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A WOMAN'S TOUCH

In my time in Thompson, I arrested or witnessed numerous arrests of intoxicated people. Many of the physical confrontations I was involved in were indeed with drunks. Thompson was a very transient community, and as the hub of the north it attracted people from all of northern Manitoba. Northern residents would come to Thompson for various services, shopping, or just for a get away.

One notable visitor literally raised hell whenever he came to town. He was a trapper and lived off the land. A mountain of a man, his name was Charlie Bland. I knew him only by his reputation for creating havoc. It always took a number of police to arrest a drunk Charlie, with chairs and tables broken, members' ties and shirts ripped off, and the use of defensive force. Charlie never came without a ruckus.

On shift, I received a complaint about a drunk causing a disturbance at the liquor store. Responding to the call, I observed a male, probably in his late 40's, early 50's, approximately 6'3"-6'4" and 280-300 lbs., and roaring drunk. I approached him and, speaking in a quiet but firm voice, asked him to step outside with me. At first, he just stared at me and didn't respond.

As a small woman, I knew I would be at a disadvantage in dealing with this behemoth of a man if I tried to use force, so I used the strongest muscle in my body, my tongue. I continued to make positive suggestions to him, smiling and batting my eyelashes, taking my time and maintaining control of the situation.

Finally, he cooperated and followed me outside, where I convinced him to sit in the back of my police car. I drove him to the detachment to lodge him in the drunk tank until he sobered up and could be released. Upon my requests, he removed his shoes, socks, belt, jacket, and so on. I had done this drill numerous times, and this situation didn't seem much different than most.

It was the policy of the RCMP that female members could not search males, and vice versa. The male officer called to the cell area to search the man said to me, "Karen do you know who this is?"

"No," I responded, apprehensively.

"This is Charlie Bland," he told me, the drunk who always battled with more two or more male Mounties when he was taken in. Charlie had complied with me without incident.

Alex Chadwick and Ira Flatow in their study the *Power of a Pretty Face*, write, "*If you have a pretty face, use it. It's pretty powerful, and unfortunately, it's a tool you'll never be accused of having.*" It was my smile, my softer voice, and my batting of eyelashes at Charlie that day that truly saved my bacon.

I did find out however, that not all male egos would bend so easily to being arrested by a woman. I actually had to chase down and arrest one young fellow. And after that his male peers laughed him out of town. I have to agree with the observation of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher that, "*men are not a reasoned or reasonable sex.*"

Being the only female RCMP member in Northern Manitoba, offered benefits. For a rape investigation in Churchill, Manitoba, investigators believed it would be in the best interests of the victim to be interviewed by a female officer. That would be me. So, I flew up to the Hudson Bay port in an RCMP aircraft and got to hone my investigative skills. My interview with the victim didn't lead to any charges being laid at that time, but it was an exceptional experience for me. After the interview, I

took in the sights. One of the best attractions of Churchill was the ¹Northern Museum. It housed one of the most impressive collections of stone and ivory carvings in the world. So many different carvers had their works on display in various themes, shapes and sizes. I'm not much of a museum person, but this one stands out in my memory.

If you're ever in Churchill, don't miss the opportunity to be captivated by the works of many local artists. You won't be disappointed.

the rest of Churchill was quite the place, almost barren of trees and other plant life. Everything was shades of grey, and not very welcoming. After spending a day there in the middle of winter, I couldn't wait to get back to Thompson. Who would have thought that?

As a junior Mountie, I was required to be in the office to answer incoming calls. The menu of things people in a northern community complain about is the law enforcement equivalent of everything from soup to nuts. I would, of course, answer the phone very professionally stating, "Good morning/Afternoon, Thompson City Detachment, Constable Somers."

Sometimes there would be a pause and the voice at the other end of the phone would say, "I want to speak to a real police officer."

At first, I put up with this attitude, because while a woman doing "a man's job" was becoming more common, it was still unsettling for some, especially men. After a few months, and my increased visibility, I negotiated this type of call by stating, "You are speaking to a real police officer, and it's me or nobody."

Because women were so new to the RCMP and to the communities, I had to educate the public that there was a new cop in town. I would be the first of many female police officers in the community and we were as capable of handling

complaints as our male counterparts. These days, a police officer's gender is rarely an issue.

When I completed my Recruit Field Training I was moved to another shift, with a new corporal and a new partner. Both were vastly different from those I became accustomed to in my first six months in Thompson. My new corporal was laid back, and the opposite of a micro-manager. My new partner was Dave Beazley, a big Newfoundlander, and we, the Mutt and Jeff of the detachment, got along just fine.

My partner Dave could be a bit antagonistic and was not known for exercising his verbal skills to get the job done. As a result, I found myself being more physical and confrontational—fighting on almost every shift. I started carrying my flashlight with me, day and night. These were pre-baton times, and a gal needed something to give herself an edge. As a result of this habit, I was nicknamed “Flashlight Somers,” which for me reflected trust in my capacity to take care of myself. The Flashlight Somers handle followed me around for many years and I was always proud of it.

