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Lacerated, traumatized and in hospital was never how Constable Carla Duncan should have ended her shift. But she did, and the thieving criminal responsible for it has had to pay a price.



By Brett Williams

THERE were no Panavision cameras rolling but it could have been a classic tear-jerker movie scene. A savage but forlorn pit bull sits isolated on death row in a Canberra dog pound. He has committed the ultimate offence by attacking a human. Indeed, a police officer.

Finally, after 12 months, the time comes to put him to sleep. Despite his crime, an attractive young woman decides not to let him go to his death without some human warmth.

He receives the destruction drug, and she holds his head in her sympathetic arms as he fades away.

The woman was Australian Federal Police constable Carla Duncan. And it was she who Buddy the pit bull had mauled at the behest of his criminal owner.

The growling dog, with his bite force of more than 100kg, wreaked his savagery on her for around 100 seconds.

With one bite of her right calf, he ripped the muscle from the bone. With other bites, he severed nerves in her hand and left deep puncture wounds in her hip.

Colleagues on the scene could see the white of her exposed tendons and bone. A surgeon later likened the crushing the dog had inflicted on her calf to that of a shark bite.

And after the attack came extreme physical pain, mental anguish, hallucinations, operations, a long, gruelling recovery, and a courtroom sequel. It was a brutal experience for a cop who had graduated from the AFP College only 15 months earlier.

But, regardless of all she had suffered on and after July 1, 2018, Duncan still wanted time with that dog.

"I was petrified," she says, "but I just wanted to see a different vision of him in my head, and I just wanted to touch him. Then, when I saw him, I said to myself: 'He's a f--king big dog!'"

"Anyway, they were going to put him down, and the vet said: 'Does she (Carla) want to come in and see him while he's sedated?'"



Left: Buddy the pit bull on death row.

“He’d bitten people because he was scared all the time. It was sad because it just didn’t have to happen.”

“I went in and was patting him, but I was still scared of him, even though he was on the ground and calm. It was nice to touch him.

“It’s so weird but I think it was a conquering of fear. Seeing the dog was really good for my recovery.”

Finally poised to put the dog down, the vet asked Duncan if she was comfortable remaining in the room. She did remain and held the dog as he died. His death left her “wailing”.

“It wasn’t his fault,” she insists. “The poor dog didn’t have the nicest life and he was just doing what was natural to him.

“And I felt bad that he spent his last 12 months in a one-metre by two-metre Perspex cage. He’d bitten people because he was scared all the time. It was sad because it (the attack on me) just didn’t have to happen.”

And it never *would* have happened had Matthew Millard, who owned the pit bull,

not acted with blatant malice. A serial offender well known to police, he began by stealing a mobility scooter from a shopping centre in the Canberra suburb of Weston.

The vehicle belonged to a disabled woman who had ridden it to the Cooleman Court Shopping Centre. After meeting up with a care worker for coffee, she returned to where she had left her scooter and found it missing.

The theft wound up reported to police, so the AFP communications centre sent Duncan and her partner, Senior Constable Ben Owens, to deal with it.

Along with Detective Sergeant Ivan Naspe, the general-duties cops attended the shopping centre and found a witness who told them he saw Millard take the scooter.

According to checks the officers ran on Millard, he had “heaps of alerts” and a “massive criminal history”. So, now that he was a suspect, Duncan and her colleagues headed straight for the nearby suburb of Rivett, where Millard lived in public housing.

Although at home, he did not respond to the officers’ many knocks on the door of his unit. So, after what seemed like “ages”, Duncan tried knocking on the door of neighbour Stephen Oliver, who did respond and whom she asked about Millard.

He told her that Millard was indeed at home and had the scooter inside his unit. That made two scooters, as Naspe had spotted a silver one on his back patio.

Before Duncan wound up the conversation with Oliver, he gave her some good advice. “Mind that dog,” he insisted. “Just mind that dog of his. He’s a bit of a savage.”

The plan was to get Millard outside, speak with him about the scooter theft, digitally record the conversation, and take whatever action became necessary.

During around six more minutes of doorknocking, Duncan could hear rustling and the dog intermittently barking.

“I remember looking through the curtains,” she says. “I could see the dog’s legs, but I couldn’t really tell the size of (the dog). He just had a really deep bark.

“I stood back and put my gloves on and just got prepared. I even had my OC spray out already. I obviously knew there was the potential for (the attack).”

