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“Don't shoot. Please
don't shoot.”

—CONSTABLE RALPH ERFLE
SEPTEMBER 1, 1984

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On September 1, 1984, three would-be bank robbers gunned down two police officers during a botched heist at the Bayshore Shopping Centre. Their brazen actions that day would leave one man striving to get out of a wheelchair while driving the other to achieve new heights in his policing career BY JUDY TRINH

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As birth rates across the country stagnate, *Ottawa Magazine* interviews three families who are bucking the trend big-time and embracing the joys and challenges of large families BY TREVOR TUCKER



It was a crime that reverberated through the city.

Two police officers shot, one of them left fighting for his life. I was a teenager in 1984 when Constables Robin Easey and Ralph Erfle were targeted while investigating what turned out to be a foiled bank robbery at the Bayshore Shopping Centre. At the time, I wasn't exactly an avid newspaper reader, but Bayshore was my local mall and I remember devouring the reports.

So when I was having a lunch-and-gossip session with journalist Judy Trinh last year and she happened to mention Superintendent Erfle's name while updating me on the goings-on on the police beat, the name immediately rang a bell. I could picture the front page of the newspaper that day—the headshots of the two officers and the crime-scene snaps from the mall parking lot.

I recently reread those original press clippings, and the stories touched me in a very different way. Twenty-two years later, as a wife and mother, I understood the reports of Robin Easey's terrible injuries in a new light, knowing that he was a husband and the father of two young boys. And knowing the obstacles he and his wife have faced in the years since the shooting, I am struck by their commitment and optimism. Remembering the front-page newspaper picture of Ralph Erfle captured just moments after bullets had shattered his jaw and leg, I am awed that he never looked back, returning to policing within weeks and dedicating himself to his career.

Trinh does an admirable job of capturing in writing the crime that stunned a city two decades ago and in moving on to the present, interviewing Robin Easey and Ralph Erfle and seeing for herself how their lives (and the lives of those who love them) were irrevocably changed in one three-minute gun battle on September 1, 1984. Theirs are stories of facing challenges head-on, of strength, and of perseverance.



Photographer David Trattles went above and beyond to capture the spirit of the three large families profiled in this issue. He travels to India this month for a series of exhibitions showcasing portraits of female boxers he took last year

A few months ago writer Trevor Tucker came in with a big idea. In an era of ever smaller families, a few parents are bucking the trend in a big way. What possesses parents to have a dozen kids? he asked. And what's it like

to be part of such a wide-ranging crew? We immediately called photographer David Trattles and asked whether he would come on board to document the day-to-day lives of the families Tucker planned to interview. He jumped at the chance and outdid himself. Magazines are the perfect forum for photo essays, and this one is a beauty. Behold the joys of a big family.

COMING UP: The Interiors edition! Over 200 pages of hot city style at your fingertips. The intimate spaces we've uncovered this year include a deluxe condo, an exceptional cottage, a dramatic "green" house, and a historic diplomatic residence. Also, for the gardeners, 20-plus pages of beautifully photographed gardens—and tips on how to make a great garden happen in your own outdoor space.

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IN THE LINE OF FIRE



IT WAS THE STORY THAT ROCKED A CITY. ON SEPTEMBER 1, 1984, THREE WOULD-BE BANK ROBBERS GUNNED DOWN TWO POLICE OFFICERS AND LEFT THEM FOR DEAD DURING A BOTCHED HEIST AT THE BAYSHORE SHOPPING CENTRE. THEIR BRAZEN ACTIONS WOULD LEAVE ONE MAN STRIVING TO GET OUT OF A WHEELCHAIR WHILE DRIVING THE OTHER TO ACHIEVE NEW HEIGHTS IN HIS POLICING CAREER

BY JUDY TRINH

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TONY FOHSE



Superintendent Ralph Erfle

Sergeant Robin Easey

It's the randomness of fate that makes it so cruel.

Its arbitrary decisions leave some besieged for a lifetime, while allowing others to escape and marvel that they were spared. That's how it was with Robin Easey and Ralph Erfle, two police officers gravely injured in a terrifying shooting spree more than two decades ago. In 1984, the men were ambushed and left for dead during a botched armed robbery at the Bayshore Shopping Centre. Their subsequent life paths challenge the adage that time heals all wounds.

