

## *RANGER BOB*

It was first light, on a frosty October morning in the early 80s, in Jasper National Park. Though roadside poaching was in its hey-day back then, the night shift had been long and largely uneventful; we were yielding the park to the day-shift and heading home to Decoigne Warden Station. Friends from out-of-town were visiting and the husband, long interested in the warden profession, had been my official ride-along companion for the shift.

He looked the part (his name was 'Ranger', in fact!) and I don't think he was bored ... but he was sleepy. That was about to change.

Just west of Jasper, along Highway #16, a dark, male figure with a pack was noted exiting the bush. It's always an option to drive past anything so open to innocent interpretation, though they were paying me to be an antidote to evil-doers – “Warden Presence”, it's called – and it had been a quiet night, so we opted to vote 'present', one more time, and check the guy out.

As I was calling in my location and intentions, having pulled to the side of the road but not yet exiting, the fellow arrived at the road and rushed immediately to my door, effectively blocking my exit and obviously upset about something. I rolled down the window to say hello and hear his complaint and he ignored my greeting, escalating his rhetoric to hostile and unpredictable levels. Textbook, training-level behaviour, actually: 'Scenarios-101' material.

There was no, or very little traffic, but I used his unsafe location as my pretext to ask him to move to the front of my vehicle to continue our discussion, thereby engaging in the only rational exchange of the whole encounter – and he complied.

Despite the chill of the morning, I unzipped the front of my patrol jacket as I exited the vehicle and moved to the front. It was a dual-purpose garment, concealing (by policy) the 9mm Smith & Wesson I carried in a shoulder holster, on night shifts. The conversation continued, mostly in my 'personal space', because he intentionally kept closing the distance between us. My attempts to lessen any pressure with neutral, even reassuring comments concerning my purposes, were cut off and out-volumed, repeatedly. I could largely but listen and nod, while keeping between him and my truck, as he vented his frustration with Canada, Canadians, the rides, the cops, being checked every day, sometimes multiple times a day ...

... and then, with his finger in my face, his piece de resistance (as we say in the west): he said he was going to cut my nuts out.

A sudden and not totally welcome silence surrounded us on that cold highway, as we stared at each other, motionless, only the unmeasured moments of time between us. His free hand, still positioned toward me, his other hand, still gripping his pack, he was seemingly suspended in his moment, somehow satisfied, perhaps surprised, to have voiced his decision to act - but indecisive enough not to.

My stance remained unaltered; the next move had to be his. We were beyond words. His vision shifted briefly to 'Ranger Bob', still in my truck, as instructed, definitely awake now, and watching this play out over his dark moustache. We hadn't discussed the 'what-ifs' of a serious threat situation but I was confident of his ability to act, if needed; he was a little younger than I and worked in construction.

I was also confident that I was still in control.

There would be no need. My antagonist suddenly wheeled around, ran through the shallow ditch and across the grassy road allowance, disappearing into the bush from which he had emerged – a welcome turn of events, to be sure, but he couldn't be allowed to continue his career without some further assessment. The new 'what-ifs' were concerned with this unknown quantity wandering into town, or worse, being picked up by some sympathetic motorist. He was clearly MHA material.

I quickly radio'd Jasper Dispatch, explaining the encounter and asking for our 'Dog Man' to be called out ... also requesting RCMP presence, ASAP. Their shift wouldn't start for another couple of hours but there was always a designated officer on call. We took a position near the Jasper/Highway #16 Junction, where we could watch the highway, to the west, and the road into town – and waited.

There was no reason to give chase and several very good ones, not to.

Alfie Burstrom and 'Ginger' arrived first (Parks Canada's first canine team). Introductions were made and Alfie was given the details, as we knew them. No weapon had been seen but the threat of one had to be made clear. The RCMP constable arrived shortly after Alfie and he, too, was briefed. He decided to call out another officer to accompany Alfie on the track (the usual practice) so our wait was extended by another fifteen or twenty minutes.

The plan was for us to remain on station, two pair of eyes for the two roadways; the first constable would patrol back and forth on the highway, well past the curve in the distance that limited our view to the west, and the dog team would pursue through the bush.

It was to be three more hours before it was all sorted out and we could go home for breakfast.

Ginger loved to track and Alfie loved the chase, so the team was off and running, literally, from the start. Many a constable came to realize that keeping up with Alfie was more like a marathon through an obstacle course, than the investigation they thought they were involved in. Having the well-defined starting point, made the pick-up easy and confidence in the pursuit sure, so their progress was rapid ... until they hit the Miette River, which meanders through the area.

The suspect crossed it at least four times, coming back to the road (in our view) at least once, before quickly realizing we weren't going away and ducking out of sight, again. He eventually gave it up, exhausted and wet, and surrendered to the officer on the highway. Ginger didn't get the coveted 'bite' reward, much to Alfie's disappointment, I'm sure.

The fellow was arrested and held under the Mental Health Act of Alberta, for assessment by a professional, later that day – then let go. In explaining it to us later, the officer who sat in the room during his interview said he presented normally with the psychiatrist, who found no justification in law to keep him locked up as a danger to himself or others. Our testimony was neither solicited nor required for this process, apparently.

For us, it became just another diary entry, in a lifetime of such entries, some more interesting than others. For another officer, about a week later, in a neighbouring town, it became an assault, under almost identical circumstances.

This same fellow, a prior resident of mental health facilities in the U. S., it turned out, had been checked at roadside by a female RCMP officer. He attacked her almost instantly, pulling her through the window of her cruiser by the hair, but not before she was able to grab her radio mike and put out the 10-33 call for assistance. At that time, his pack was found to contain soiled, ladies undergarments, of unknown provenance, leading to a lengthier hold for that investigation and the eventual involvement of immigration authorities.

I believe, but do not recall, for sure, that he was returned to his country of origin.

I do recall that 'Ranger Bob' was surely pleased with the ride-along experience, that night.

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