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Policing in the 21st Century  
with [Cole Zercoe](#)

# The cop who refused to die

Officer Timothy Sterrett flat-lined on the operating table on November 8, 2017. He also, improbably, came back to life

Dec 11, 2018



## Editor's Note:

*As part of our [year-end coverage](#), we look back at some of the biggest law enforcement news stories of 2018, and reconnect with those involved to find out what has developed since. Earlier this year, Forest Park Officer Timothy Sterrett – who was nearly killed in the line of duty when he was shot by a suspect on November 8, 2017 – was awarded a Purple Heart and Medal of Honor by the city for his bravery that day. This is the story of the shooting that nearly took his life, and his ongoing fight to get back to policing.*

*Stay calm.* Officer Timothy Sterrett repeated the phrase in his head as he watched blood run down his arms and pool on the ground beneath his hands. *Stay calm.* The amount of blood he'd lost was life-threatening – he knew keeping his heart rate down was his only chance of survival. *Stay calm.* The bullet had ripped through his neck and bounced around in the right side of his chest – hitting one of his cervical nerves, two vertebrae and shattering two ribs before coming to rest in his right shoulder. *Stay calm.*

The hours leading up to the shooting had been unremarkable – no omens, no sinking feelings, nothing out of the ordinary – just the usual start to his morning on patrol in Forest Park, Georgia, with a trip to his favorite breakfast spot for some donut holes and a chocolate milk. The call that changed everything seemed innocuous: a male on a motorcycle driving erratically without a helmet on.

The speed at which the call deteriorated was disorienting. The suspect reached toward his waistband. He was heading for a house Sterrett knew he didn't live in. Sterrett drew his service weapon and shouted repeated commands to stop. As the suspect tried to enter the house, Sterrett moved to block him. He heard a loud “pop” and immediately started falling – blacking out as he returned fire.



The bullet that nearly killed Sterrett ripped through his neck. (Photo/Tim Sterrett)

When he came to, his attacker was standing over him, pistol in hand. As Sterrett steeled himself for a second bullet – one he knew he wouldn't survive – the gunman's attention shifted to something in the distance. Then, miraculously, the suspect fled.

The adrenaline dump numbed the pain, giving Sterrett the strength to get back on his feet. *Stay calm.* Knowing his assailant was still on the loose, he put pressure on his wound and went after him.

Sterrett died on the operating table later that day, November 8, 2017. He also, improbably, came back to life.

## PASSION TO SERVE

Ever since he was a child, Sterrett, 31, wanted to be a first responder.

“I've always been an adrenaline junkie,” Sterrett said. “So I've always had an interest in public safety. No two days are the same; I love that the job brings something different.”

At 18,

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became a volunteer firefighter in the North Georgia mountains, and got experience responding to medical calls as an EMT-Intermediate. Working alongside police officers during those early years in public safety drew him to the particular brand of unpredictability found in law enforcement.

“I kind of got bored in fire and EMS - every once in a while you might get a call for a house fire or a vehicle fire, but mainly it's just running medical calls,” Sterrett said. “I wanted a little more action.”

At 23, he became a cop for Georgia State University, where he worked in various positions, including the motor unit. Although he enjoyed the campus beat, after five years he wanted a new challenge. That brought him to Forest Park, a city just nine miles south of Atlanta.

He was looking for more opportunities to make an impact – particularly in his department’s community outreach efforts. Over the nearly three years he’s been with the Forest Park Police Department, Sterrett has received multiple commendations for his work connecting with as many of the nearly 20,000 people who make up the small, diverse community as he can.

He has a particular soft spot for young children – one of his most treasured moments of police work was [“Cookies with a Cop,”](#) an event that saw him connecting with kids at a local library.

“I like to get out of the car – in my free time sometimes, I'll play soccer with the kids or I'll pass the football around,” Sterrett said. “Some of the kids want to get in the back of the patrol car to see what it is like. I love interacting with them.”