MILLARD eventually opened his inner front door and Owens began speaking with him. Through the closed outer screen door, Duncan noticed him rustling keys. That prompted her to think: “You’re up to something.”

Owens got to the point at which he asked Millard to step outside to talk some more. And Duncan, conscious of the risk of attack by the dog, issued a clear instruction.

“I said: ‘Make sure you secure your dog before you come out,’” she recalls. “I said it quite sternly a few times: ‘Make sure that dog is secured.’ And he was like: ‘Yeah, yeah.’ I even remember saying to him: ‘Secure it in the bathroom.’”

Millard then stepped back from the door claiming that he had to fetch another key to unlock the screen. And, to Duncan, who suspected he was simply buying time to figure out what to do with the scooter, he seemed to “take forever”.

After he finally got back to the door, he appeared to draw out the unlocking process.

“Then,” Duncan says, “I remember him just flinging the screen door open and just holding it for that dog to run out.”

And run out he did, as Millard yelled: “Go, go, go.” The growling pit bull charged straight past Naspe, as Duncan shouted to Millard: “Get your dog! Get your dog!”

Within seconds, Owens and Duncan had lost their first battle with the creature. Each tried to ward him off with bursts of their OC spray directly into his face. It had no effect, other than to make him rage even more intensely, as Naspe fired his Taser into him.

The pit bull then charged toward Owens, whom he jumped at and tried to bite. As Owens raised his hands to fend him off, Duncan ran in to try to distract the frenzied canine, again using her OC spray.

Her distraction strategy worked but the dog then turned on her. He jumped up and, with a bite powerful enough to kill her, took aim at her throat and face.

She managed to keep her head out of his reach but, with a penetrating snap of his jaws, he seized her hand. “My hand was in its mouth!” she exclaims.

And like any pit bull latched on to an opponent in a dogfight, he was not about to let her go. So, Duncan started to strike him in the face with the OC spray cannister in her other hand. In the process, she copped some spray in the face.

“Then,” she says, “I couldn’t see properly, and I was screaming for help. I tried to get

my hand out, but I had to put my other hand in to try to lever its mouth open.

“He was trying to shake me like a dog would do with a rabbit. That’s what he was doing with my hand. And I remember thinking: ‘Stay on your feet. Stay on your feet. Do not fall over.’”

Ultimately, all Duncan could do to retrieve her hand – despite the risk of losing fingers – was simply to drag it out of the dog’s locked jaw. She took the risk.

“So, I literally just sliced my finger on its teeth,” she recalls. “It severed all the nerves up the finger. And then I still couldn’t see (for the OC spray in my eyes).

“I didn’t feel pain but, when you hear the audio (recording of the attack), I’m screaming as if I *am* in pain. In my head I was just scared. I just remember being terrified.”

Duncan might have wrenched her bleeding hand free, but the relentless dog pounced again – this time fastening his jaws on her lower leg. And she was still struggling to see.

“It was trying to pull me down, so it ripped my calf (from the bone),” she says. “Then I hear a firearm go off and that scared me.

“I didn’t know who fired, and part of me was thinking: ‘Millard’s got a gun!’ And the whole time, he’s screaming: ‘Don’t hurt my dog!’ I was screaming: ‘Get your f--king dog off me!’”

The gunshot, which Naspe had fired, startled the dog into releasing its iron grip on Duncan. Lucky to be free of his jaws for the second time, she started to run toward the screen door of the Millard unit.

Her overwhelming urge was to charge into that unit and “shut myself in there”. But, as strong as that sense of self-preservation was, she quickly found reason not to act on it. “Don’t leave your mates,” she thought. “Just stay with them.”

“I just didn’t want to leave them out there in case *they* got (attacked),” she says.

So, Duncan, who refused to take cover indoors and had “nowhere else to go”, wound up against the front wall of the unit. And, almost immediately, she could see the dog running at her again, primed to continue the attack.

He sunk his teeth back into her leg and tried again to drag her to ground.

“When it kept coming back and was grabbing my leg,” she says, “I was thinking: ‘I just don’t know how much more of this I can take.’ I just felt so desperate.”



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Above and left: the injuries the pit bull caused to Duncan’s hand and calf.

DUNCAN was now safe but shockingly injured. As Owens rushed toward her, she pulled the knuckle-reinforced leather glove off her left hand and could see the shiny white of her exposed tendons.

“I saw that and, then, I felt the pain,” she says. “It felt like my hand was on fire. I’d never experienced pain like that in my whole life.