That September 1, the Brinks truck was due to arrive at Bayshore at 9:30 a.m. sharp, as soon as the Toronto Dominion Bank opened its doors. Inside the armoured vehicle were a million dollars in cash, protected only by security guards who, at that time, were not allowed to have their guns drawn while doing a money escort.

What nobody knew was that the truck was being watched by criminals, a group of five professional robbers from Quebec who had marked it as easy prey. While the mastermind waited downtown, orchestrating the heist from The Westin Hotel, the female driver of the getaway car stationed herself a block away from the mall. Three other men, armed for bloodshed, sat in a car on the rooftop parking lot directly above the bank and waited for their moment to pounce.

That was 22 years ago, but Robin Easey remembers the events of the day it as if it were yesterday.

At 9:20, the police got a tip about suspicious activity from an alert shopper who noticed the men idling in their parked car. The call came over the cruiser's radio at 9:22, and Easey, who was nearby, offered to check it out. Fellow constable Ralph Erfle agreed to provide backup.

As Easey pulled his cruiser up to the suspicious vehicle, the passenger door was suddenly flung open and a man leaped out. He bolted away down the concrete stairwell. Easey immediately radioed Erfle, who arrived on the scene seconds later and dashed down the stairs in pursuit. Easey, meanwhile, focused his attention on the second suspect—the driver.

"I took the driver to the front of the car, and I told him, 'Put your hands on the car. I'm going to search you.'" Easey found a gun.

"I was just about to say, 'You're under arrest,' when I heard a shot go off," he recalls. Neither officer had realized until then that there was a third man who had left the car before the police arrived and hidden out of sight. Now he had

Erfle was unharmed by those first shots, but knowing they had come from the second level, he feared that Easey might be in trouble. He turned and raced back up the stairs.

As Erfle reached the second level, he saw his colleague struggling with the man he had previously been trying to arrest. Aiming at the driver's shoulder, Erfle shot. The man fell, then immediately jumped up. The bullet had shattered the windows of a vehicle parked next to him. The driver turned and opened fire on Erfle. He missed, then moved quickly between the parked cars, spinning out of Erfle's range as he tried to take cover behind a car. But the constable had a steady shot.

"I took close aim, I hit him in the head, and I heard him hit the asphalt," Erfle remembers.

One threat was eliminated, but danger still lurked. Easey was down. In the brief seconds that marked the gunfight between Erfle and the driver, the third suspect had shot Easey in the back of the neck, and he now had Erfle in his sights. He opened fire with his semi-automatic pistol. Erfle was hit in the jaw and staggered back behind the door of the police cruiser, blood streaming down his face. He knelt behind the door of his partner's cruiser and took aim at his attacker but, to his horror, realized he had run out of bullets. With no time to reload, he threw himself across the seat of the cruiser and grabbed the radio to call for help. When he looked around, the gunman was standing over him and pointing his gun at Erfle's head.

"Don't shoot. Please don't shoot," he pleaded.

The gunman smirked, Erfle remembers, as he lifted his gun. In the split second before he fired the shots, Erfle kicked his legs up to protect his head. Two bullets tore through his thigh. Another shot passed through his hat and another lodged in the dashboard. The assailant attempted to shoot again, but when his gun jammed on the 10th, and last, shot in his clip, he fled.

But Robin Easey would never again be the man he once was. While Ralph Erfle, 27, recovered quickly from his wounds and went on to achieve new heights in his policing career, doctors predicted that Easey, 30, would spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair—parts of his body and brain damaged beyond repair by the bullet.

Today, the entrance to the Easey home is a cheery one. Shrubs and flowers line the pathway, its gentle incline disguising the fact that it's actually a wheelchair ramp. Robin Easey sits at the kitchen table in a red Ottawa Senators T-shirt, having just finished his lunch. Knowing his vision is badly damaged, I tell him I'm tall, blond, and drop-dead gorgeous.

