

FIVE OFFICER DEATHS IN FIVE WEEKS TAKES ITS TOLL ON MEMBERS

As members grieve the losses of Constables Hong, Gillespie, Northrup, Russell and Yang, the PAO is calling for change.

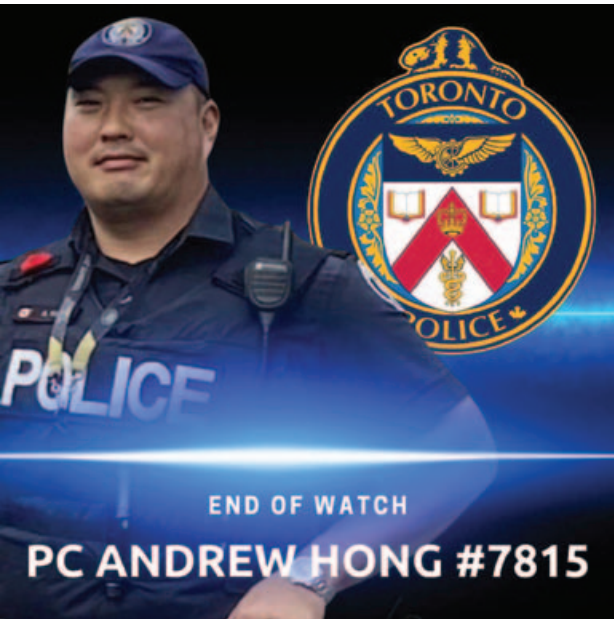
By Lauren Alpern

On September 25, 2022, police personnel gathered in Ottawa for the 45th annual Canadian Police and Peace Officers’ Memorial Service for the first time since 2019 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The beautiful ceremony honoured six police officers who were killed between 2019 and 2021: RCMP Constable Alan Poapst; RCMP Constable Heidi Stevenson; Ontario Provincial Police Constable Marc Hovingh; Calgary Police Sergeant Andrew Harnett; RCMP Constable Shelby Patton; and Toronto Police Constable Jeffrey Northrup.

Burying a police officer is never easy, but six across Canada over the course of a three-year period can’t compare to the concentrated tragedy of losing four on-duty and one off-duty officers during a horrific five-week span between September 12 and October 18, 2022: Toronto Police Constable Andrew Hong, 48; York Regional Police Constable Travis Gillespie, 38; South Simcoe Police Constable Devon Northrup, 36;



The death of Cst. Hong, who was known as a gentle giant, shook the policing community and has changed the behaviour of many officers.



Emily Dietrich of the Guelph Police Service drew Cst. Hong’s motorcycle as a way to honour him.

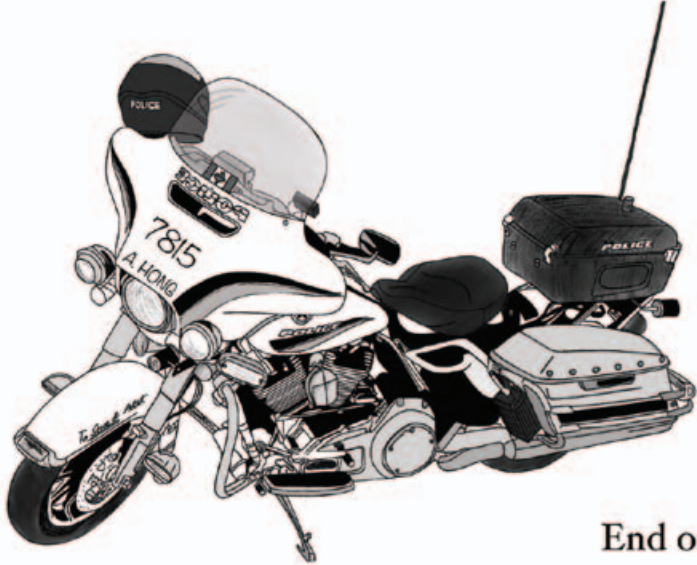
South Simcoe Police Constable Morgan Russell, 54; and Burnaby RCMP Constable Shaelyn Yang, 31. Four of those officers were from Ontario.

