

POLICEWOMAN:

'I was hired as a police officer in Peel, not as a man or woman' — but to do the job

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Out of uniform, Catherine Carlson does not fit the traditional cop image. A policewoman with Peel Regional Police, Carlson, however, knows her business.

(Staff photo by Susan de Stein)

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She hardly looks the part.

Standing 5'5" at 115 pounds, Catherine Carlson is young and pretty, and bears little resemblance to the tough and burly street cop image.

Regardless of appearances, Carlson, 23, is a cop — a policewoman with Peel Regional Police, working out of 12 Division in Streetsville.

It's been two and a half years since she joined the force as a rookie, but she still retains the enthusiasm and excitement for even the most routine of investigations.

"Whether I'm helping a little old lady find her purse, or aiding a young kid who's been hit by a car, I love it. What you might think is dull and boring is exciting for me."

Like a little boy who always wanted to be a fireman when he grew up, wearing a police uniform is the fulfilment of a life-long goal. "I really can't explain why, but it's something I always wanted to do as a kid and later."

For someone who is outgoing and who has been active in athletics all her life, it was a natural progression. "I enjoy working with people. And what better way to be involved with people and their problems than being a police officer?"

Most of her two and a half years with the Peel force have been spent in field operations, although she spent nine months with the planning and research department at the Brampton headquarters. Her work in that department entailed studying traffic problems in new subdivisions, examining training requirements, new equipment and compiling annual reports.

She's back on the beat now, investigating the range of occurrences that any police officer must look into on any given day. "There are a lot of routine complaints — parking, small vehicle accidents, traffic complaints . . . and there are break-and-enter incidents, domestic disputes, personal injury accidents."

Carlson has chased a man suspected of robbery through a muddy field at three in the morning. She's manoeuvred a stubborn cow away from a busy intersection at rush hour. It's all in the line of duty.

"A meek or timid man or woman couldn't do the job. You have to be outgoing, ambitious, level-headed."

A police officer must be bright, able to respond to any given situation promptly and effectively. He or she must be able to analyze the problem and react rationally and safely.

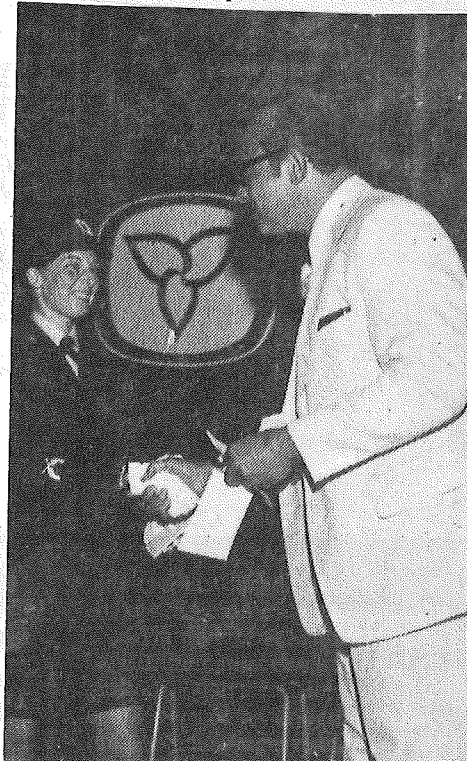
Carlson fits the bill. She graduated with a 96 per cent average in 13 courses at the Ontario Police College in Aylmer — missing the top award by a small percentage point. She's a smart woman.

Active in a host of outdoor sports, she's in top physical condition.

And she's a good shot, despite the fact she'd never handled a gun when she entered recruit training. She's never had to use her weapon in the line of duty. "It's a last resort," she says. "But if I have to use it someday, I have to use it."

One of two women in a 20-odd member platoon, Carlson says she isn't treated much differently from the male officers on the job. "Let's face it. We're all trained and we're all doing the same job. That's the way I want to be treated."

"I was hired as a police officer . . . not as



Peel Regional Police officer Catherine Carlson achieved a 96 per cent standing in 13 courses at the Ontario Police College at Aylmer and received a Recruit Group award for that accomplishment.

a man or a woman. Dispatchers, she adds, "don't discriminate . . . we have a designated patrol area. We have a responsibility to do the job."

She would depend on the back-up of fellow officers — men or women — as they would depend on her.

