Vancouver Police Pipe Band celebrates 100 years by playing the palace

Left to right: Drum Major - Retired VPD Sergeant Bruce Kehoe, Drummer - Constable Dave Farrow, Pipers - Carter Smith and Constable Cal Davis.
Detectives Follow a Lead that Solves Double Murder After Ten Years

NO ONE HEARD HIM. No one saw him.

In the early hours of April 12, 1999, a shadowy figure crept to the back door of a house on St. George Street in Vancouver and quietly began to barricade the exit. Then he slipped around to the front porch and poured gasoline in four different spots, including the front door, which he then set on fire.

Inside the house, Nicholas Cortner would be awakened by the smoke and the flames. Terrified, he ran for the back door. In his panic, pushing against the blocked exit he would soak in the fumes that would kill him. His roommate, Alexander Conto, suffered the same fate, but died in bed.

For ten years the murderer was able to stay in the shadows. The house fire was initially deemed to be accidental and the file was closed. But then one day in 2007, someone came forward who claimed the fire had been set and he knew who did it. But finding the proof that could eventually convict the killer in court would still be a massive task. It fell to a group of VPD Major Crime investigators. The two leaders were Detective Constables Ryan Smith and Paul Woodcock.

“The first problem we had was proving that it was a murder,” said Detective Constable Woodcock. “All the evidence was gone, there were no witnesses willing to talk and the fire had never been declared arson.”

“We found a leading arson expert in the U.S. who said fires can burn so hot that they can burn away all traces of accelerant,” said Detective Constable Smith. “Once we could prove it was arson then we could prove it was murder.”

For three years, the investigators of Project Resurrect used a number of techniques, including an undercover operation and wiretaps to expose the killer.

“But the key was finding the witnesses and convincing them to give testimony,” said Detective Constable Woodcock. “At one time we spoke to 70 different people, but most of them were too afraid to testify.”

“We had to convince the witnesses to trust us to do the right thing,” said Detective Constable Smith who took over as lead investigator in 2009.

All their efforts paid off, leading to an arrest of the killer, and in June 2012, he was convicted of manslaughter and arson.

Detective Constables Ryan Smith and Paul Woodcock.

“The best part for us was going to tell the family that we finally knew what happened to their loved ones, and that the man responsible would be held accountable,” said Detective Constable Woodcock.

“We still get Christmas cards from the family,” said Detective Constable Smith.

For their persistence and tenacity in their unrelenting efforts to bring some measure of closure and justice for the families of Nicholas Cortner and Alexander Conto, Detective Constables Ryan Smith and Paul Woodcock were awarded the Chief Constable’s Commendation.

Domestic Incident Flames into Full Scale Rescue Operation

IN THE EARLY MORNING HOURS of August 2013, police were called to a single room occupancy hotel to respond to a domestic dispute. What they found was far worse.

Even though the dispute was over by the time they arrived, Constables Jeff Fletcher and Andre Haaksma decided to investigate further when they heard that bear spray had been used. Concerned for the other residents, they climbed to the second floor, where the air was still heavy with toxic fumes.

“You could feel it burning in your mouth and in your eyes,” said Constable Haaksma.

Their first instincts may well have been to retreat immediately from the stinging residue of bear spray, but Constable Fletcher. “Then I focused on the propane bottle in the flames and the first thing I thought was that this is really going to hurt.”

Constable Fletcher jumped around the fire and began to bang on residents’ doors, getting at least six of them to leave.

“It wasn’t easy to wake everyone up and get them moving. One woman kept screaming, ‘My cat, my cat!’”

Constable Haaksma found a water hose in the stairwell, but it would not reach, so he smashed out a panel to get to an extinguisher. The fire was now at head-height.

Keeping low, he shot the extinguisher successfully at the base of the fire, but now it was a relief to finally get everyone out and breathe in the fresh air. I coughed for hours afterwards,” said Constable Haaksma.

For their quick and courageous actions that put the safety of the building’s residents above their own, Constables Jeff Fletcher and Andre Haaksma were awarded the Chief Constable’s Commendation.

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Project Rescue Stops Reign of Terror in Downtown Eastside

WHEN WE THINK OF TYRANTS, it is the thought of third world countries, banana republics and war-torn backwaters that first come to mind. We don’t think it could ever happen here.

But in 2011, many residents of the Downtown Eastside knew better. They were being terrorized by a ruthless tyrant who ran an organization that supplied drugs and ensured payment with violence, head-shavings, fear and intimidation.

“These guys were more than street thugs. They were serious criminals who didn’t even live in the area, but they were determined to take over all the drug operations and then expand,” said Sergeant Rob Faoro.

“They were forcing people at gunpoint and with beatings to sell drugs for them, and if they were successful in taking over from other dealers, we could have had a full-scale gang war.”

With violence at this level, it called for a special response. A team of investigators, patrol officers and civilian members of the Vancouver Police came together, and Project Rescue was born.

“We put together a plan and brought 15 to 20 people together from different areas of the Department, and then we began to target the street-level dealers and work our way up from there.”

In a complex six-month operation involving a variety of police tactics, officers infiltrated the gang at the highest level and were able to link the street-level drug dealers and enforcers to the group’s leaders. Project Rescue would culminate in a series of simultaneous search warrants, vehicle stops and arrests, including those of the leaders and underbosses.

