

Follow the career of a police officer from his early days in the police academy through his time as a seasoned detective. He shares true stories about events that take the reader through a wide range of emotions. You will experience anger, sadness, shock and laughter, often times asking yourself, "could this really have happened?"

WE TOOK AN OATH

A personal account of what it was like to protect and to serve

by Fredrick Wayne Klobe

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A woman dressed as Lady Justice, blindfolded, holding a sword and scales of justice. She is wearing a white, flowing robe and a white blindfold. The background is a cloudy, blue-grey sky.

FREDRICK WAYNE KLOBE

A Personal Account of What it Was Like
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Chapter 9: Detective Greg Erson, E.O.W. June 19, 1980

Early in my career, I despised some detail assignments, mainly because they took me off the street and kept me out of the action. One such detail required providing guard duty for a prisoner confined at City Hospital #1. It was June 19, 1980, and we were working the overnight shift, 11:00 PM to 7:00 AM. A prisoner in police custody who is sick or injured and requires hospital care, and until he is formally charged, becomes the responsibility of the police department to place a guard on him until he is deemed fit for confinement in a jail cell.

That night, it was my turn for that mundane chore. For the first half of the shift, from 11:00 PM to 3:00 AM, I had to sit with the prisoner at the hospital and make sure he didn't go anywhere. It was very boring duty, plus it was a Friday night and I was missing the busiest part of the shift. I sat in my chair, monitoring the 3rd district channel on my miniature radio, listening to what was happening. Suddenly, an all points transmission, which overrides all the other radio transmission and is broadcast on every channel, came across the radio with urgent chatter about an officer being shot in the 9th district. I switched over to "Channel 9" to listen to what was going on. As it turned out, 3rd District Detective Greg Erson was working as a decoy on the "Stroll" in the 9th district at Whittier and Westminster Place. That area of the city was called the Stroll because it was notorious for prostitution in that area, with activity peaking on

weekends. The Stroll was a regular weekend duty rotated among the other districts to provide support to the Vice Unit and the 9th District. That night, Detective Erson was part of that rotation.

He was sitting in an unmarked car waiting for prostitutes to approach him for a “date.” Detective Erson wore a wireless monitor and the surveillance car was further down the street out of sight, listening to the interaction between Detective Erson and the hooker. When the price for sex was agreed to, the arresting officers would quickly arrive, arrest the prostitute, then put her in the back of the Police Prisoner van and get back out of sight waiting for the next prostitute to approach. Up to now, Erson and his crew had made six arrests. As the operation continued, somehow, communication broke down between Erson and his backup units. About that same time, a call came out for a shooting at the intersection where Detective Erson had parked. Responding officers arrived and found Detective Erson slumped over the wheel of his car, his gun missing from its ankle holster, and his badge and wallet missing. He had been shot in the back.

Information came in faster than it could be disseminated with a description of three black male suspects and one white male. Their vehicle was described as a red pickup truck. Police officers throughout the region stopped every red pickup they saw. Off-duty officers came in to help with the search. Detective Erson was taken to City #1, the very hospital I was in. I thought this was a good thing because other officers had told me if you were ever seriously hurt, this was the best place to go to because the emergency room doctors had seen everything and were some of the best at saving lives. Many of them were trained at St. Louis University or Washington University.

The Police Chief, Eugene Camp, got on the radio. Rarely did you hear him on just the regular district channels. I will never forget the sound of the chief’s voice, and the words he spoke. He sounded angry and determined to be understood when he said, “Dispatcher, under no circumstances will any officer mention the condition of that wounded officer on the air. Am I clear?” Totally. And at that

moment, I knew Detective Greg Erson, a 29-year-old, eight-year veteran of the department, was dead.

I was devastated. This was not supposed to happen. I thought we were supermen. We always won over the bad guys. But sometimes even superman could not win when it was four to one against him. It turned out these four assholes had seen Greg in his car and decided to rob him. During the robbery they must have discovered he was a police officer. Ironically, it was two area prostitutes who provided information that broke the case. Even the working girls understood the game played between themselves and the police department. When people got robbed on the Stroll, it was bad for business. Getting locked up for the night was just part of their occupational hazard. But someone getting killed, especially a police officer, took it to a whole different level, too much even for them. Their lives would change forever. The police would be relentless on these girls, locking them up every chance they got, affecting their ability to support themselves and their drug habits.

The two prostitute witnesses that came forward identified all four suspects in Detective Erson's murder: Robert L. "Bobby" Baker, Leslie Lomax, and two others who were never charged. Baker admitted to shooting Detective Erson. He took his chances in court and went to trial. A jury convicted him of First Degree Murder and gave him the death penalty, the first death sentence in Missouri since the penalty was re-instituted in 1977. Lomax also went to trial, was found guilty, and received a life sentence without parole for his part in the murder.¹

That was my first experience with an officer being killed in the line of duty. Unfortunately, it would not be my last.

¹ As a side note, several years after the murder, while in prison on death row awaiting his death sentence, Bobby Baker got into a fight with other inmates and was killed during that fight. In a way, his death sentence was carried out right then, instead of after years of appeals and incarceration, saving taxpayers tremendous amounts of money. The whole department was satisfied that Baker got the justice he deserved.