He looks at me out of the corner of his right eye, where his only patch of vision is, and responds with a smile.

"You know, I'm not completely blind."

In fact, he can see only blurry and compressed images,

help to use the washroom and to bathe. If he concentrates hard, he can curl a 10-pound weight with either arm, but he doesn't have the strength or coordination to scoop his 18-month-old grandson onto his knee unaided.

By contrast, Ralph Erfle today has climbed high up the corporate ladder. His office on Greenbank Road is huge, even bigger than the police chief's downtown office. It has comfortable leather couches and an expansive bookcase. Altogether, he has spent 26 years on the force, constantly pushing himself to excel, and last summer he became the new superintendent of Ottawa's West Division, a region that stretches west from the Rideau River to Arnprior and south from the Ottawa River to Burritts Rapids—an area that encompasses the Bayshore shopping mall.

Back in 1984, though, Erfle had been a police officer for just four years. Until that fateful day in September, he had barely ever taken his gun out of its holster while on patrol,

TWENTY-ONE BULLETS HAD BEEN FIRED IN A SPAN OF 29 SECONDS. ONE SUSPECT LAY DEAD, AND TWO OFFICERS HAD BEEN GUNNED DOWN

robbed of most of his sight by the bullet that shattered a vertebra and severed an artery. The latter injury led to his brain being starved for oxygen. But although the brain injury limited his abilities, it didn't change his core personality: in many respects, he's still the same laid-back and upbeat man he used to be. His life is a full one, he'll tell you. He has seen his children grow up, is enthralled with his grandson, and suffers for the Sens. He has aged well—he's stockier but has a full head of hair—and his eyes still glint with mischief.

And 22 years after the shooting, his primary goal remains the same. "I'm going to walk. I'm going to get out of this damn thing," he says, slamming his arm against the wheelchair.

The odds seem slim, but Easey has already exceeded many expectations and confounded most predictions. "The doctors said he wouldn't survive more than 24 hours," recalls his wife, Glennis Easey. "Well, he lived. They told us there was a less than one per cent chance that he would be aware of his surroundings, but he came out of his coma too."

The couple celebrate each small achievement but always with an underlying sadness; Glennis admits she has long since given up hoping for a "Reader's Digest kind of miracle" for her husband. In order to cope psychologically, both Easeys have had to readjust their goals. Her benchmark, Glennis says, is no longer a pre-shooting Robin. It's just a Robin who's better today than he was yesterday.

True, after years of therapy, Easey has regained some mobility and has partially recovered his ability to speak. But though his progress is amazing, given the extent of his injury, he's still severely limited in what he can do. He has the mental capacity of an adult, but his physical ability to speak is compromised. So while his vocabulary and syntax are excellent, his words come out garbled and slurred.

The right half of his body is partially paralyzed. That means he can't cut his own food, though he can direct a fork to his mouth. He has to drink through a straw. He needs

let alone aimed it at anyone. But in less than three minutes, he killed an assailant, faced death at the end of a crook's gun, and learned a lifetime of lessons.

"A police officer's greatest enemy is complacency," Erfle says now. "Despite the routine nature of our job, we have to be prepared for surprises."

After the shooting, he spent five weeks in hospital, in traction. His broken jaw was wired shut, and he was fed liquids through a feeding tube. A fellow officer stood at the door to his room in case any of the other members of the gang came back to "finish the job." But despite that brush with death, Erfle never doubted he'd go straight back to policing, "get right back on the horse," as he puts it. For one thing, there was his sheer love of the job. For another, the outpouring of support from his fellow officers and from the public made it impossible for him to walk away.

"There was so much peer and community recognition," he recalls. "I was overwhelmed by the number of visitors and cards." (He still has those boxes of notes and letters stored away in his basement.)

Erfle's first challenge while still confined to his hospital bed was to get back into shape physically. He began working out with dumbbells. "The nurses thought I was crazy, but I wanted to prove I was able to do it."

His combination of aggressive weight training and physiotherapy paid off: within a few months, Erfle was back on patrol again. Three years later he even won the title "Toughest Cop Alive," beating dozens of other North American officers in a gruelling day-long athletics competition in Albany, New York. He is evidently a man who has always viewed adversity as a challenge and relishes rising to the occasion.