“I remember screaming at my sergeant: ‘You need to get the ambulance here now!’ The pain was just getting worse.”

Descending on the scene now were back-up patrols. Among them was Constable Taran Morgan, who charged in with a first aid kit. As Duncan screamed in pain, he bandaged her hand and tried to calm her.

She pleaded with him to make sure someone stayed with her because she felt she was going to faint.

“I laid down and just started shaking and convulsing,” she says. “I was in shock and I started to feel really dizzy.

“I grabbed my sergeant and said: ‘Just don’t let that dog out,’ because I felt really vulnerable on the ground. I was just worried the dog was going to come at me again.”

The trauma of the attack had clearly gripped Duncan. Her head filled with a mixture of both rational and irrational thoughts. On the one hand, she rightly told herself to calm down.

In fact, Duncan would later speak of a kind of out-of-body sensation, as if she had watched herself suffering the attack.

But she mustered the courage to prop herself up against that wall, kick the creature in the face, and “rip my leg out of its mouth”.

Close by was a chair which she grabbed and with which she tried to push the dog back as she stepped away from him. But he charged at her yet again and jumped up at her face.

To protect herself, she twisted her upper body side on to him, but that left her hip exposed and the dog pounced with another lethal bite.

“It was attached to my hip,” she explains, “and that’s when I saw Stephen (the neighbour) through his screen door. I remember yelling out to him: ‘Can you please help me?! Please help me!’

“He came out and literally grabbed the dog off me and locked it away.”



“I thought I was being a bit of a sook,” she says. “I was saying to myself: ‘You’re being a pussy. F--king man up.’ ”

On the other hand, she wrongly thought she was giving a poor account of herself and repeatedly apologized to her colleagues.

“I thought I was being a bit of a sook,” she says. “I was saying to myself: ‘You’re being a pussy. F--king man up.’ ”

An ambulance got to the scene in 13 minutes, which felt to Duncan like the longest wait of her life. And as the ambos were carting her off on a stretcher, a smug Millard shouted: “Sorry, darling. I’ll have it destroyed. Don’t worry.”

Duncan responded with some justifiably colourful language and then made comment to Naspe that Millard had committed the whole act on purpose.

“No, I didn’t,” Millard replied, despite all the needless suffering he knew he had just caused.

In the ambulance, on her way to Canberra Hospital with Woden Crime detective Lara Williams, an ambo cut off Duncan’s pants. At that moment, Williams rightly stretched the truth. “Yeah, you’re good,” she assured Duncan.

Over dinner one night, months later, the truth came out *unstretched*.

“I said: ‘What did my leg look like then?’ ” Duncan recalls. “And she (Williams) said: ‘I could see your bones and your tendons and your muscle. I could see everything.’ ”

At the hospital, Duncan expected to get a few sutures and leave. She had not yet grasped the extent of her injuries and the need to undergo surgery.

Her stay in hospital stretched out to three days as surgeons operated on her severed ulnar nerve, which runs down

