

Luck was with him

Veteran cop was fired at with a shotgun on Saturday, and lived to tell the tale

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Last Updated: 28th January 2009, 4:38am

"I'm thankful I am alive"

-- Toronto Police Const. Rob North

Shot cop Rob North's daughter will receive a very special present this weekend for her seventh birthday.

Her dad -- breathing and in one piece.

It could have turned out far worse. The birthday celebration will go on -- as will the veteran police officer's valuable life.

"It takes an incident like this to appreciate how important life is and how lucky I am," North said yesterday, one day after making the sergeant's promotion list. "It really puts it into perspective,"

His daughter's birthday was actually Monday but her dad was kind of busy -- sorting out the fallout from being shot in the head by a sawed-off shotgun blast late Saturday.

The husband and father of four walked away from that with one pellet lodged in his head.

COUNTING BLESSINGS

It was pretty close to there being a funeral. But it did not happen like that and North is counting his blessings and looking forward.

"We will have the party this weekend," said North. "I am really looking forward to it."

You better believe he is.

Outside 11 Division yesterday, in his first interview since the incident at Bloor and Symington that resulted in Jeron Powell, 32, being charged with three counts of attempted murder, he said his family was first on his mind after he was struck.

"I actually do have a special gift I got for her but it is a surprise and if I tell you, she might end up knowing."

One thing she does not know are the facts surrounding the red mark on his forehead above his left eye.

"The older ones understand but with the smaller ones we have not told them and don't plan to right now," said North. "We just said daddy has a boo- boo on his forehead. We don't want them thinking every time daddy goes to work he could get shot."

But the reality is in 2009, that happening to any police officer is a hazard of the profession. And it did happen to this honoured, kind-but-tough 13-year veteran Saturday. That boo-boo he talks about looks like no big deal at first glance. It's tiny and precise and in time the skin

will heal and there should be no infection.

But you look at it for a second and you can't help but think about how if this pellet had even five miles more in speed or been just a little lower and who knows whether this officer gets to his daughter's birthday or anybody's birthday ever again.

Yet less than 72 hours after this occurred, and after two men were taken into custody with one being charged with three counts of attempted murder, North was back at 11 Division to do some "administrative" work and see "the people who have been so supportive." He said the "brotherhood and sisterhood" is real. "We really came together as a team."

And from now on, he said, every single day will be special. "I have a new appreciation for life after that," he said of going through something like that. "I realize how fortunate I am. I can't stand the thought of not seeing my family again or them not seeing me. I was thinking about how my family would be carrying on without me."

It came as close as one can come to that actually happening. When he flashes back to that night -- still just four days ago -- he can't believe all that transpired.

It all started with a beer store robbery and for North ended in a shootout -- which he called "unacceptable behaviour" that could have cost his life and that of others.

"I felt the pellet hit me and I wondered if I had been hit," he said. "I put my hand to my eye and saw that my fingers were covered in blood. I didn't know how bad it was. It is strange when you realize you have been hit."

The first thing he did was start to try to "secure the scene" since we had "suspects that were armed."

He then started to feel the pain. "I asked a colleague to look and see how bad it was."

Nobody knew for sure so they put him in an ambulance and sent him to hospital where doctors removed a pellet from his forehead. It was there, he phoned his wife to tell her. "I didn't want her to hear it on the TV," he said. "But she is a strong woman."

It is not lost on him just how "lucky I am to be alive" and his colleagues who were shot at, too.

"You go through the what-ifs," he said. "They tell me I could have lost my eye if the pellet had have been a couple of inches lower. He shot over my head."

'RELIEVE THE STRESS'

Who knows where that pellet would have ended up without the bone from his skull stopping it in its tracks. It will heal and he has been getting some serious teasing from his brothers and sisters at 11 who tease that if not for his hard head, the pellet would have ended up in his brain.

"It's good that we can laugh about it," said North. "It helps relieve the stress."

The truth is every police officer knows that this could very well have been them and that there is nothing funny about being shot at or dealing with the psychological and post-traumatic stress that could come with it. "This could have been any one of us," said North. "There were others shot at and the gunman was within 20 feet of them and missed."

North will take a few days leave but said he plans to get back to work soon. "I want to get back on the horse," he said.

He wanted me to "thank everybody so much" for all of their support.

"I really appreciated Mayor Miller calling me and Chief Blair. It was great, too, that Supt. Glenn Decaire and Staff Insp. Tom Russell came to see me in the hospital -- as did Mike Abbott and Dave Wilson from the police association."

He said he's looking forward to getting back to work since the community's safety is the most important aspect to this story. "At the end of the day there are two guys who are in custody who hopefully won't be around for a long time," he said.

And there is that one detail of a seven-year-old girl's upcoming birthday party.