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T. O. gets shot of reality

Cop survived, but does city care?

By JOE WARMINGTON

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There won't be a cop funeral in Toronto tomorrow.

But it was not for a lack of trying in a city that has become a war zone where goons shooting at police officers is no longer front-page news.

Brace yourself, Toronto. As I write this, there is a shooting under way at Jane and Threthewey. What is new? Nobody much cares anymore as long as it's gangsters shooting each other.

But now it seems nobody much raises an eyebrow when a cop is hit, too!

It is true Const. Rob North did not dodge a bullet when he was shot at Saturday night. A piece of one hit him in the head. It was the city that dodged a bullet because it was within a sliver of burying another brave cop.

This reality was not lost on Toronto Police Association president Dave Wilson, who with his board sent out an internal memo to members last night saying this shooting "should serve as a wake-up call that gun crime in our city continues to escalate at an alarming rate ... we are all tremendously grateful that the officer involved was not more seriously injured, for events could have easily unfolded differently" at a time when "without question the environment in which we perform our jobs is becoming more perilous."

You don't have to be a physics professor to see if North had have been one foot to the left or right, or the alleged shooter was three feet closer, Toronto would be a city in mourning today.

It was that close. The 40-year-old 11 Division veteran was on yesterday's already determined promotions' list and will soon become a sergeant instead. He is recovering and is expected to return to duty.

What happened here is a reminder of how dangerous being a cop is. It's amazing how close his family came to losing him.

And what I find even more amazing is how this city seemed to miss this story.

To recap, this incident occurred late Saturday night -- on Symington Ave., north of Bloor, when North and other officers were attempting to arrest two men allegedly involved in a beer store robbery nearby.

Shots were fired and this 13-year veteran of Toronto Police had a fragment from the shell hit his forehead. It is believed the full charge of the shot missed him by inches. "Very lucky," is how Staff Sgt. Devin Kealey put it Saturday.

It has never once made the front page of any newspaper. The biggest story I read was one column in a competitor calling the cops' leaving a car on the train tracks "colossally stupid" on a night where one of their own was shot.

What I think is "colossally stupid" is a system that allows hardened criminals, like the

suspects, loose on our streets.

Charged with three counts of attempted murder is Jeron Powell, 32, and facing robbery charges is Craig Buckle, 29. Both have extensive rap sheets. In Powell's case, there are firearms charges and robberies and Buckle was charged with robbery, weapons dangerous and wearing a disguise during a 1999 bank robbery.

Note their ages. They are not boys as the apologists for this behaviour try to call the thugs that rule the streets. They are men. The sad part for me personally is I actually met Buckle once -- back in 1994 when he was just 14. He seemed like a nice kid and a hell of a basketball player. His Dream Team III street ball team won a tournament at the Dufferin Mall.

DREAM TEAM

At the time the United States Dream Team of NBAers were here for the World Basketball Championships. As he was holding the trophy, I remember asking him if he was going to go to a game and watch his Shaquille O'Neal in action?

"It's just too expensive," Buckle told me. "But my mom told me 'not to worry' and to just keep working hard and I will be there someday as a player."

On the possibility of meeting Shaq, he said "I don't know what I would say if I ever met him. I'm pretty sure I would be in a state of shock."

Later that day we tracked tickets down for them but we could not find Craig Buckle and he did not get to go and get to meet Shaq as his buddies got to do. It always bothered me that we could not find him.

Meanwhile, it is time Mayor David Miller gets his head out of the sand, stops talking about a handgun ban, stops sending out the spin this is a safe city compared to other big North American cities and instead comes back from Hollywood and convenes an emergency meeting on the violence issue.

There have been six major shooting incidents in the past week -- including one in the west end last night, the one where North was wounded, the one at the Osgoode TTC station, the one in the Entertainment District and the one on the 401.

They can talk about building new basketball courts and social programs but they had better talk about building new jails, prisons, too -- as well as creating a special armed, gang-war unit as they have in places like Los Angeles.

It's time to get serious with these thugs and take our streets back from them and protect the youth, store owners and innocents. This is no longer just an aw' shucks, boys-will-be boys problem as the weak left politicians push all the time.

There's been too many innocent people killed for that to wash anymore. Time for aggressive but smart action. All ideas are welcome but if I have one suggestion it is to the media which had better not get bored of crime. This happened in Detroit where a murder just garners a flash in the paper.

I hope a cop getting hit with a shotgun blast is still a front- page story here.

Or is it that we have become desensitized to what has become normal? Do we need a police funeral to get interested?