



FORCE SCIENCE® NEWS

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A walk in the shadows of the spotlight with a hero cop

I. A walk in the shadows of the spotlight with a hero cop

This is the stuff of police heroism:

An officer we'll call Joe arrived at a residence to check out a 911 hang-up and interrupted a mentally disturbed man trying to strangle his mother with a telephone cord and scalp her with a kitchen knife after wounding her and his father with bullets to the head.

A gun battle erupted between Joe and the would-be killer in a parking area outside. In the midst of fighting for his life, Joe radioed a warning to get a school directly across the street safely on lockdown. His wife was a teacher there and two of his kids were students.

The suspect ended up dead. Joe suffered a nonfatal g.s.w. to his side. But no civilians were injured in the shootout. Even the suspect's parents survived.



Not surprisingly, Joe was showered with public accolades. But within his department, some very different reactions slithered out.

To his shock, some cops he worked with displayed blatant “award envy,” sarcastically mocking to his face the ceremonial acknowledgments he received.

“It was stunning,” says Brian Murphy, who has experienced some stunning things himself as a presidential Public Safety Medal of Valor winner. “Would you ever think law enforcement officers would begrudge a fellow officer shot in the line of duty?”

Murphy used Joe’s incident to introduce his personal reflections on the limelight at the recent annual WINx training event hosted in a Chicago suburb by Force Science Analysts Brian Willis and Roy Bethge. His topic was a phenomenon rarely discussed in law enforcement circles: the dark aftermath of heroic actions.

Murphy won international acclaim as the first responding officer to a white supremacist’s shooting rampage at a Sikh temple near Milwaukee in 2012. Six Sikh worshippers were killed, others wounded, and Murphy was shot 15 times in a confrontation with the gunman.

Since his retirement from the Oak Creek (WI) PD in 2013, he has served as the “Saves Program manager” for Armor Express, the ballistic vest manufacturer, and has been a popular figure on the law enforcement lecture circuit. He estimates he’s talked to more than 200 shooting survivors, typically depicted as heroes for their fateful encounters.

“I ask them what they most want,” he told Force Science News after his WINx presentation. “Almost to a person, they say the same thing: ‘I’d like my old life back.’ ”

In their fantasies, officers who haven’t been there yet “may want that hero status,” Murphy says. “But there’s a price that comes with it, a penalty you wind up paying.”

In a voice still raspy from a throat wound, he’s quick to point out that in his shooting the Sikh victims, their loved ones, and their religious community paid a price of pain that “will last far longer than mine ever will.” And yet, “from being a normal, workaday officer to all of a sudden getting the hero label—there’s just so much more to it than meets the eye.”

Here are some of the behind-the-scenes elements, in addition to collegial resentment, that you may need to prepare yourself for, he says, depending on the circumstances of your incident.

DOUBT. You may feel a sense of unworthiness about your “hero” designation. “You can become a media darling without doing a tremendous amount,” Murphy says.

“The definition of ‘hero’ is ‘performing extraordinarily in extraordinary circumstances.’ But in law enforcement and the military, facing and overcoming danger is not extraordinary, it’s part of our job. The standard for heroism tends to be much higher among us than for civilians.

“So when you’re slapped with that hero label, you think, ‘No, what I did doesn’t match up to people I regard as heroes. Brian Murphy is not Audie Murphy.’ ” (Audie

Murphy was one of the most decorated American soldiers in World War II, who at age 19 held off a company of German soldiers singlehandedly, then led a successful counterattack while wounded and out of ammo.)

GUILT. If innocent people were killed in your incident, you may be haunted by “survivor guilt,” Murphy warns.

“The Sikhs were victims of radicalized hate, singled out for execution for their heritage, their faith, their color. All they did was take time out of their busy lives to pray; that’s it, just pray, and for that, they gave their lives. That cannot be wiped away.

“Their leader, a 65-year-old man, sacrificed himself trying to protect his flock. That’s a hero. I couldn’t keep all those deaths from happening, yet I survived. It doesn’t seem fair. That’s a lot to come to terms with.”

PRIVACY LOSS. “My wife and I are very private people,” Murphy says. “The day before my shooting, we could go where we wanted and do what we wanted and nobody noticed. After that day, people often recognized me from TV or the papers. They’d interrupt whatever we were doing to comment or ask me about the shooting or want to know how I was doing or maybe pay our bill at a restaurant.

“We appreciated their appreciation, but wanting to be anonymous at that point was just as important to us.

“Career ballplayers or movie stars are used to attention. Most of them have had it all their lives. But for us, our anonymity was ripped away and it felt like we were suddenly living in a spotlight.”

INDIGNITY. As cops, “We all like to think we’re the baddest guy on the planet,” Murphy observes. But a “heroic” event that leaves you injured can deliver not only the shocking reality of your vulnerability but other “things outsiders never see” that assault your personal dignity as well

An officer who’d been nearly killed by a shotgun blast described to Murphy the “super pain” of his wife scrubbing out his wounds every day. When he tried to return to work, “he wasn’t able to buckle his Sam Browne by himself. His wife had to do it for him.”

