

Police Chief

opens up about

PTSD



John Edwards is the chief of police in Oak Creek, Wisconsin. He oversaw the police response to the 2012 shooting at the Sikh Temple of Wisconsin, where a white supremacist killed six worshippers and injured four others, including a police officer.

A Traumatic Experience

One night, after four years of being on the job, I came across an individual at a truck stop off the interstate. There was a car in a back area with two people in the backseat. When I saw the car, I felt something was wrong. They train us to trust the hairs on the back of your neck.

I started to walk around the car, and I saw an Indiana plate. I knew immediately who it was. The FBI was looking for an escaped prisoner who had tried to shoot a sheriff's deputy in Indiana and taken a hostage before fleeing north with a prison employee who helped him escape.

As I was walking around the car, the driver got out of the backseat and came around the other side with two guns. He shouted, "Put your hands up! Get on the ground! Get on the ground!" Later on, when interviewed, his plan was to get me on the ground, handcuff me and then execute me.

I decided not to lie down on the ground. I had my hands raised, and I knew the bullets would not penetrate my vest. I was young and agile, so I turned, put my head down and ran. I knew I would get shot in the back. A bullet went through my jacket and my badge. Another hit me in the hand, which threw me off balance. I got behind a car, and I took my gun out to engage him. But he was already in the car, sitting on the edge of the door pointing his guns back in my direction. I was going to shoot him, but I

saw two people just behind him at the gas station in the line of fire.

I ran to my car and chased him on the expressway, into the next county south. He and his accomplice stopped at a farm and holed up in a barn. She was a psychiatrist, and she had medication on her. They both took medication and overdosed. When they were found, they were unconscious but alive.

When he went to trial, the jury found him guilty of reckless use of a weapon, but not guilty for attempted murder. They said if he'd been trying to kill me, he would have hit me more than twice.

When these things happen, you either get angry or you go into a shell. A doctor asked me later on what I would have done if I had been able to stop them. I would have shot them both. That's not what you are supposed to do, but I was just so angry that they had tried to kill me.

The Aftermath

Right afterwards, I was at the hospital. There was nothing life-threatening about my injuries, but it hit me that I almost died. I went back to the police department and they interviewed me right away. Later we found out that my interview was completely wrong. I swore that the woman's hair was white blonde and it was actually black. I got tunnel vision and focused on the gun. I could probably still tell you

the serial number on that gun, but I got all the other details wrong. Now I know that there's an adrenaline dump during these incidents and a rest period is needed to remember correctly.

Afterwards, I was treated like a hero. I got a letter of commendation and an awards ceremony. That was really hard because I knew I screwed up. I approached the car wrong. I didn't see his hands. The whole time I was thinking, "Shit, this is wrong, this is wrong." But I still did it. The hero label is a pretty heavy burden to put on somebody who knows they made a mistake.

When I got back to work, after two months of medical leave, the chief called me into his office. The chief was a veteran and his whole office was a memorial to World War II. He said, "I always like to talk to someone who has tasted a bit of the lead. You hear about these doctors, but you don't need doctors. You just need to suck it up."

So I did. I sucked it up for about two years. I was paranoid on calls. I was hyper-sensitive. It got so bad that once an elderly man asked me to unlock his car for him, and I made him stand 50 feet away.

I couldn't sleep. Once, my wife moved in her sleep, and I jumped up on top of her and grabbed her by the throat.

When a new chief came in, I decided I couldn't take it anymore. I told him I needed help, that I had to go see someone. He took my gun and badge away for seven months. He said he wasn't letting anyone get a disability on my watch. I had just gotten married, and my wife was pregnant.

I went to several doctors and they all said, "This guy isn't lying, he does have PTSD," but that wasn't enough for the chief. PTSD wasn't as well-known back then. The mayor got wind about what the chief had done and intervened. I was finally able to get my job back and get reimbursed for all that time.

Twenty-Five Years Later, it All Came Back

More than twenty years later, the Sikh Temple shooting brought back my PTSD. It was about two or

three days after the shooting, and I went to the hospital to see Lt. Brian Murphy, the officer who was shot during the incident. His wife was sitting next to him in the hospital room. He couldn't communicate, so I took her out into the hallway and tried to explain the disability benefits to her. A few nights later, I woke up at 3 a.m. and my bed was soaked. I was sweating profusely, crying uncontrollably, shaking and trembling, just like after my shooting.

The scene of Brian in the hospital bed is what brought it all back. It was a snapshot of 25 years before when I was in the hospital after my shooting, my wife was in the chair next to me and my sergeant came in to talk to me and my wife.

When I came into work, I called my captains into my office, and I broke down. I told them, "You cannot tell the officers; the supervisors can't know." But I wanted the captains to know so they could watch out for me.

The Milwaukee area has Police Officer Support Teams to assist officers after a critical incident. I called in a lieutenant from Milwaukee to come to one of my staff meetings and talk with the supervisors about what they were feeling.

The room was very quiet. At that point, I felt that I had to tell them what had happened to me. It was important for them to know it's okay if it happens, and don't suck it up.

I went to see a psychologist who works with us at the PD. I spent about three hours talking, getting a tune-up. It reassured me and got me back on track.

One of the things I'm doing now is trying to create a branch of the city employee assistance provider (EAP) to provide six visits to a psychologist or psychiatrist for police and fire related PTSD. The city pays for it, but they don't look at the medical records. This is not part of the disability determination process. We control the network of doctors, so we know that officers can't use it to game the system. The goal is, early intervention can make it not as severe as it was for me, and prevent worker's comp claims down the line.