

Introduction

I have been telling this story to friends and family for more than forty years. The time has come to share it with others.

About half a dozen high school students, including me, were en route home on the Thursday before Mother's Day in 1973 when we literally walked into the middle of something surreal.

Turning the "Post Office" corner where the TransCanada Highway becomes Main Street in Kenora, a remote northwestern Ontario community near the Manitoba border, we thought we were in the midst of a Hollywood action movie or a TV police drama. Traffic was halted by police cruisers at both ends of the downtown shopping district, with officers from the Kenora Police, Ontario Provincial Police and RCMP brandishing shotguns and rifles.

We soon became part of the crowd of more than a thousand men, women and children lining the sidewalks. Our group stood on the steps of Pitt's Clothing Store to get a better view of the scene. We were parallel to the police blockade and had a clear line of sight to the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce.

People who arrived before we did told us they heard the bank was being robbed. We didn't believe them. There was no crowd control and no police emergency response team (commonly referred to as SWAT) at the scene. Given the year, there were no cell phones and no Internet to spread the news.

Don Milliard, who we recognized as an out-of-uniform Kenora police officer, double-parked a town half-ton truck in front of the bank and entered. Moments later we watched in disbelief as a masked gunman and Milliard emerged. Then, as Milliard raced to the back of the truck, the robber squared himself up to become a visible target for the police.

Days later we learned from media reports Milliard had volunteered to drive the getaway truck the robber ordered the Kenora police provide him.

The crack of a rifle triggered chaos in the crowd. Rather than running, I dropped to the sidewalk. Before I hit the cement, I heard an explosion and saw debris flying above us.

We also learned the shot had caused the robber to release a Dead Man's Switch that was clenched in his mouth, triggering a home-made bomb in a flight bag slung over his shoulder.

The decision to convert this story into a book came while I was recovering from my first battle with cancer in 2006. Squamous cell carcinoma, a common form of skin cancer, was growing on the left inside of my throat.

After the radical neck surgery, my logic was that the book project would motivate me to get out of bed every day to begin my research, interviews and eventually writing.

I had saved copies of stories about the incident that ran in the Kenora daily and weekly newspapers to use as background for a possible book. I thought I could easily augment this background with online research, but it wasn't enough. So, over the next few summers, I drove the ten hours back to Kenora from my Regina home and spent countless hours scanning files in the Lake of the Woods Museum and the Kenora Public Library, and talking to many townsfolk.

This book is my third attempt to tell the story.

Initially, I tried to write it as a trade non-fiction book, a genre in which I had modest regional success over the years on the Prairies. My plan was to track down and interview eyewitnesses. This proved to be difficult.

Dozens of people came forward with stories that I knew could not have been true. For example, one man described a female friend's reaction to the explosion in vivid detail - "She rushed into The Red Lion with flesh and blood dripping from her hair, freaking out!"

However, when he gave me her name, I realized the story was false. I knew the individual was the nine-year-old sister of one of my friends at that time and not a woman who rushed distraught into a local bar called The Checkerboard in 1973.

I also tried to convert the story into a novel, but got bogged down in the planning stages. I remained obsessed with telling this story and sought professional help to focus my efforts. Conversations with friends, who are published authors, as well as a former book agent, pointed me to creative non-fiction.

I established and strictly followed a writing rule for the book: when I had two reliable sources describing an incident or testimony, I wrote it as fact.

All the individuals named in the book are real. So too is the description of the robbery, explosion and aftermath by the CJRL radio station announcers. Excerpts from the live broadcast appear in this book with permission of CJRL, now broadcasting as 89.5 the Lake in Kenora, Ontario.

Sergeant Bob Letain, who shot the robber, and Constable Don Milliard, who volunteered to drive the getaway truck, stopped doing interviews in 1983. I respected their wishes and opted to write the book without approaching them.

As someone who witnessed the event, grew up in Kenora and was a part-time reporter at *The Kenora Calendar* weekly newspaper, I can provide many unique insights into the northwestern Ontario community, the incident and that period.

