

WHEN LONE POLICE OFFICER **SHANE GRAY** WAS ATTACKED BY A **MURDERING RAPIST** IN WA'S OUTBACK, AUSTRALIA WAS **SHOCKED**. FOR THOSE WHOSE LIVES WERE AFFECTED BY THE KILLER, THE HIDDEN **SCARS** STILL **ACHE**. BUT FROM **EVIL**, SOME **GOOD** HAS EMERGED.

STORY BY **NICOLE COX** PICTURE BY **KARIN CALVERT-BORSHOFF**

PHOTOGRAPHS OF TWO YOUNG WOMEN sit on the lounge-room sideboard. Their youthful, exuberant smiles beam out and their eyes sparkle with life.

Alongside the pictures is a framed letter overflowing with heartbreaking sorrow. These are the words of a grieving mother suffering the torment of knowing that the last hours of these beautiful young women – her only children – were agonising and terrifying. Both were brutally raped and then murdered.

Mostly, they are words of thanks for the policeman who shot dead her daughters' crazed killer on a remote Western Australian highway, 5000km from the scene of these horrific crimes.

For Shane Gray, a hardened police officer of 19 years, the letter is an emotional reminder of the deadly confron-

tation, but mostly the words are solace. They have helped him deal with the extreme act of taking another man's life, albeit in self-defence and in the line of duty.

"We know you were doing your job and what you were trained for, but we don't think you know just how much everyone that walks this earth thanks you," Shirley and Allan Irwin wrote to Gray in early 2006, days after their daughters Colleen, 23, and Laura, 21, were killed in their unit in Melbourne's western suburbs.

"Your strength and courage ... has taken the fear away ... You have made sure that there will be no future victims and families to ever suffer the enormous pain that we are living with now. What a wonderful person you are."

On the face of it, father-of-three Shane Gray is a laid-back, carefree, she'll-be-right kind of character. Most country cops are. He's the humble, no fanfare type. He's not the sort who

would want to be put up on a pedestal and he openly scoffs at the suggestion that he is as brave as they come.

But to the Irwin family he is a hero.

"It's just a passionate letter from a mum and dad who have lost everything in the world," Gray told STM in his first in-depth interview.

"Occasionally I'll sit down and have a read of it again and look at the girls' photos. They are beautiful girls. I can understand exactly where the words are coming from and most people could.

"Our friendship with Allan and Shirley has definitely made it easier. They are just beautiful country people who have lost everything and suffered a trauma that none of us can really imagine.

"Allan and Shirley will never get over what happened. They cope every day. They take one day at a time. Some days are good, some days are bad. Their thoughts are always with their kids, especially how they died, and that's never going to go away.

"I've got three boys and you just try and imagine that happening to them and you put yourself in  
Allan and

# HIGHWAY TO HELL





Shirley's position – you'd be pretty grateful to the person (who) ended this bloke."

Both the Gray and Irwin families are acutely aware of the value of life. They know it can be snatched away in an instant.

It was January 31, 2006, when Gray, then an acting sergeant, was called to intercept a vehicle on the North West Coastal Highway on the southern edge of WA's rugged Pilbara region.

William John Watkins, 38, had pumped \$80 of petrol into the tank of his station wagon and taken off from the Fortescue River Roadhouse & Tavern without paying. He had been running hard across the country for three days.

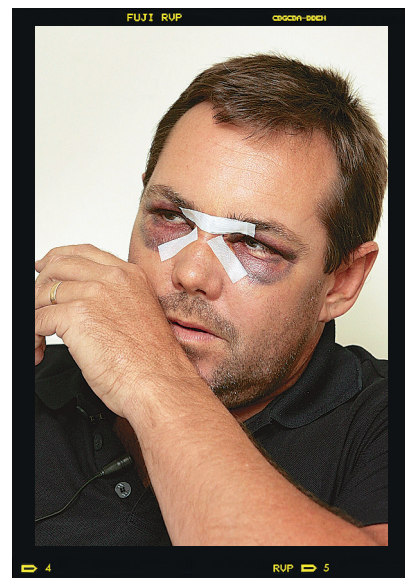
Watkins, an estranged husband and a father-of-two, was a violent man. He had a long criminal history dating back to 1985. The hefty list included convictions for serious assaults, dishonesty and burglary and, in May, 2000, he was jailed for rape, aggravated burglary and theft.