Murphy, fit at 50 from regular workouts at the time of his shooting, had been married only a year when the gunman’s rounds “turned me into a human sprinkler.” During his recovery, his wife had to feed him through a tube. Worse, because his wounded hands were incapacitated, “I couldn’t fold toilet paper. She had to come in and wipe me. That,” he says in a near-whisper, “is humbling.”

FAMILY IMPACT. “A heroic event can throw your family into a mess,” Murphy says. “Your training, perseverance, or vest may have kept you alive, but when it’s all said and done, you came that close.

“Your family may not want you to go to work again. Another shooting survivor told me his 10-year-old son wouldn’t let him out of his sight, clung to him everywhere he went. My six-year-old stepdaughter had never seen me as anything but a big, strong guy. Now I was hooked up to a bunch of machines. She couldn’t grasp it. She wanted no part of me. My 22-year-old daughter, who was teaching

overseas, was furious because she thought she should be there caring for me.

Murphy and his wife were scheduled to leave on a delayed honeymoon a week after he was shot. As he lay bleeding outside the temple, it flashed into his mind, Boy, is she gonna be pissed!

Fortunately for me, she wasn't. Instead, "she was my psychologist, my physician, my best friend—everything to me. Her normal routine was completely upended and she had to deal with stuff like worker's comp and various law enforcement protocols, in addition to medical procedures, that she had no experience or familiarity with. Yet when we went to ceremonies or social gatherings after I recovered, she'd be shoved off to the side and all the attention would be on me."

One of the dark aspects of heroism that has most impressed him, Murphy says, is "how everyone in your family will be truly affected, especially kids. You need a strong bond going in and good therapy for the whole family coming out" to emerge with everyone intact.

DIMINISHMENT. In an ironic sense, something marked as heroic can be belittling, Murphy believes.

"I served over two decades on my department. I ran the SWAT team, I ran the evidence team, I ran the emergency management team, I got an award for leadership from the command school at Northwestern University, I solved cases through good, solid police work, I trained and worked with guys and gals who are fine police officers.

"But then on one Sunday morning a guy shows up and shoots the hell out of me. Those few seconds—1.51 minutes—overshadow everything I did in law enforcement for 22 years. That now defines me, and I feel it has diminished other things in my career that I'm more proud of."

FACING THE FUTURE. With more than a whiff of nostalgia Murphy says, "I'd absolutely be heading the list of people to get my old life back if that were possible...doing things that are forgotten right away, with no attention paid to them.

"You tell yourself, I didn't ask for any of this. Easy to say, not so easy to deal with.

"We all have plans of how we think our lives will play out. Then 'the thing' happens and those plans are gone, to one degree or another. You knew what you were gonna do, but you may not know what to do when you have to find a new normal that has never existed for you before.

"You can want to go backward forever, but that's never going to happen. Sooner or later, you have to answer the big questions: What do I have now? And what am I going to do with it?"

With time and adaptation, some of the shadows begin to fade, Murphy says four-plus years after his shooting. But the impact of the event rarely vanishes entirely.

"My wife and I will be driving someplace," he says, "and I'll notice her looking at me. 'What?' I'll say.

"And she'll say, 'I still can't believe you were shot 15 times and are still alive.' And I'll say, 'I can't either.'

"She cries easier than I do, but not by much. We keep on driving, and the moment passes...for now."

Brian Murphy can be reached at: bmurphy@armorexpress.com.

CLICK HERE to watch a video interview in which he describes his shooting.

II. 2 easy reads to heighten your performance, cut your danger

In response to Force Science News #323, which described an approved napping-on-duty policy established by the Henderson (NV) PD, we received the following recommendations from Dr. Alexis Artwohl, well known in law enforcement circles for her research into OIS-related phenomena and as a faculty member for the Force Science Analysis certification course:

I've been a long-time practitioner and advocate for "restorative rest" (napping). Research shows that napping enhances health in a sleep-deprived world, and it enables employees to be more productive. It also saves lives by creating a safer work environment in alertness-sensitive occupations like law enforcement. Agencies and officers would be doing themselves, their employees, and the public a big favor by embracing this vital performance-enhancing tool instead of resisting it.

I'm always frustrated when people are resistant to this idea. Some even see it as a moral deficiency or totally impractical, when, in fact, it is neither. Even in the absence of official "nap rooms," a quick nap in a squad car in a safe location, on a couch, at a desk with head down, on a sleeping pad on the floor, etc., are all possibilities. I've done them all and know how to take a good nap when traveling.

I commend Force Science for taking up the torch on this issue. *Take a Nap! Change Your Life.* is an easy-to-read book by a researcher on the topic.

Another problem in law enforcement is obesity and lack of fitness. This issue is hardly unique to policing but it's especially alarming in an occupation where officers can easily find themselves in a fight for their lives.

Many people struggle to find time in their busy lives for regular exercise. Here is a book reviewing the research finding that even just 20 minutes of daily vigorous exercise can greatly enhance fitness levels. Officers who set up their home and/or work environments so they can grab that daily 20 minutes without a hassle will be doing themselves a big favor, and will be safer for it.

Written by Force Science Institute
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