And there are plenty of challenges before him in his new role, now that he has exchanged patrolling the streets for guarding his department's bottom line. Erfle now worries



01 Nepean Constable Ralph Erfle lies wounded in a shocking photograph taken by a bystander at Bayshore just moments after the shooting. He spent weeks in hospital being treated for bullet wounds to the jaw and left leg. 02 The puddle of blood in this crime-scene photograph marks the spot where one suspect was shot and killed by Constable Erfle. The baseball cap had been part of his disguise. 03 Nine months after the shooting, in June 1985, Constable Easey arrived at the Nepean Sportsplex, where 200 friends and supporters waited to see him in his first public outing since the shooting. Easey wept as the crowd gave him a standing ovation. The Optimist Club of Carleton, which hosted the event, selected Easey and Erfle (in pale blue suit) as police officers of the year at their annual Respect for the Law dinner. Easey's wife, Glennis, and son, Mathew, are also shown. 04 In December 1985, Lieutenant-Governor Lincoln Alexander (shown back right) hosted an event to present the Ontario Medal for Bravery to Constables Easey (centre) and Erfle (left) at Queen's Park. After pinning the medal on Easey's chest, Alexander reportedly told the officer: "May God continue to watch over you, bless you and your family, and may you once again be able to stand tall." Nepean Police Chief Gus Wersch (back, centre) travelled with his officers.

entered the stairwell and was firing on Erfle as he ran down the stairs after the fleeing man.

Easey heard Erfle returning fire and remembers leaning over the railing, trying to see if his colleague was all right. The driver took advantage of Easey's momentary distraction and grabbed for the confiscated gun. A frenzied struggle for the weapon ensued.

Erfle, his jawbone shattered in 25 places, continued to call for help. He feared that Easey was dying.

The facts were these, it was established later: Twenty-one bullets had been fired in a span of 29 seconds. One suspect, the driver, lay dead, and two officers had been gunned down. The remaining four criminals were all eventually caught and convicted.

about overtime costs, which last year in West Division skyrocketed to more than double what the city had anticipated. In response, he got more officers assigned to his region, both to rein in those overtime costs and to avoid burnout on his front lines.

He also has to contend with growing community discontent over break-and-entry levels, speeding, and youth crime. "We do more than the community is aware of," he insists. To get the message across, he has begun working on a plan to send out weekly crime statistics to community newspapers, giving details of offences committed and what police did about them: arrests made, crimes solved, and names of those convicted.

He also wants to get tough on youth crime by holding parents more accountable. Existing laws allow parents to be charged and fined if a teenager under 16 is out after midnight in a public place without an adult.

He hopes his approach will enhance public confidence in their police. "If they know we're solving cases, hopefully the community will mobilize to assist us more," he says. Erfle speaks with confidence, clearly excited by his new role and the greater influence and resources he has at hand to effect change in his region. But there are still moments when a sense of powerlessness descends on him. He still finds it hard to accept the two very different hands that fate dealt—why he recovered fully and Easey did not.

"We were outnumbered and outgunned. I know this. But there's a part of me that wishes I could have made the outcome better for Robin." He often wonders if he had had the training and experience then that he has now—or a better gun or more ammunition—could he have stopped the suspect before he shot Easey? If.



more than 20 years, they have adapted to the new "normal." Despite the many physical and emotional strains she has had to cope with, Glennis says she has never considered placing her husband in a long-term care facility. To do so would finish what the gunman failed to do.

"HE WENT OUT TO WORK TO MAKE A LIVING TO SUPPORT HIS FAMILY, AND HE GOT SHOT. YET EVERY DAY HE TRIES SO HARD TO BE THE BEST HE CAN BE. HE WORKS TO KEEP HIS SENSE OF HUMOUR AND TO GET OUT OF THAT DAMN CHAIR" —GLENNIS EASEY

Both police officers were awarded medals for bravery in the line of duty. But you could argue that the third, if undecorated, hero of the tragedy is Glennis Easey. Her bravery has been demonstrated over 20 years as she has shouldered the dual responsibilities of caring for her husband and raising their two sons.

