

In Remembrance – Patrolman Emil Vyskocil 1908-1974 – by Lt. Bernard Whalen

The New York Police Department immortalizes its dead heroes by embossing their names on bronze tablets displayed in the Memorial Lobby of One Police Plaza. This is only right. They are the officers who have paid the ultimate price. But what of the men and women who suffered career ending injuries serving at their sides? For most of them, memories of their heroic deeds fade quickly once they leave the police department, but their families remain proud of their accomplishments forever as I discovered speaking with the son of Emil Vyskocil, an NYPD patrolman from 1932 to 1944.

Prior to joining the force, Vyskocil was the head typist for J.C. Penney, a nationwide chain of 1600 department stores, headquartered in Manhattan. Like many talented men during the Great Depression, he sought a civil service job for the security it provided. On December 30, 1932, he was one of 268 recruits were sworn into the New York Police Department. A fellow recruit was Joseph Lynch, who gave up a promising career as a pharmacist to follow in the footsteps of his father. Neither man realized that their fates were to be forever intertwined.

Vyskocil attended Recruit Training at the Police College. The institute was similar to the current Police Academy, but instead on focusing on the law, a major portion of the curriculum involved teaching recruits the arts of self-defense, boxing and jujitsu, to better prepare them for the criminal element they'd be confronting once they hit the streets.



The class commencement ceremony took place on June 22, 1933, at Yankee Stadium in front of 50,000 people. 267 graduates took the field dressed in white duck trousers and athletic shirts to demonstrate their prowess and agility with batons and rifles. One recruit, however, was absent. He was home recuperating from a bullet wound, the result of an accidental discharge during firearms training. Then the graduates engaged in a tug-of-war with the incoming class. Lastly, the rookies simulated a confrontation with gangsters that included firing machine guns at each other loaded with blanks. When the smoke cleared, the police band and Glee Club entertained the audience while the recruits changed into their dress uniforms and marched back onto the field in perfect formation. They stood at attention as Police Commissioner James Bolan addressed the packed house.

Bolan reminded them that they were public servants responsible to the public for their acts in both their public and private lives. The speech was not much different than what could be expected to be heard today. Then the officers were presented with their shiny new shields. Patrolman Vyskocil was assigned number 10412. The next morning he reported to his first assignment, the old 3rd precinct in lower Manhattan.

Vyskocil was also a talented baseball player who'd made extra money pitching for a semi-pro team in the barnstorming circuit as a teenager. When he joined the force, he hoped to pitch for the police department. It was big deal back then. Games against the arch rival fire department took place at Yankee Stadium and the Polo Grounds before sold out crowds. The try-out went well. Vyskocil struck out the squad's top three hitters. Unfortunately, he discovered that it took more than talent to land a coveted spot on the roster. Without a rabbi to speak on his behalf, he was cut from the team.

Vyskocil spent the next two years tussling with communists, rioters, strikers and assorted nut jobs, all the while racking up department citations. In 1935 Vyskocil was transferred to the 109th Precinct which was much closer to his apartment in Corona. In 1939, his wife Emily gave birth to their first child, a healthy boy they named Emil after the father. Things were looking up for the growing family.

In the spring of 1940, Vyskocil drew a plum assignment and was detailed to the New York World's Fair at Flushing Meadows Park. It was pleasant duty, close to his home, and fairly routine, except for the occasional lost child or pick-pocket victim. On the surface, all seemed well, but behind the scenes fair authorities were concerned that a serious criminal act might occur.

The war was raging in Europe. Poland and France had already fallen to the Nazi's. Britain and Russia were in dire straights. On the home front, the American public was deeply divided between interceding or remaining neutral. World's Fair officials received several anonymous telephone threats directed against the pavilions of the nations involved in the conflict. The information was intentionally kept from the public to prevent a drop in attendance and more importantly, a loss of revenue for the investors.

When Vyskocil reported for duty on the fourth of July, he had no idea that it would be the final tour of his career. That afternoon, a suspicious satchel (suitcase) was discovered hidden inside the British Pavilion. It was ticking inside leading the authorities to believe it contained a bomb. The satchel was removed by police to a remote area of the fairgrounds behind the Polish Pavilion. Two detectives assigned to the Bomb Squad, Joseph Lynch (Vyskocil's former classmate) and Ferdinand Socha responded to the scene to investigate.

Patrolmen Vyskocil was assigned to crowd control. There were no guidelines delineating frozen zones or outer perimeters back then, but he did his best to keep bystanders at a safe distance. As the Bomb Squad detectives examined the satchel, Vyskocil observed a group of civilians had moved dangerously close. He rushed toward them, waving his arms and shouting, "Get back, get back." Just fifty feet away, the two Bomb Squad detectives were cutting into the satchel. Suddenly, and without warning, the infernal device exploded. Vyskocil was hurled into the air. Sharp metal fragments pierced his uniform and lodged deep in his body. Vyskocil passed out and when he finally woke two days later, he was in Flushing Hospital. It was there that he learned that Lynch and Socha were dead and that three other detectives, William Federer, Joseph Gallagher and Martin Schuchman had suffered serious injuries similar to his own.

Although Lynch and Socha took the brunt of the explosion, Vyskocil believed chasing the civilians away actually saved his life because he would have been much closer to the bomb when it detonated.