Three days before Shane Gray pulled him over in WA, Watkins had raped and murdered the Irwin sisters at their home at Altona North, in Melbourne's western suburbs. Watkins had lived next door.

Gray had no idea about any of that. All he saw when he stopped Watkins was a man mountain, weighing 99kg and towering 182cm.

It was meant to be a routine traffic stop but Watkins became angry.

Gray remembers seeing a sudden "white flash" as he was belted on the side of his face with a force so great the burly police officer collapsed on all fours.



The assault had come out of nowhere and Watkins wanted round two while his victim was down.

He stormed towards the injured officer, repeatedly punching him to the back of the head and kneeling him in the head and ribs.

"You're a dead c\*\*\*," Watkins told Gray with an eerie calmness.

Gray found strength from somewhere and staggered to his feet – half standing, half crouching. Just half a metre separated the pair when the policeman fired the first shot. He thought it had hit Watkins but Watkins continued to charge towards him. Gray fired again, fatally hitting him in the chest and Watkins went down.

"That's probably the hardest part – knowing how close you are to being murdered yourself," Gray says. "You might have a close shave in a

car crash, or something like that, but to have a person physically wanting to murder you ...

"It's knowing you're a second away and 500mm because that's how close he was when I shot him. That's hard to deal with.

"The next punch was coming – it would have knocked me out. He would have taken my gun and would have finished me off and driven away. It's as simple as that."

The morning after the shooting, Allan and Shirley Irwin were in bed, neither able to haul themselves out of their grief to get up. The phone rang at their home in Toolamba, in Victoria's Goulburn Valley.

"Turn on the TV," the homicide detective on the other end of the line told them. "We've got him."

With great trepidation, the Irwins switched on

**ABOVE: SHANE GRAY NURSES A BROKEN NOSE AFTER BEING ATTACKED BY KILLER WILLIAM WATKINS.**

**ABOVE LEFT: MURDERED SISTERS COLLEEN AND LAURA IRWIN.**

**PREVIOUS PAGE SHANE ON THE SPOT WHERE HE SHOT DEAD THE SISTERS' KILLER.**

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*The next punch was coming – it would have knocked me out. He would have taken my gun and would have finished me off and driven away. It's as simple as that*

”

the television. What they saw was a policeman staggering down an outback highway, his face battered and his khaki police uniform blood-spattered and torn. Deeply traumatised, his legs were buckling underneath him as his workmates supported him. But, thanks to him, their daughters' killer was now dead.

“My first reaction was that my girls had helped Shane on that day, and he even believes that,” says Mrs Irwin. “They were his guardian angels. They picked him – he was the best man. Anyone else, they would have been dead.”

As one of the most skilled firearms handlers in the WA police force, Gray had shot about 30,000 rounds from his police-issue pistol and he had trained junior officers in armed combat. He was the best man for this do-or-die crisis.

WA Coroner Alistair Hope found that Gray had acted in self-defence, and while Shane Gray says the finding was a relief, he had no doubts about doing what he did.

“I knew that I was a second away from being murdered – it was as simple as that,” he says. “Watkins' dad rang my superintendent shortly after the incident and said ‘I hold no grudges. I hope the copper is all right. Tell him to get better soon’. That was good because part of my concern was that if he (Watkins) had family, they'd lost a son and a dad and a husband.”

After such an experience many would have just packed up and left, but for Shane Gray, it was a case of “getting back on the horse”. He returned to work at the Karratha police station six weeks later.

“I've always been like that – it's a copper's thing,” he says. “You don't want to let people see that you're hurt or weak or injured in any way, so you get back out there, to your own detriment sometimes.”

“I drive past the shooting scene every day on my patrols and I have a little bit of a think and keep driving. It doesn't really affect my life any more, but it's always there.”

“I look in the mirror and I've got a little bit of a bent snout, a little bit of pain every now and then, so there's always things that remind you. You just don't forget.”

“It was good to stay in Karratha. It was probably the best decision I made. I love the lifestyle and most of my close mates are up here – we've been mates for a lot of years now. Plus there was the familiarity with the town – it was a bit sooky, a bit of a comfort blanket. I knew everybody in town and they all knew me.”