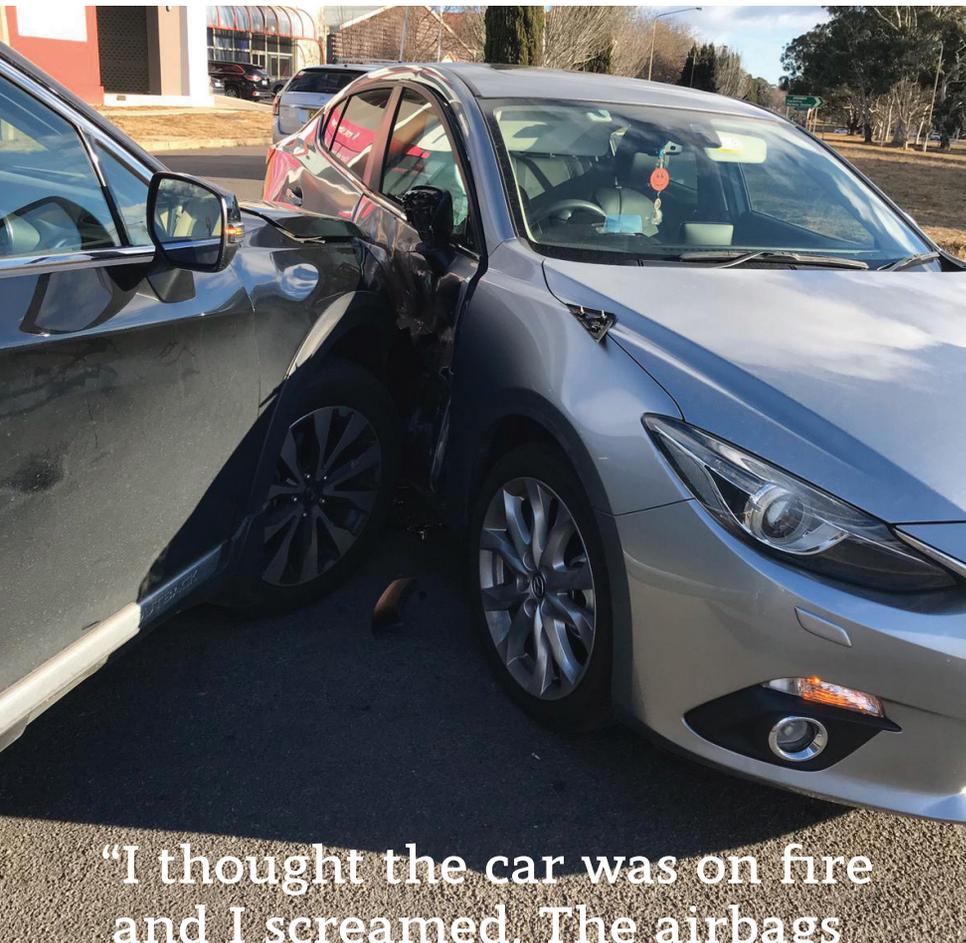
Top left and right: the calf and hand injuries after stitching; **above left:** puncture marks in Duncan’s hip; **above right:** the calf wound after it had become necrotic.

the arm and into the hand. And closing the gaping wounds in her hand, calf and left hip took more than 100 stitches.

At one point, Duncan received too strong a dose of anaesthetic and pain-relief drug ketamine, which caused her to hallucinate. She believed she could see and hear a dog in the ward and even asked some of her visitors if they had seen or heard it.

But, out of her hallucinogenic state, she drew great comfort from a level of concern she had never experienced. She woke after surgery to a mound of flowers, and police from all over Canberra kept up a steady flow of visits.

Also supporting her was her fiancé and his mother who the Australian Federal Police Association flew over from Perth to help care for Duncan.



“I thought the car was on fire and I screamed. The airbags had deployed, and the smell was like an electrical fire.”

Left: The scene of the T-bone crash Duncan survived on her way to hospital.

AFTER her discharge from hospital, Duncan began her recovery at home in a wheelchair and would be off work for six months. It was a case of allowing her wounds to heal and receiving treatment such as hand therapy.

But, on August 1, exactly one month after the attack, another disaster struck. Colleague and friend Naomi Keenan had picked Duncan up and set out to drive her to a hospital appointment.

At an intersection, however, just down the street from the apartment block in which Duncan was living, the pair wound up T-boned.

“I thought the car was on fire and I screamed,” Duncan says. “The airbags had deployed, and the smell was like an electrical fire.”

On the busy road, Duncan got herself and her mate out of the car, called police

communications, and tried to direct traffic.

Some traffic cops responded to the crash and made sure Duncan got to her appointment.

At the hospital, she consulted her surgeon about the way her calf was healing – or not healing. The wound had turned black and “just looked disgusting”.

“Your tissue is dying,” the surgeon told her. “It’s gone necrotic.”

It was critical to get the calf wound clean and healing, so Duncan had to undergo surgery to remove the dead tissue.

She got back to work on light duties in late December 2018 and wound up assisting on some homicide investigations. Although she worked only four-hour days, she suffered extreme tiredness and great frustration.

“I just wanted to do more and just be normal again,” she says. “Looking back, I wasn’t ready. It was so hard.”

“It was my story and I was going to tell it. No one else was going to tell it in the same way I was.”

AND Duncan was still yet to face the ordeal of the court process. She skipped an early appearance Millard made in the ACT Magistrates Court. There, he revealed the criminality of his character.

After Magistrate Bernadette Boss refused him bail, he called police officers “f--king maggots” and, with his hand, directed a shooting gesture at them.

Among his other atrocities was a pre-sentence interview in which he blamed Duncan for the attack and remarked: “F--k her because she’s a pig.”

But she fronted up to the ACT Supreme Court last April to read her victim impact statement. She had rejected offers from her victim liaison team to read it for her.

“It was my story and I was going to tell it,” she says. “No one else was going to tell it in the same way I was.”