Andrew Hong was ambushed and fatally shot at a Mississauga Tim Hortons while on his lunch break on September 12. The 22-year veteran, who was in Peel for training, worked in Traffic Services. His murderer went on a rampage, killing two others, before being taken down in a cemetery in Hamilton by Halton and Hamilton Police.

Just two days later, Constable Travis Gillespie was killed in a head-on collision while driving to work at 6:00 am in Markham. The 23-year-old driver of the other vehicle had minor injuries and was charged with impaired driving, dangerous operation causing death and over 80 milligrams causing death. He has been denied bail. Travis was sworn in as a police constable in April 2020 after working as a Metrolinx/GO Transit special constable. He was a volunteer with Primal Mixed Martial Arts Academy.

On October 11, Constable Devon Northrup and Constable Morgan Russell responded to a disturbance at a house in Innisfil. A 22-year-old in the house shot them before they could even draw their guns. A third officer engaged in gunfire with the suspect, but both Devon and Morgan died in hospital. Devon was a six-year member of the service and worked with the community mobilization and engagement unit. He also served as a member of the mental health crisis outreach team and the emergency response unit. Morgan, a trained crisis negotiator in the uniform patrol division, was a 33-year veteran of the service and was only waiting until his children finished university before he retired.

Just one week later, on October 18, Constable Shaelyn Yang of the Burnaby RCMP was stabbed to death while accompa-



nying a parks employee to speak with a man living in a tent in Burnaby’s Broadview Park. Yang was a member of the detachment’s mental health and homeless outreach team, just three years into her career. A plane was quickly chartered to Vancouver and over 100 police personnel flew to British Columbia to attend Yang’s regimental funeral on November 2.

A 2010 Statistics Canada report shows that between 1961 and 2009, 133 police officers were murdered in the line of duty,



Cst. Travis Gillespie was killed by an impaired driver on his way to work.



Cst. Northrup and Cst. Russell were killed on October 11 while responding to a domestic dispute in Innisfil.



an average of two deaths per year. Between 2010 and 2018, an additional 36 were killed—more than double that rate. Homicides against police officers occurred most often during a robbery investigation, accounting for almost one-quarter of all killings. Nine in 10 police officers were shot to death, most of them not wearing a protective vest.

The losses of Constable Hong, Constable Russell, Constable Northrup, Constable Yang and

Constable Gillespie have been traumatic for Ontario's close-knit police community. Not only have they happened in a shockingly short time span, but they have also made the inherent dangers of the job seem that much more real.

"The risk seems to be a lot greater now than when I started in Halton at age 24," said Halton Police Association President Clay Gillis. "Responding to a robbery call and exchanging gunfire seems very different than going for

coffee and being murdered. These are targeted executions of police officers."

Clay, who has been a police officer since 2002, knows his wife would be much happier if he hung up his uniform. As a husband and father, he now attends these funerals thinking about the devastation it causes a police family – something he didn't think of when he was 25. Ultimately, the trauma of these events has deeply affected him and his members.

"Officers used to make a point of going into coffee shops and interacting with

the public, but now they only want to use a drive-thru. It has really had a tangible effect on how people feel about being in public spaces. These are low-frequency but super high-impact events that I think will be felt for a long period of time," said Clay. "This just makes the worst-case scenario feel like it could become a reality for us. And now, people are going to leave at their earliest opportunity, so they can mitigate their risk. That's a change in mindset."

Both Halton and Hamilton officers were closely involved

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The funeral procession for Constables Northrup and Russell saw a lot of support from both officers and the community.

in the Andrew Hong incident after his killer fled from Mississauga to Milton and finally to Hamilton, where he was lying in wait at a cemetery to take down more officers.

Hamilton Police Association President Jaimi Bannon said her members were lucky to go home that night.

"It was the skills and abilities of the Halton and Hamilton officers that kept everyone safe and alive that day," said Jaimi, who has 29 years of service, and has been seconded to the association as full-time president. "He was hunkered down in the cemetery, waiting to kill more officers. Hamilton officers were on alert and just wanted to go home to their families once it was all over. And luckily, they did. When I went to the station that night, some of them were clearly rattled. They

really felt their mortality."

