one of the ultimate virtues and any display of weakness borders on disgrace.

“I was raised English, stiff-upper lip style,” he says. “My mother often told me to suck it up, so I grew up tough. You need to be tough to do this job; it’s certainly not for everyone.”

Among the most stressful and depressing duties police face is delivering news of death, or dealing with parents when their kids are missing, dead, or seriously injured.

“I remember one case where a grandfather had run over his two-year-old grandson,” Chuck recalls. “Dealing with the family in the hospital was horrible. Talk about pure human misery.”

Liz joined the RCMP when Chuck was on his 10th year as a member. And that, he says, made dealing with the job a bit easier.

“I never wanted to bring my work home with me, and talk to my wife about some of the bad things I’d seen during the day,” he says. “But, when she joined, it made it easier for both of us.”

“Now we can disclose to each other what bothered us on that particular day without being concerned about whether or not we’d be seen as weak – like our co-workers may think if we open up.”