I did not set out to write a book to fit into a specific genre, such as True Crime.

My mantra was -- Just Tell the Story. I wrote *The Devil's Gap* as I saw the story replay in my mind's eye through the sands of time.

I overcame a second battle with cancer and numerous other health issues to finish the manuscript more than ten years after I began this journey. It was a very cathartic experience for me to give the manuscript to my wife and six children as a Christmas present in 2016.

Because I had invested so much time and effort into the project, I then decided to publish the manuscript as my personal way of celebrating Canada's 150th anniversary of confederation.

That's because the outcome of my efforts is a comprehensive and fast-paced book that tells the untold story of Canada's first suicide bomber.

Joe Ralko
July 1, 2017

Part One - Prologue

April 23, 1973

A wet spring snow blanketed the Lake of the Woods district of northwestern Ontario. Lawns were brown. Buds were barely emerging on the branches of the cottonwood, Manitoba red maple, oak and poplar trees that dotted the mixed forest of the Canadian Shield.

Only a few local people had launched their aluminum, fiberglass or handmade wooden boats into the waters of the pristine lakes and rivers. There were no mosquitoes or deer flies pestering people. The invasion of tourists and summer residents had not begun yet.

It was a depressing, ugly time of year in the remote Canadian town.

Hector Turcotte, the chain-smoking owner of Star Taxi, watched the westbound passenger train crawl past the Kenora station.

The train's diesel locomotives came to a halt about a hundred yards west of where the Canadian Pacific Railway line passed beneath Matheson Street, one of the two north-south streets in downtown Kenora.

Instead of continuing half a block to his company's dispatch shack, Turcotte turned left past the whitewashed brick Royal Canadian Legion Building and eased his car into the taxi stand near the spot where passengers would be gathering their luggage.

Turcotte pulled an unfiltered Export cigarette from its emerald green package. As he struck a wooden match, he saw the porter struggling to push a baggage cart larger than the taxi around the corner of the train station.

The passengers who had just arrived on "The Canadian" from Dryden and points east swarmed the wooden cart. Turcotte recognized five of the six passengers as residents, who he guessed more than likely would have arranged transportation home.

He smiled when the sixth passenger, a short, bearded man, began to wrestle with a steamer trunk.

"Taxi?" Turcotte shouted through the rolled down window of his cab.

The stranger nodded and waved him up onto the platform. Together, they easily lifted the steamer trunk off the baggage cart and duck-walked it to the cab.

"Might not be able to close the trunk with this in it," Turcotte said. "However, depending on where you are going, I don't mind driving slowly - shouldn't bounce the lid onto it too much. Where am I taking you?"

"What is the best hotel? I do not have a reservation but I hope they will have a room with a bath for me," said the stranger, buttoning up his pink plaid lumberjack bush jacket before pulling a checkered fedora tightly down onto his balding head.

"Newest is the ten storey Holiday Inn, right on Lake of the Woods. Opened last year. Some say it looks like the Capitol Records building in those movies set in Los Angeles. Best is still the Kenricia Hotel, downtown," the veteran cab driver said. "Both'll have a room for you at this time of year. Which is it - brand new or our oldest and classiest hotel?"

"Take me downtown," said the stranger as he climbed into the back seat of the cab.

Turcotte gently closed the lid of the trunk. As he did, he noticed a name stenciled across the top of the yellow steamer trunk in block letters - P A U L H I G G I N S.

As he got into his taxi, Turcotte tried to strike up a conversation with the less-than-talkative fare. He guessed English was not the man's mother tongue. The letter 'd' had replaced 'th' when he had spoken. Turcotte tried the language he first learned to speak at home - French.

"Parlez vous Français?" he asked.

Higgins did not acknowledge the simple phrase asking if he spoke French. So, the driver slipped into his standard chitchat about the weather.

“Unusual winter and spring,” he began, slinging his right arm over the back of the bench front seat and twisting his body to look out the rear window.

He pressed lightly on the gas pedal and backed out of the taxi stand.

“Snows at night, melts during the day. What’s it like where you’re from?”