Chapter 31: Perception is Everything

Everything we do has the potential to be misconstrued, misread, misunderstood, or seen only as a part of the total picture. As police officers, that happens routinely. People watch what police officers do. What someone sees or thinks they see might be the farthest thing from actual reality. It happens all the time, and in today's current environment, where everybody has a cell phone and a camera, the problem with perception versus reality is exasperated because only part of what is caught on camera may actually be seen by others. The same is true for what someone witnesses. They may only see part of something, which, in many cases, isn't enough to capture the entire event. Almost anyone can be convinced something is factual if we only tell part of it, especially just the part we want them to hear.

The same is true for the person receiving the information. They can choose to give value to as much or as little of what they are presented with, then formulate their own opinion, which most likely won't be accurate if they don't have the whole picture.

There were no smart phones during my career, nor did we have body cameras. I don't think I would have been a fan of either. But if they were in use, I would have hoped they would be utilized as much to exonerate officers as they would be to second guess an officer's actions. But then again, people see what they want to see.

In the spring of 1987, I received a call for a "cutting" at a residence in the 2800 block of Nebraska. The dispatcher advised me an ambulance had been dispatched running "urgent." My assist car

was much further away than me, but due to the possibility of serious injuries, I expedited to the call. The house sat back off the street, up a slight hill. As I approached the steps, a black female came out of the front door holding a large bloody kitchen knife. I asked her if she or anyone inside was hurt, and she told me she had stabbed her boyfriend. She told me he was inside, but I could not go in.

She stood there holding the knife and blocking my path to the victim. As I always did, I started negotiating with her to gain her trust and access to the residence. I also knew the circumstances did not allow me to be as patient with the woman as usual because I had no idea about the condition of the victim inside. I started asking her how badly he was hurt, but she either did not hear my questions or simply ignored me. She was becoming very agitated, screaming and cursing at me while I kept talking in a very slow, low voice, hoping it would bring down her level of agitation. As I questioned her I tried to get a little closer so I could maybe find a way around her in order to get up the stairs and tend to her boyfriend. She was wise to that, though. The closer I got, the louder and meaner she became in her tirade. She cursed and called me everything you can imagine, including a racist. She continuously threatened me with the knife if I did not get off her property. I really wasn't angry with her, I just figured something had pushed her over the edge. She was not rational and there was probably nothing I could say or do that would change that.

I started to feel like time was becoming critical, and I wasn't gaining any advantage with my current approach towards this woman. I was still on my own, as my assist car had not yet arrived. Finally, I changed strategy and gave her some of what I felt was the only thing that might get through to her. I shouted, "Lady, shut the fuck up and put the knife down before I knock the shit out of you!"

Well, that must have got her attention. It also must have gotten the attention of Sergeant Joseph Robinson, who had just pulled up to the front of the residence as the scene supervisor. Apparently, that was the only part of my encounter with the woman he observed. He had no idea I had been trying to negotiate since I arrived on the scene more than five minutes earlier. He did not know she had stabbed her

boyfriend, who might be up in the residence critically injured, bleeding to death, or even dead. He did not see or hear the threats, the name calling, or cursing she directed towards me. All he saw and heard was me scream at a woman. He ran up the front steps towards me and the female suspect, almost like he was going to get between two kids arguing on the school playground. He scolded me right in front of this suspect. He told me to calm down and go wait by my car. I was absolutely flabbergasted. I walked off the porch towards the street and my patrol car, while keeping an eye on Sergeant Robinson in case the crazy and irrational woman went after him.

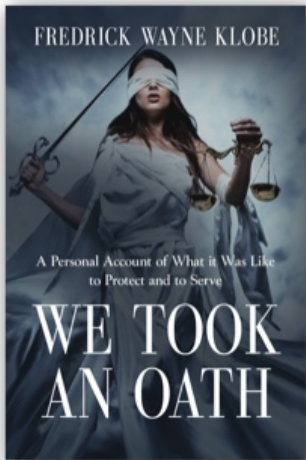
When the sergeant turned on me and banished me to my car, the female suspect immediately changed her tune, and quieted down. I don't know the reason for her behavior change. Perhaps it was because both she and Sergeant Robinson were black, and she felt by the Sergeant sending me away he had somehow validated her behavior and supported her. I know that's how I felt.

Sergeant Robinson was a very good, decent man. He was one of the fairest people I have ever worked for. But he was wrong about the way he handled this. He had known me long enough to know this was not my normal response in these types of circumstances. I was usually the calm voice that could de-escalate most situations. All of a sudden he'd seen me as some badass cop that had tried to use intimidation tactics to control an individual. He should have given me the benefit of the doubt and supported me over a criminal suspect. I had no history of being a racist, or of mistreating suspects.

When the situation had calmed down, and the boyfriend went to the hospital, and the girlfriend went to the holdover, I told Sergeant Robinson that I refused to write the report, because I did not know how to explain his actions in writing. I was still fuming and thought he might write down some bullshit to justify his actions towards me.

But a funny thing happened. Instead of ordering me to handle the assignment, Sergeant Robinson apologized to me. He said all the things I just did. He said he knew I wasn't a racist and did not have the reputation of getting physical or out of line with people I encountered. He said when he got there he saw me being loud and aggressive towards the woman on the porch, and that he should have

taken into account that other things might have taken place before he arrived. Like I said, Sergeant Robinson was a fair and good man. I did not like the way he reacted towards me that night in a public setting but I appreciated his apology, and told myself to remember perception is not always the reality.



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