His wife brought a picture of their infant son to the hospital and placed it on his bed stand to remind her husband that he had a lot to live for. Vyskocil gradually recovered from his most serious injuries, but it was apparent to the surgeons treating him that some fragments in his body would never be located, even with X-Ray equipment. So, while he appeared healthy, tiny bits of shrapnel lodged deep within his muscle tissue caused constant debilitating pain, especially in his ankle, making it difficult for him to walk. He remained on sick leave after his discharge from the hospital.



Patrolman Vyskocil, recovering in the hospital. The photograph of his son is at the base of the radio. Notice the bowl of fresh fruit atop the radio.

In March, 1941, Detective Joseph Lynch and Detective Ferdinand Socha received posthumous Medals of Honor, while Patrolman Vyskocil, one sergeant, and the three injured detectives received Honorable Mention awards for their heroics. Up until 1997, police medals were donated by wealthy private citizens who created trust funds to pay for them. In exchange, the donor's names were engraved on the awards. Vyskocil was presented the LeRoy W. Baldwin medal, a former President of the Empire Trust Company. In the late 1800's Mr. Baldwin began amassing his fortune when he patented coin operated scales, the same type that are still popular attractions in bus depots, railroad stations, airports and amusement arcades to this day.



The LeRoy W. Baldwin Medal awarded to Patrolman Emil Vyskocil March 24, 1941.

In April, 1941, a representative of the British government, Viscount Halifax journeyed to City Hall to present the families of the dead and the injured officers, tokens of appreciation. Patrolman Vyskocil received a gold plated cigarette case engraved with the following:

*Presented by
His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom
To
Patrolman Emil A. Vyskocil
in recognition of his gallantry at the
British Pavilion, NY World's Fair
July 4th, 1940.*



The cigarette case as it appears today.

With the awards came membership to the Police Department's Honor Legion. Vyskocil particularly enjoyed the monthly dinners. Brooklyn born vaudeville entertainer Jimmy Durante was a big police supporter during those war years and often appeared at the get-togethers to tell jokes and sing songs. The gatherings buoyed Vyskocil's spirits although he continued to suffer ailments related to his injuries.



In this group photo, Patrolman Vyskocil is seen in the dark suit is sitting on the extreme right between two other members of the Honor Legion.

Soon after America entered World War II, thousands of soldiers began returning home with shrapnel wounds similar to those suffered by Patrolman Vyskocil. He played an important role in perfecting the treatment for their injuries. In 1942, Dr. John Moorehead of the Post Graduate Hospital of New York, known today as New York University Hospital and a young New York City transit engineer named Samuel Berman developed an electromagnetic device, a kind of surgical divining rod. The instrument was in reality a primitive metal detector. When the stainless steel wand was passed over the body and detected a metallic object, electromagnetic waves registered on the instrument's gauge providing the exact location of the hidden fragment. The device was first tested on Vyskocil's injured ankle. Dr. Moorhead was able to locate the fragment causing his pain and extract it. The shard was described as being no bigger than the corner of a postage stamp. A short time later, Dr. Moorehead traveled to Pearl Harbor to treat soldiers who hailed the detector as a "military miracle," totally unaware a New York cop was patient number one.

Years later, Vyskocil thought he had a pimple. It turned out a long forgotten metal shard had risen to the surface of his skin. Ironically, it was shaped like the letter "V." He took it as a sign of good fortune since his last name started with the same letter.

Meanwhile, Vyskocil and his wife celebrated the birth of a second child, Dorothy. But the girl never saw her father in his police uniform. Despite the excellent medical care he received, the fragment in his ankle had caused irreversible damage to his tendons. In November, 1944, Vyskocil was pensioned out with Traumatic Arthritis to his left ankle. He received an annual disability pension of \$2,250, the equivalent of \$26,258 per year today. To show how much police pensions have improved over the years, a cop with the same amount of time on the job as Vyskocil, retiring on a disability pension today would receive \$58,295 per year tax free.

After a while, Vyskocil grew restless in his forced retirement. He'd always loved visiting the countryside as a boy and in 1948 he purchased a small farm in upstate, New York hoping to make a living away from the bustle of the city. His son recalled milking the cows and living in an old farmhouse that had no running water, very little heat and an outhouse in the backyard. But the cost of installing plumbing and a furnace, coupled with purchasing seed to raise crops and feed the animals quickly drained Vyskocil's life savings. After just two short years he reluctantly gave up his dream. After the farm was sold, the family relocated to Amityville, Long Island where Vyskocil sought work in fields that he was more familiar with than pastures, first as insurance investigator for Travelers and later as security guard at Republic Aircraft. He still retained his calling for public service and joined the Amityville Volunteer Fire Department where he rose to the rank of captain. In his spare time he took his son rabbit hunting on the farmlands adjacent to route 110 and flounder fishing on Great South Bay in a fourteen foot rowboat. He never missed opening day of the fishing season even if there was ice on the water.

Emil Vyskocil Jr. poses with his father's awards which he has kept safe to this day.



Emil Vyskocil continued working into the mid 1960's. Sadly, his wife Emily died in 1971. Although he contracted Parkinson's disease, he always stopped by his son's house on Saturday mornings with fresh jelly donuts for the grandchildren. In 1974, he underwent an operation on his stomach and suffered a stroke from which he never recovered. Vyskocil passed away that April. He was only 65 years old, but thirty-five years later, thanks to his son, we remember him once again.