Higgins didn’t respond as Turcotte shifted the taxi into drive. He appeared to be daydreaming as the taxi passed what would soon become the train station’s beautiful flower garden. Today, the closed heads of purple, red and yellow tulips were struggling to emerge through the melting snow in the valleys of soil. Three rusty pitchforks hinted at the work in progress.

“Temperature’s bounced up and down like a yo-yo,” the driver continued. “One of the strangest years I’ve ever seen. Been here for twenty winters, so far.”

Again, the passenger didn’t speak when Turcotte paused.

“Last Thursday, the day before the kids began their Easter long weekend break; the temperature hit sixty-eight degrees. Then, it snowed an inch yesterday – Easter Sunday,” Turcotte said, turning left onto Matheson Street from McLellan Avenue. He accelerated as he passed his dispatch shack.

“The radio said it was unseasonably cool again today. Really?”

Turcotte noticed his passenger now was studying the few people wandering the sidewalks. Supper time was approaching and the streets were almost empty.

“We’ll be there in a minute. I turn right at this intersection, one of only two sets of traffic lights in this town, and then I’ll pull over onto the sidewalk in front of the Kenricia Hotel.”

“Parking on the sidewalk, is that not illegal?” The passenger’s question surprised Turcotte. “Will you not get a ticket?”

“Cops all know me. I’ve helped them out more than a few times,” Turcotte replied.

A half dozen semi-trailer trucks loaded with eight-foot logs streamed west on Second Street South followed by several half ton trucks and an Ontario Provincial Police cruiser.

“Why are they here?” Higgins asked, pointing at the black and white police car.

“OPP are here because the TransCanada Highway runs right through the heart of Kenora, past your hotel, down Main Street and west over Tunnel Island,” the taxi driver replied, wondering why his passenger was interested in the police.

“OPP patrol the highway and do some policing in the nearby communities. We also have the RCMP and the Coast Guard because Lake of the Woods stretches south into the States. None of the cops care where I park.”

Turcotte followed the mini-convoy and glided onto the sidewalk as he passed the Cecil Café, two doors down from Kenora Photo. Ahead of him, the last of the semi-trailers was completing a sharp ninety-degree turn around the Kenricia Hotel north onto Main Street.

“We’re here,” the cab driver said, emerging from the taxi at the same time as Higgins.

“Front desk is through those double glass doors,” Turcotte said, pointing to the hotel entrance. “I’ll get some help; bring all of your bags and the steamer trunk inside while you check in.”

As Higgins walked through the first set of doors, two burly lumberjacks carrying white hardhats and wearing unbuttoned Kenora Dinner Jackets – black and red plaid bush jackets – staggered through a door on the right side of the foyer. The sign on the door simply said: Men’s Beer Parlour.

Opposite was the entrance to the hotel’s gift shop which offered a wide selection of jewelry along with souvenir post cards and a full range of the collectible Husky the Muskie teaspoons.

A short, stocky woman wearing a black and white polka dot dress stood behind the registration desk. Adjusting the plastic red rose in the back of her beehive hair, she made eye contact as Higgins cleared the second set of glass doors.

“Welcome to the Kenricia Hotel,” she said. “How can I help you?”

“Room with the bath? I do not have a reservation,” Higgins replied.

“We can do that depending on how long you plan to stay?” she replied, flashing a smile that revealed some missing front teeth.

“I will be here until Sunday. I will be gone then for ten days and will return for a few more days after that,” Higgins said, without smiling back. “When I am away, I will leave most of my bags and my trunk in the room, yes?”

“I’m certain we can make the arrangements,” she said. “The type of room you want is almost forty dollars a night. So, we need you to pre-pay.”

“Yes. This is good for me,” he said, pulling cash from his wallet. “Let me pay for the first two weeks now. This will include my time away. Then I will pay you again when I return.”

“Okie dokie.” the front desk clerk said. “Do you know when you’ll be leaving for good?”

“It has not been determined,” Higgins said. “But when I check out, everyone will know.”