A female officer has some advantages. "In some cases, a woman can diffuse a situation merely by her presence," she says.

In domestic disputes, a female officer "often eases some of the tension. I'm not a burly 200-pound man . . . I probably appear to be someone who's there to help."

Regardless of whether the investigating officer is male or female, the parties involved in a domestic dispute "often calm right down when they see the police". Although an officer is there to keep the peace, she adds, "we're not marriage counselors". Police attempt to achieve reconciliation, "talk the people into an agreement of sorts". Where that isn't possible, the officer may advise one or the other to spend the night at a friend's home.

The first concern of the police in any situation is the people concerned. At the same time, "we can't get personally involved. I'm not a hard person, but we have a job to do. We're trained to do it."

There are certain things a 115-pound woman might not be capable of doing. "I don't have the strength of a 200-pound man." But it hasn't impeded her. What she might lack in pure size and physical strength, she makes up in skill and common sense.

She claims she's never been ill-respected by a member of the public. Often, people stopped for a simple Highway Traffic Act violation don't even notice she's a woman. "I'm an officer of the law. They have to respect me for that."

Despite the authority she assumes when

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she wears her uniform, she says there's no ego trip involved. "I take the job seriously, yes, but I'm not on an ego trip."

While people may look negatively on a police officer who's handing out speeding tickets, "the next day we might be helping that person in another situation — an accident, a break and enter, a barking dog".

Police, she says, "provide a service. We're trained to keep the peace in society, enforce the law, and help people when we can."

All officers work closely with the public. "Many of our complaints originate from the public. They're reporting a lot of the crime. It's a two-way street."

Her work isn't all glamorous and exciting. Armed robberies, murders, high speed chases . . . don't occur every day. Television has created an ill-conceived image of police work, she says. "It's just not like that. We don't have violence on the street to the same extent in Mississauga as there is in Chicago or New York."

And it isn't an easy job. The shifts themselves are demanding — physically and mentally. Carlson works seven days on, two days off, seven on, etc. Three times a year she enjoys a six-day weekend. She has

one in four weekends off. Shifts are assigned on a rotational basis — midnights, afternoons, then days.

She would have chosen a different career if she didn't love her work. "I'm married. I wouldn't work shifts if I weren't genuinely interested in the job.

"We've adjusted to the schedule, the shift work. But we've never known what it would be like if I had a different job."

Police work is her chosen career. And although she's interested in eventually working with juveniles, in morality investigations and other phases of police activity, "it takes time to build up experience".

She may be biased, but she has only the highest of praise for the Peel Police force. It was the only force to receive her job application. "I felt it was the best force in Ontario and I wanted to work for the best."

In her opinion, Peel's force is not only "tops in the administrative aspect, we have highly trained specialists in every department."

She may not look the part, dressed as she is in a smart beige suit, without her cap and official dress.

She doesn't like the word "tough" applied to her. But she is a cop.

He worries,

'But if she's happy then I'm happy'

Ted Carlson has the normal fears, common to wives and husbands of police officers.

But he's philosophical.

"I'm concerned when she's on the midnight shift, out on the streets at two o'clock in the morning. But I guess you have to look at it as a job that is very responsible and one that is a good opportunity."

Any job that requires responsibility, "also requires some sacrifice," he adds.

"There are different jobs I might prefer she did from the safety aspect. Police are more exposed than the average person to danger, but I know the people she works with are good and will back each other."

Cathy enjoys her work. "I'm happy to see her in a job she enjoys so much. If she were dissatisfied with her work, our home life might not be as good," he says.

He has no doubt she is capable of doing her job. And he knows she's also capable of being his wife. "It's fully a partnership. We spend all our spare time together. I don't feel threatened by her job."

When he introduces Cathy and tells others his wife is a policewoman, he meets different reactions. "Some say 'You mean you let your wife do that?'. Others say, 'Good for her'."

Himself a top business executive, Ted feels women are as capable as men. "There are no jobs that only a man can do . . . except those requiring a great deal of physical strength."

Women police officers, in fact, have an advantage in that they can "put a sense of tranquility into situations where perhaps men can't".

Considering the tough shift work, strange hours and danger involved, being the husband of a police officer isn't easy either.

A supportive spouse is a necessity.