The leader was convicted and received a ten-year sentence, along with another sentence of seven years for a manslaughter conviction. Four of his underbosses received a total of 20 years.

“I was so proud of all the members of the team,” said Sergeant Faoro. “Everyone came together and we succeeded. In my 20 years in Major Crime, this investigation stands out as my favourite operation.”

For their dedication and commitment that removed a deadly scourge from our city, the following members of the Project Rescue team were awarded the Chief Constable’s Unit Citation:

Superintendent Mike Porteous, Inspector Brad Desmarais, Sergeants Rob Faoro, Michael Kim and Besnik Dobreci, Detective Constables Byron Taguiam, Mike Wheeler, Lisa Wu, Brodie Haupt, Sharon Hunter, Kyle Davies and Steve Powell, Crime Analyst Peggy Irwin and Project Assistant Catherine Driver.

Mad Woman with a Knife Chasing Postman Brought Down by Gunfire

IT WAS NEITHER RAIN, nor sleet, nor gloom of night that kept this courier from his appointed rounds – it was a crazed woman with a large knife.

On the morning of April 25, 2013, 9-1-1 received multiple calls about a woman who was attacking her roommates with a knife. The operator told the caller to get out of the house. She left the house and stood on the lawn while another roommate locked herself safely in her room.

Meanwhile, unaware of the deadly drama inside, a postman was walking up to the house to deliver the mail. The roommate tried to warn him off, but it was too late. The screaming woman opened the door and lunged at him with the knife.

He turned and ran with the woman at his heels. The roommate who witnessed this later told police, “I didn’t know she could run that fast. I couldn’t have believed the mailman could run that fast.”

As he ran, the courier spotted another man in the street and tried to warn him away, but that man was Constable Craig Look, who was the first to respond to the 9-1-1 call.

“I saw the mailman come off the lawn and he was running at a full sprint,” said Constable Look. “I also saw the woman running after him with the knife with her arms windmilling.”

He told the mailman to get behind him, shielding him with his body from the attacker. The woman was still closing in, but Constable Look had his firearm pointed at her, yelling at her repeatedly to stop and drop the knife. She did neither. He fired twice.

“I gave her the first warning to drop the knife when she was about 30 feet away, and then fired when she kept coming and was ten feet away. She fell at my feet.”

The woman survived her injuries and was taken to hospital for treatment.

“I’m glad she survived,” said Constable Look. “She is very lucky to be alive.”

For his quick actions that saved a man from certain injury or worse, Constable Craig Look was awarded the Chief Constable’s Commendation.
FOR MORE THAN 100 YEARS, the Vancouver Police Pipe Band has brought honour and recognition to the Vancouver Police Department. In 2014, to celebrate that achievement, the Band set its sights on something that many considered to be an unattainable goal: to play at the Changing of the Guard at Buckingham Palace. No non-military band had ever been permitted to take part in that historic and traditional ceremony.

"The Band has done amazing things since its inception, like playing for the opening of the Golden Gate Bridge, but this would be like an astronaut going to the moon or a quarterback playing in the Super Bowl," said band member and former VPD spokesperson Tim Fanning, a 20-year veteran of the band.

So the Band was determined. Beginning in 2012, they launched a massive effort to obtain permission, endorsements and support from various levels of government in Canada and the United Kingdom. The bureaucracy involved and the hurdles that needed to be jumped were tremendous. The Band persevered.

Finally, in February 2014, the Band received permission to be the first non-military police pipe band to play at this royal ceremony in its 350-year history. They would appear not just once, but four times.

A CRY FOR HELP in the middle of the night and an icy, heart-stopping plunge into dark waters turned into a rescue for both the woman in distress and the police officers who came to save her.

About 3:00 a.m. on March 5, 2013, a distressed young woman made a phone call saying she was in Stanley Park and was going to hang herself. When Constables Brian Chernoff and Graeme Wells arrived, they found the woman hanging from the seawall railing just below the Brockton Point Lighthouse.

"At first we couldn’t see anything. It was so dark and we didn’t know where she was," said Constable Wells. "But then I saw a bright rope, white nylon that sort of glowed, and then there was a dark shadow falling. I thought if we moved fast we could save her.

They immediately jumped over the fence and cut the rope. Bringing the unconscious woman back to safety wasn’t going to be easy. Struggling up the steeply sloped and slippery sea wall, the two constables lost their footing trying to get the struggling woman over the railing. The trio then tumbled 20 feet, plunging into the ocean below. They were immediately submerged in ten feet of frigid water.

"I had this instinct to get back up to the surface as quickly as possible," said Constable Wells. Once the constables regained their footing on underwater rocks, their ordeal was far from over. The officers had to use force to restrain the woman from swimming out into deeper water. An attempt to climb the steep seawall was impossible, so now all three had to wait for rescue while standing in thigh-deep freezing water.

For more than 20 minutes they stood, shivering in the cold. Police threw blankets down. The constables gave theirs to the woman. When rescue came in the form of a fire ladder, the constables insisted that the woman receive medical attention first.

"It was a little surreal. When we went back in daylight the next day, it was higher than I thought," said Constable Wells. "The woman had been through some rough patches in her life and it was nice to know that her family was not going to have to deal with another loss.

For their selfless efforts and heroic actions, Constables Brian Chernoff and Graeme Wells were awarded the Chief Constable’s Commendation.

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