Jaimi said that her members are having a hard time and the air in the station is noticeably heavy.

"Anxiety is real and everyone is always on guard now," said Jaimi. "They're now demanding better body armour and more opportunities to train. I fear for our profession, and I think it's going to lead people to second guess coming into our profession, which is only going to add to our recruitment problems."

Jaimi echoed Clay's sentiment that members who are close to retirement are choosing to retire as soon as possible instead of staying on. Morgan Russell could have retired several years earlier, but chose to continue working.

The murders of Morgan and Devon have been a devastat-



ing loss for the South Simcoe Police Association (SSPA), who only have about 150 members, including 100 sworn. Matt Kernen, SSPA Vice-President, said their small service is still reeling at the loss.

"Most of our members are deeply affected by this," said Matt, a constable with nine years of service. "We all know each other; we spend time together on our days off. We're like a family, so a loss

like this is very tragic. They are our family members; they are people we rely upon on a daily basis. We never would have thought something like this would happen in a small community like ours."

Devon had participated in the Run to Remember less than two weeks earlier in honour of the previous year's fallen officers. Matt said that he was always involved in events like that. Still, until



these recent tragedies, not coming home at the end of the day didn't seem like such a real possibility.

"We've always been told of the inherent dangers, and we try to prepare for the worst, but unfortunately, sometimes things are beyond our control," said Matt. "It's not just the member who has to put on their uniform every day and go out and do the job. It's the family members who have to say goodbye and worry about whether they come back at the end of shift."

The support from the Innisfil community has been overwhelming and constant – a beacon of light during an incredibly difficult time. Matt said that while the town has always

been supportive of the police and community partnerships have really helped the small service do its job so effectively, their support since the incident has been tremendous.

"I don't even really have the words to describe what it's been like around here. Since this happened, there has been food constantly showing up at the station – coffees, muffins, letters, flowers, telephone calls. This outpouring from the community in support of us. We're being flagged down by community members to talk to us so they can offer their sympathies, and many of them are often in tears themselves," said Matt. "The vibe around the office is tough, though, because members are chal-



The support from the South Simcoe community has been overwhelming.

lenged by this and it's going to be really difficult for a lot of members to regain some sense of normalcy."

Both Jaimi and Matt mentioned that their members have been using resources like Boots on the Ground, Badge of Life Canada and Wounded

Warriors Canada to get some help. Matt was particularly grateful for the support of PAO President Mark Baxter and other PAO members who came out to South Simcoe to lend their support.

Mark is glad members are getting help, but he knows



that these recent deaths are traumatic, which is only adding to the growing trauma that members of the policing community experience every day.

"It's making them feel like their safety is more precarious," said Mark. "In spite of that, they're professionals, and they're still leaving their families and going to work for the safety and security of their communities. Their dedication remains unwavering."

According to Mark, police in Canada respond to 13 million calls every year, and while we still live in a relatively safe society, violent crime is on the rise. Mark and the PAO will be pushing for



The PAO chartered a flight to Vancouver for Cst. Yang's funeral.

the government at all levels to make changes that will actually make a difference.

"Now is time for real leadership, in the federal government and in our police services. We're in a catch-and-release state where our offenders are routinely

arrested only to be quickly released by the courts," said Mark. "Actions must have consequences, and now more than ever, we need the federal government to step up with meaningful change, including much-needed bail and parole reform, and much better security of our borders, while providing law enforcement with the tools and resources to do their jobs."

Mark also believes there's a mental health issue that needs to be addressed.

"We have people with significant mental health and substance abuse issues in our

communities, and there's a gap in the support they receive," said Mark. "It's a societal issue and we've got to figure out how to address that as well. I'm determined to turn this into action."

The PAO has sent sympathies to all of the associations involved in these tragic deaths. Please remember the importance of taking care of yourself and using resources like Badge of Life Canada, Boots on the Ground and Wounded Warriors Canada. None of us is alone. Thank you to all of you for your service and dedication.



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