In one situation, where I put my handy plastic yellow flashlight into action, Dave and I were called to a fight behind the Thompson Inn. For once the battle had started before we arrived. Two males were involved in a donnybrook, with a large crowd assembled, abetting the situation. Dave and I quickly separated the two combatants, placing one in the police car then turning our attention to apprehending male number two.

Although my focus was on the second man, with my peripheral vision, I saw a bystander open the back door of the police vehicle, allowing the occupant to escape. Losing a prisoner was never an option, so I moved quickly to ensure he remained in custody. As he started to emerge through the car door, I took my flashlight and hit him over the head as hard as I could, a total knee-jerk, and ground-fighting reaction.

the blow caused the young man to crumple back into the seat, and I was able once again to close the vehicle door. At the time, I thought I had killed him and I was so grateful he survived. He never even complained of having a headache. That was how drunk he was, I guess.

Another memorable confrontation with Dave as my partner could have ended horribly. We'd been investigating and doing surveillance on one of the biggest drug dealers at that time on Caribou Avenue, in Thompson. The police knew the subject of interest very well, and Dave had an informant who was his associate. Information was received that a large shipment of marijuana had just arrived in the community and was being trafficked from the residence.

Acting on this credible information, a search warrant was obtained. We were working the mid-night shift, alone with two other members. We watched the residence, planning to make our move without being detected. The house appeared quiet, with only enough vehicles for its occupants. It was time to strike, using our court authority to enter a private home to search for illegal narcotics. Three of us approached the house, knocked on the door and a man let us in.

Dave, with the search warrant in hand, advised that we had a legal right to search for illegal narcotics. No sooner had he said this than we were physically attacked. We were badly outnumbered and in a dangerous situation. I was struck and my glasses went flying. I fell to the ground, got back up and starting hitting back at whoever was hitting, pushing or shoving me. Dave and Jim Begley were holding their own.

During this skirmish, the toilet was being flushed non-stop. I wasn't an experienced drug investigator, but I sure knew the City of Thompson sewer system was being treated to an over abundance of marijuana. By the time we got to the bathroom, the stash of drugs had been flushed.

Recollection of Jim Begley (Superintendent, retired): “I just remember Dave either heard something or for whatever reason booted the door in and all hell broke loose. The place was thick with people shoulder to shoulder, and I remember a wall of beer cases that slowed us getting in. I think it was ‘the Beast’ (Dave’s nickname) who went straight for the bathroom and caught someone trying to flush grass, but that left us in the crowd thick with smoke and I just remember we got out of there pretty quick... but I think we all got a bit caught off guard going in there that night. No one got hurt though, so I guess that is good.”

Reinforcements were called out of their beds, but by the time they arrived the situation was under control and we were no worse for wear. The occupants of the house were arrested and charged with Assault of a Peace Officer, and Obstruction of a Peace Officer. The situation could have ended badly but I saw the events of the night in a positive light. I learned to never take anything for granted in an investigation and to never underestimate a criminal opponent. It also boosted my confidence and commitment to law enforcement.

John Maxwell, in his book *Failing Forward* writes there are lessons to be learned when things go wrong, and calls applying those lessons “*failing forward*,” using that knowledge not just to learn but to “*let your learning lead to action*.”

I soon realized that policing was not at all like *Ironside*, with never-ending excitement, car chases and arrests of the bad guys. As I would teach to hundreds of aspiring young law enforcement officers, policing was about dealing with “the mad, the sad, and the dead.”

there were many hours of boredom, driving around Thompson in the middle of the night on the graveyard shift. There were times, of adrenaline-pumping excitement, times of sadness and times of fear. But, there was never a time when I doubted my calling to be a member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. I forged ahead regardless of the personal costs. One of the saddest investigations I was assigned to in

Thompson was a complaint from a middle-class family whose daughter was pregnant. You're probably asking yourself, since when is that a police matter? the dilemma was, their daughter was only 13 years old. Yes, 13 years old. How does that happen? I was 23 years old and had just lost my virginity. Had she been raped, of course she must have been because 13-year-olds aren't voluntarily sexually active, are they? Oh, I had so much to learn about the real world.

She was a beautiful little girl, really a baby having a baby.

But who had impregnated her? She was very shy and reluctant to talk to me about the situation. I would have been too at her age, but I knew that she wasn't the Virgin Mary and a man had impregnated her. I spoke calmly and let her know that she wasn't in any type of trouble, but that I had to ascertain whether or not she had been the victim of a crime.

After my fairly one-sided conversation, she finally admitted to having a sexual relationship with her 13-year-old boyfriend. Really, are you kidding me? I was still playing with Barbie Dolls at 13, not having sexual intercourse. There was no criminal offence, just social and community unease, and a lack of sex education. Her parents made the decision to terminate the pregnancy, which in my mind was the best resolution to this sad situation.

As with many of the people I dealt with as a police officer, I often wondered what later became of the girl. Had I helped her make better choices down the line? I hope so, but will never know.