Sterrett’s move to Forest Park also meant a higher volume of crime-fighting work – responding to offenses of a more serious nature than what he’d been handling at GSU. It was exactly what he wanted.

“I needed to get the other side of law enforcement that I didn’t have a lot of experience in – and that's definitely what I got. I've been in foot chases, initiated vehicle pursuits, I've ended up fighting people on the side of the roadway,” Sterrett said. “And the shooting, of course.”

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Sterrett has been recognized for his work connecting with the Forest Park community. (Photo/Tim Sterrett)



Sterrett has a particular soft spot for children, and takes the time to connect with them whenever he can on patrol. (Photo/Tim Sterrett)

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## **'HOLD PRESSURE ON MY NECK'**

Even as he was fighting for his life – gun in one hand and the other pressed against his wound – Sterrett was determined to catch his attacker. It took a colleague's urging for the officer to finally remove himself from the hot zone and into the care of EMS workers who'd arrived at the scene. On the way out, he caught a glimpse of his partner, Demarkus Hutcherson, limping toward cover.

As a battalion chief ripped off Sterrett's uniform in the middle of the street, checking for an exit wound and additional injuries, Sterrett wondered if his partner had been hit too. He'd later find out Hutcherson took a non-fatal shot to the leg while engaging the gunman, who later died. The exchange was what had distracted the shooter as he stood over Sterrett, preparing to shoot him again. A lot of things had to go right for Sterrett to survive that day. Hutcherson's rapid response was, undoubtedly, one of the most crucial.

"He and I started at the department together," Sterrett said. "So we got to grow very close, and we always back each other up no matter what. If he didn't show up when he did – when the guy was

standing over me – I personally believe I wouldn't be here.”

In the ambulance, keeping himself calm and awake long enough to get to the hospital continued to be the biggest battle. Although he finds it humorous now, it wasn't the smoothest ride. A very green EMT student who was tasked with applying pressure to Sterrett's neck required some coaching.

“He was like in awe of what his co-workers were trying to do,” Sterrett said. “He was distracted. And I could feel him slipping off of the area where I needed him to hold pressure.”

Sterrett had to nudge the student to snap out of it.

“He said, 'Oh my bad.' And the next thing I know, he starts putting too much pressure on it,” Sterrett said. “And I'm like, 'Dude, don't choke me! Just make sure you hold it over the wound!’”

At one point, one of the EMTs nearly fell on top of Sterrett after a hard stop. The officer caught him.

“He said, 'Man, don't worry about me, worry about yourself,’” Sterrett said. “And I told him, 'I can't worry about myself if you're falling on top of me!' And then they started laughing.”

## **OIL CHANGE**

Sterrett's memory of what took place in the hospital before he flat-lined is fuzzy. He knows he didn't feel any pain. At one point he got embarrassed that he'd been stripped naked and requested some clothing. There was some talk of what he'd eaten that morning. The last thing he remembers was a mask placed over his face.

He was in such bad shape that a doctor who was working a different surgery had to be pulled in to assist the surgeon already working on him.

“The chief of trauma didn't let his residents scrub in because my case was just too much,” Sterrett said. “He told the residents to just watch.”

Sterrett's chest was split open as surgeons worked to tie off veins and arteries to get the hemorrhaging under control. He lost a total of 32 pints of blood that day.

“The blood was going out as fast as they were putting it in,” Sterrett said. “My body got an oil change.”

When he woke up in the ICU after he'd flat-lined and come back to life, one surgeon made it clear: Sterrett's



Sterrett lost a total of 32 pints of blood that day.  
(Photo/Tim Sterrett)

calm in the immediate aftermath of the shooting had been the difference maker. Had he not been calm, cool and collected, he wouldn't have survived.