On the morning of the shooting, Glennis Easey was packing for a weekend getaway to the family cottage. Her sons, six-year-old Mathew and three-year-old Chris, were watching Saturday-morning cartoons. Then the phone rang. A friend called to say that there were radio news reports of two Nepean officers shot. At that moment, a wife lost the high school sweetheart who had swept her off her feet when she was just 15 and two young boys lost the father who tossed them in the air and wrestled them to the ground.

"When people look at us as a family, they must think it's odd to live like this." The "this" Glennis refers to is life with Robin's disability and all that it entails. Robin has 24-hour care, which means a caregiver is always at his side, physically closer than any member of the family. It's not the picture of marital bliss that the Easeys dreamed of, but after

"It would kill him and I love him." Her voice cracks, but it is steeled with conviction. "He went out to work to make a living to support his family, and he got shot. Yet every day he tries so hard to be the best he can be. He works to keep his sense of humour and to get out of that damn chair. At what point do you decide that's not enough?"

But there was a time when Glennis was close to breaking. Two years after the shooting, shortly after Robin returned home from the rehabilitation clinic in Cortland, New York, she was exhausted and overwhelmed. Although a health-care worker came in to help her during the day, she still felt as though the walls were caving in.

To escape, she decided to challenge herself even further: the former stay-at-home mom headed back to school and completed two degrees: a bachelor's in psychology and a master's in counselling. She focused on what was most important to her: learning about brain injuries. And she came to the conclusion that there was a dire lack of resources in Ottawa, both for victims of brain injuries and for their families.

It was a void she decided to fill. In 1993, Glennis started The Phoenix Network. Located on Lancaster Road, the

brain-injury rehabilitation clinic has helped hundreds of families cope with and make sense of brain injuries in all their forms. The network employs speech and occupational therapists as well as life-skills counsellors. These last coach patients through the often arduous process of relearning all the mental tools they lost: social skills such as listening, forming complete thoughts, and participating in conversations, for instance.

Also retaught are basic skills like getting dressed and more advanced ones such as cooking and managing finances. To help patients improve their hand-eye coordination, memory, and mental sequencing abilities, they are also taught basic woodworking skills.

Glennis is proudest of the fact that the clinic also offers counselling to the families of patients. She remembers vividly how alone she, herself, felt when Robin first came home. She couldn't understand his thinking, his sudden mood swings, his overpowering feelings of guilt. She understands them now, though, and tries to ensure that others in similar circumstances never have to feel that same isolation.

When tragedy strikes, she stresses, the whole family is injured, whether they realize it or not. "You've got to treat the family—the wives, the husbands, and the children—you don't want an injured family." For Glennis, it's vital that everyone who is affected is given as much information as possible about the implications and consequences of brain injuries. Information is empowering, and empowerment is a big part of the healing process.

These days Robin Easey concentrates on his healing at the Richmond Arena. He spends most afternoons in the large community room above the arena. It has a circumference of 61 metres. There, he slowly works at realizing his own personal dream—one step at a time.

His therapist helps him out of his wheelchair and straps him into a customized walker. It's designed specially, 1.5 metres high, made of pipe metal and with wheels. A hip cage wraps around his torso to balance him; his arms rest on a padded U-shaped support rail. He stands upright, takes a deep breath, and starts to walk.

His first steps are tentative, but after half a minute or so, he finds his pace and begins to move more briskly, round and round the circumference of the room. On a good day, he can do more than 20 laps. He has had this contraption for a decade, and in that time, he has walked roughly 900 kilometres.

"My goal is just to walk more than I did yesterday," he says. To motivate himself through the exercise, his mind conjures up a destination—it's always the same one. "I'm walking to Smooth Rock Falls." That northern Ontario town, located between Iroquois Falls and Kapuskasing, is where he used to stay with his dad when he went moose hunting. It's where he took his wife on their honeymoon. It's where he used to walk miles at a time.

END

Ottawa Magazine would like to thank Superintendent Erfle for granting access to photos and records relating to the shooting