Hero in Red

By Robyn So

“Ahhhh!” Const. Linda Barrett, who had been setting down traffic cones, turned away from the chaos of the crash site, toward the cry. Frank, her partner, was flying through the air, his police-issue motorcycle under the pickup truck that had pulled a U-turn into his path. Landing on his back, he began to scream. As Barrett secured his gun and removed his duty belt for the paramedics, fear threatened her self-control.

Barrett had two crime scenes now. Beside her, the fallen officer; behind her, a garbage truck and its driver crushed beneath a fallen pedestrian overpass. As she secured the area and comforted Frank, her face betrayed none of the distress she felt imagining the driver’s terrible suffering or her partner’s uncertain fate. You might think a police officer grows immune to trauma, but Barrett has not. She admits, “You’re on the way to a car crash where you know there are fatalities, and you’re thinking, ‘I can’t stand it.’”

Managing traffic chaos and staying calm with aggressive drivers are just some of the stressful, potentially traumatic situations that RCMP traffic enforcement officers experience. They are dispatched to shoot a deer or dog struck by a car or to photograph a mangled corpse for evidence. And they investigate a crash scene with the body lying in their peripheral vision for hours, because the chronically overworked coroner’s office cannot respond quickly enough.

Incidents like these risk the physical and mental health of traffic officers, making them vulnerable to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The force has always recognized the vulnerability of homicide investigators. At the Burnaby detachment where Barrett works, they receive annual mandatory one-on-one counselling with a psychologist. Traffic enforcement officers, however, are offered only occasional group sessions with a psychologist, and these are voluntary. Barrett recalls just three members plus herself, a quarter of her team, attending a voluntary session. The debriefing helped, but her greatest relief came from hearing the others reveal their own emotions and knowing she was not alone.

Catching dangerous drivers, going to court, the instant gratification of issuing a ticket to an especially egregious driver: these perks attracted Barrett to traffic enforcement. When a driver ran a stop sign just as her unmarked police car started through the intersection, she slammed on her brakes. The young woman leaned out the window and gave her the finger, a defiance Barrett quickly deflated with the whoop-whoop of her siren.

Although Barrett was trained to investigate traffic fatalities, she was unprepared for the crushing caseload of up to five files in a year. That number does not seem very impressive, until Barrett explains that traffic fatalities can be as involved and complex as any murder file.

Unlike homicide investigators, who work in teams, traffic investigators work alone. Her investigation of a double fatality lasted a year without any relief. Each time she opened the file, photos and accident details sickened her. And as her investigation stretched on, she relived the suffering of the people left behind as she comforted them on more than one occasion.

She recalls the time when a man materialized out of the dark and rain to where Barrett stood talking with some officers. He had heard news reports of a cyclist being struck. Worried because his son was not home from work, he had come to see for himself. “Have you identified the cyclist?” he asked, giving them the name of his son. Barrett’s stomach dropped. It was the young man whom the coroner had taken away. “I’m sorry,” she said, putting her arm around him. “Officers are already on their way to your house. I’ll have someone drive you back.” The man never said another word to her. His anguish, palpable in the silence, “is hard to talk about,” says Barrett, swallowing hard.

Attending fatalities does not seem to bother other Mounties, according to Barrett. “You signed up for it, deal with it” she quotes them, shaking her head. The stoic Mountie stems from an idealized image that has existed in the popular imagination for more than a century. In 1999, when Barrett was in training at “Depot Division,” in Regina, mental health was irrelevant. In the only lecture to the cadets on managing stress in their demanding, potentially dangerous chosen careers, the only recommendations were to eat healthily and to exercise.

In her early years on the beat, Barrett relied on officers with whom she spent 12-hour shifts four days a week. “You’d go out for coffee or a meal on your swing shifts and talk about the files you went to. It was a kind of debriefing you’d do once a week. I liked that.” But camaraderie at work and sympathy at home from her common-law partner, Charlene, could not protect her from symptoms of fatigue and sleeplessness. “I could usually hold it together in work mode, but it started to affect my concentration,” said Barrett. “Outside of work, images of what I’d seen would appear in my head, and I had trouble sleeping.” Her work supervisor was unsympathetic. The possibility of traffic officers suffering from PTSD was not yet accepted.

A gender comparison study of police officer burnout mirrors Barrett’s struggle. While male officers tended to report feeling emotionally hardened by their jobs and more likely to depersonalize the civilians they dealt with, female officers tended to report feeling emotionally depleted by their jobs and more likely to put themselves in the shoes of the civilians they served. “When these things happen,” Barrett says, “I think back to my mom and my dad, losing somebody and how hard it is. I find it so hard. It takes a lot out of you.”

With her health in jeopardy and little support from her supervisor, Barrett realized that she had to make a decision about her chosen career. Could she stay in traffic enforcement and learn to distance herself from her emotions like her dispassionate colleagues? Or was that an even greater risk to her physical and mental health? It was a Hobson’s choice, and she opted out.

Although she misses some things — like giving out tickets to dangerous drivers — she will not go back to traffic enforcement, even though the RCMP launched a mental health strategy in May 2014. For Barrett, it is too late. Besides, her new post investigating internal police complaints is “a breath of fresh air.”

Escape can be illusory. The day before this interview, driving off-duty on the highway where her partner broke his back, Barrett saw a body at the side of the road. Tangled emotions of dread, revulsion and compassion overwhelmed her. But she pulled over, the first on the scene, and called for assistance.