Sterrett had never faced off with an armed suspect before that day. It was the first time he'd fired his weapon in the line of duty. What kept him so calm? Part of it, he says, was his training. But even in law enforcement, where the potentially deadly reality of the job is ingrained in you from the first day of training, death doesn't seem real until it's absolutely real. Sterrett believes most of what kept him calm was innate.

"I don't think there's any way you can truly prepare yourself for that. You either have it or you don't," Sterrett said. "I know I wanted to live. What kept me in the fight was my family, my friends, my loved ones, my co-workers. And the man upstairs said he wasn't ready for me yet – that I still have a purpose and it's yet to be served. I want to continue to fight and to live as long as I can until it's my time to go, and obviously it wasn't that day."

Sterrett spent a week in the hospital – four of those days in the ICU. He didn't get much sleep and he was in constant pain. Given how much blood had been transfused, Sterrett also had to grapple with the possibility of suffering a potentially life-threatening blood clot.

"I was having horrendous nightmares," Sterrett said. "I kept re-living the shooting over and over again. It was tough, and I had some moments of doubt in the hospital. But I said, 'I'm still here for a reason, so I'm going take it one day at a time and live it to the fullest.'"

## LIFE AFTER DEATH

It's been over a year since the shooting. Sterrett's wounds have closed. His partner has returned to work. The scene has long been cleaned up. But Sterrett's fight for survival continues. The road back to policing has been arduous – over 10 specialists, countless doctor visits, ongoing outpatient surgeries, and physical and occupational therapy sessions.

The bullet remains in his body. The pain is constant as his nerves work to regenerate in his hand, forearm, rib and shoulder areas, feeling like “sparks” that go off like firecrackers and a million bee stings all at once. His right hand is hyper-sensitive to certain textures. The arteries and veins that go through his forearm get knots. Therapy adds to the exhaustion.

“I spend about three hours at physical therapy and occupational therapy, and when I come home I'm in a lot of pain,” Sterrett said. “I usually take a nap to try to rest up and just make it through that day so I can do it all over the next day.”

There are financial difficulties as well. A [gofundme](#) has helped, along with efforts from the community, but Sterrett still faces the monetary hardships that come with being out of work for so long. While his prognosis is good, it's likely that he will have some minor chronic issues. Despite all this, he holds no ill will toward the man who shot him, instead choosing to remain positive. He credits a [post-critical incident support group](#) – where he and his partner share their experiences with other LEOs who have been through traumatic experiences on duty – as instrumental in his recovery, and recommends all cops going through similar challenges should attend one. Ultimately, what keeps him going is his determination to get back to the job he loves.

“When it comes to nerves, they take millimeters a week to regenerate. It also depends on the person's body and the exercise and everything else. So my return to work is still very much in the air,” Sterrett said. “But overall, as a police officer and as a person, this incident has just made me love life and law enforcement a lot more. I don't take anything for granted. I pray every night when I go to bed, thank the Lord that I'm alive another day. I take it one day at a time. That's all I can do, is take it one day at a time.”



Over a year after the shooting, Sterrett continues to fight to get back to policing. The road has not been easy. (Photo/Tim Sterrett)

## About the author

Cole Zercoe is the Senior Associate Editor of PoliceOne. From the latest police technologies and innovations to the emerging threats cops face in the digital age, his features focus on the complexity of policing in the modern world.

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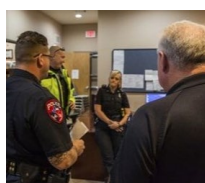
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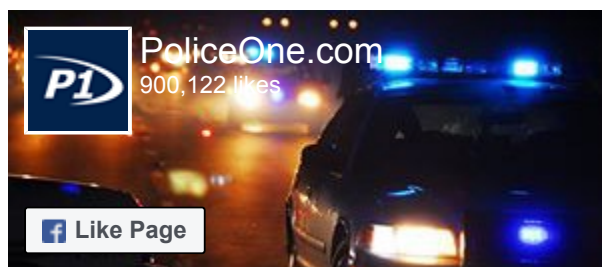
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