

★ The great chase of '63

Peel Biog. Scrap

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Douglas Burrows isn't one to talk about the day he almost single-handedly captured two armed bank robbers after a wild chase, punctuated by gunfire.

Getting Burrows to talk about what many have called the great Mississauga cops and robbers chase is like pulling teeth. As far as he's concerned, it was a long time ago and he was just doing his job, just as he does it today as Peel Regional Police Chief.

But his fellow officers haven't forgotten and they herald Burrows' actions as one of the greatest displays of bravery they've ever seen.

On May 26, 1963, Burrows was a 30-year-old Mississauga police detective. Answering a distress call, Burrows rushed to the Royal Bank at the corner of Dundas Street and Dixie Road, where Sgt. Bernie Oaks had been wounded answering a bank alarm. Burrows arrived in time to see a police cruiser occupied by four civilians roar past him.

Two young bank tellers, Pat Gruber, 21, and Barry Johnston, 20, taken hostage by the bank robbers, screamed and waved frantically at Burrows from Oaks' stolen cruiser.

Burrows spun his car around and the chase was on. During the chase north on Dixie Road, both Burrows and the bandits had their accelerators to the floor. Leaning out the passenger window of the stolen cruiser, one of the bandits fired repeatedly at Burrows.

Both the front and rear windows of Burrows' cruiser were shattered by bullets. He recalls that the tiny fragments of glass "felt like sand in his eyes." He didn't shoot back for fear of hitting one of the hostages, but aimed his gun at the robbers.

On the cruiser radio he could hear the hostages screaming, "Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" Meanwhile Burrows kept yelling "north on Dixie" into his radio, hoping his message would get through.

Just north of Highway 401 the bandits' cruiser was forced to slow down for a truck. The southbound lane was blocked by an oncoming truck so the bandits veered onto the right shoulder; Burrows took the left.

When the trucks were passed Burrows found himself ahead of the stolen cruiser. Intending to cripple the robbers' car, he put on the brakes. They rammed him twice, forcing him to lose control of his car.

As his cruiser flew through the air flipping end to end, Burrows

remembers tucking himself in a ball on the passenger's side and saying to himself, "Here goes, God."

A farmer who watched the police drama said he saw Burrows crawling out of the demolished cruiser while it was still skidding on its roof. Plainclothes policemen giving chase were sure he was dead.

At this point Burrows remembers "being pretty annoyed. They'd shot an officer and tried to kill me and I wasn't about to let them get away with it," he said.

He stopped a passing car and jumped into the passenger seat, telling the startled driver "follow that car." With his left foot on the accelerator, his left hand on the wheel and leaning out the window his gun ready, Burrows was back in the chase.

Passing the other officers in pursuit, Burrows took the time to wave from his commandeered convertible.

His first attempt to stop the robbers had crippled the stolen cruiser, slowing it to about 35 miles per hour. The bandits, who thought they'd left Burrows in the ditch, were taken aback to see the determined face of the cop with the crew-cut.

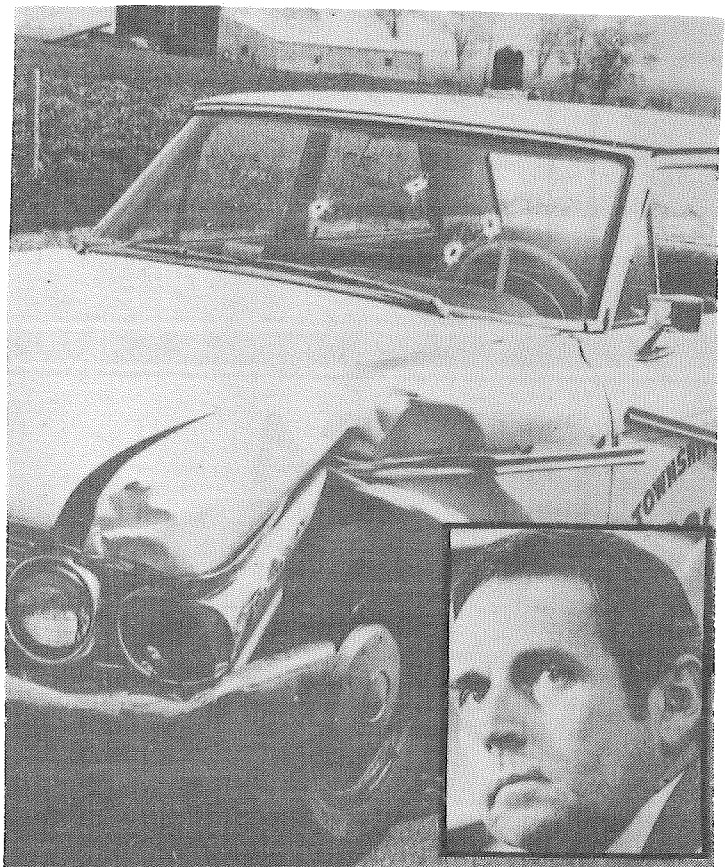
Burrows had his car door open ready to leap out as the convertible swerved in front of the bandits' cruiser, bringing both cars to a halt. But Burrows found himself jammed between the two cars when they collided. In the chaos, the hostages jumped free. One of the bandits, using the rear door of the cruiser as a shield, opened fire on policemen arriving at the scene.

Burrows fired at him, not realizing the other bandit in the driver's seat was set to fire his last four shots at the young detective, trapped between the two cars just feet away. Somehow, he missed. As Burrows turned to fire on the second man, the bandit — now out of ammunition — thrust his hands in the air.

Melvin George Brown, 35, of Texas, and Donald E. Gothen, 33, of Washington, were sentenced in Canada to 20 years for attempted murder.

Burrows' one regret today is they were paroled after seven years because of what Burrows calls "our great parole system."

Stories just like this one are featured in the 1980 Mississauga Times Community Guide, which tracks down the participants in many of Mississauga's greatest news stories of the past. The guide is included in this edition of The Times.



Burrows, inset, and his demolished cruiser