Giving Duncan their full support were around 40 police officers who packed out the public gallery. And it was to them and her fiancé she directed her words, without affording Millard even a glance.

She described him as a coward and spoke of how the attack had threatened to destroy her childhood dreams of life as an operational police officer.

Specifics of the attack, such as the dog charging at her as she propped against the wall, formed part of her statement, too.

“That was the worst moment in my life, against the wall, thinking I was going to die,” she told the court.

“I hate hearing it. It just takes me back to that same state I was in (when attacked): shocked, shaking and terrified.”

Almost impossible for Duncan to bear during that sentencing hearing was the audio recording of the attack. It captured her screaming in sheer terror and pain. Played over and over to the court, it forced her to block her ears as she shook and cried.

“I hate hearing it,” she says. “It’s just awful. I hate the noises on it – the rustling and the growling. It just takes me back to that same state I was in (when attacked): shocked, shaking and terrified.”

But the defence had claimed that Millard had not shouted “go, go, go” at the dog but rather “no, no, no”. So, the court had to hear the recording several times to judge for itself which words Millard had used.

Justice John Burns was satisfied that he had encouraged the attack and would sentence him on May 24.

Duncan went to court that day to see the sentence handed down. Millard had pleaded guilty to stealing the scooter and committing an unlawful act causing grievous bodily harm.

Justice Burns sentenced him to four years and nine months’ jail with a non-parole period of three years and eight months.

Then escorted from the courtroom, Millard yelled “f--king dogs” at police in the public gallery and “f--king bitch” at Duncan specifically.

“I went to stand up,” she says, “and some bosses just held me and sat me down. They (police in the gallery) all just stood up and stared at him and laughed. I felt really proud to be there with them.”



“I was in panic mode, and asked: ‘Can I come in to work on light duties?’ Because, once that ball was rolling and I was back at work, I didn’t want to lose that momentum.”



Facing page top: Duncan at the National Police Bravery Award dinner in Canberra last September; **below:** with her mother, Rae Duncan, after the ceremony in which she received the Federal Police Bravery Award; **right and centre:** taking part in training exercises in the ACT with the AFP canine team helped Duncan's recover; **below:** getting a visit in the gym from a service dog in training for people with PTSD.

DUNCAN does not think of her actions in the attack as particularly courageous, but she received some major recognition. She wound up nominated for the 2019 National Police Bravery Award and received the Australian Federal Police Bravery Medal.

"I was proud," she says, "but I was almost embarrassed."

Police Federation of Australia president Mark Carroll considered Duncan an outstanding nominee for the bravery award.

"The point is that Carla was not just courageous under attack," he says. "The days, weeks and months that followed demanded equal courage as she underwent surgery, recovered from injuries, and faced the struggle of her return to work."

"Carla has stood up to all of it, and she's a symbol of the greatness in not only police officers but also their profession. There could be few better examples of how much of themselves cops are prepared to put on the line for their communities."

Duncan had even more to stand up to last September. After she had attended the National Police Bravery Award dinner in Canberra and returned to Brisbane, she rolled her ankle during a gym workout and tore ligaments.

The injury kept her off work for two weeks.

"And that was frustrating," she says. "I was in panic mode, and asked: 'Can I come in to work on light duties?' Because, once that ball was rolling and I was back at work, I didn't want to lose that momentum. It's so hard coming back."

Assigned to duty at Brisbane Airport since last September, Cairns-born Duncan, who suffers from PTSD, is now closer to family.



BUT not for a moment since the attack has she ever considered quitting police work. It was the career she wanted right from her early childhood, and she "worked my butt off to get into the AFP".

And, although she was cautious around dogs after the attack, she has not ditched her dream of working with them in policing.

"That'd bring me a lot of joy," she says. "How ironic would that be? It might not happen but I'm in the merit pool."

"It took me a long time to get past the specialist fitness test with my hand and grip strength, but I got through it. The dream is still there, but I'm open to trying anything."

One role Duncan finds fulfilling now is that of speaker. In a presentation she delivers to police recruits and others she shares her story, plays the audio recording of the attack, and discusses mental health.

As for Millard, she allows him no place in her thoughts. She knows how easily the whole issue of the stolen mobility scooter could have played out and that no one had to end up hurt or in grief.

"All we wanted to do was just return that scooter to the lady that day," she says. "That's all we wanted to do, and it could've been such a simple matter. He (Millard) could have just prevented the whole thing."

"It's done and dusted for a lot of other people now but, for me, it never will be." **PJ**