Gray concedes he was anxious about returning to work. He felt edgy. And he still does, at times.

“It took a little while to get the nerves out of the system and feel pretty relaxed back out there again,” he says. “It still goes through your mind, there's no doubt about that. Every car stop has the potential to turn nasty.”

At the coronial inquest into Watkins' death in September 2007, the coroner said the case highlighted the need for urgent reform and recommended the abolition of single-officer patrols and a national database so police could immediately check histories of interstate criminals.

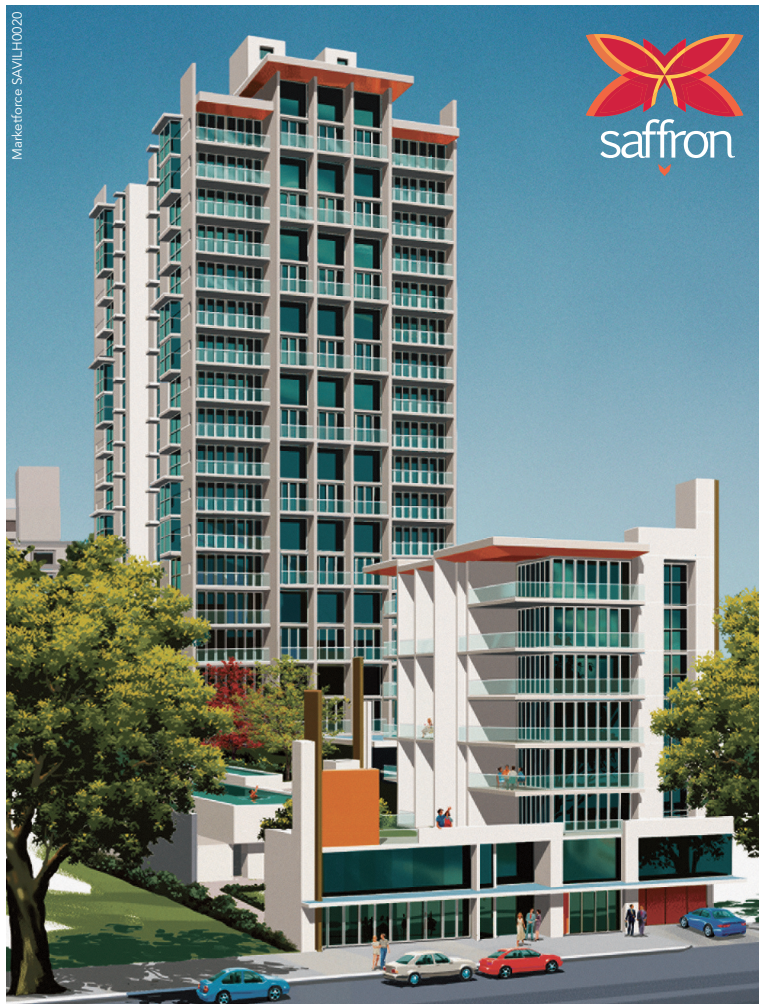


PICTURE: KARIN CALVERT-BORSHOFF

While these changes have been instigated, there are still gaping flaws in the radio communications network in regional WA and this gravely worries Shane Gray and the WA Police Union. There have been 27 major breakdowns in the communications system in the past six months and it is estimated it will cost \$100 million to replace. “The difficulty is that the system is 28 years



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THE LETTER OF SUPPORT FROM THE IRWINS AND PICTURES OF THEIR DEAD DAUGHTERS.

old and they haven't got any spare parts left," says Mike Dean of the WA Police Union.

"It's such old technology that they can't fix a lot of things. It's constant breakdown. It's constant patchwork.

"The Government is well aware of our concerns. The Commissioner has acknowledged it publicly and it's apparent the Government doesn't see this as a priority. They should.

"Shane is highly skilled. He's the most highly qualified person in that area of armed combat. If it hadn't been Shane that day, it could have had a far more terrible consequence. We could have ended up with a dead officer, easy."

But Gray wonders how much longer it will take.

"I was at Eucla 10 years ago and they were talking about it then. They talked about it in 2007 with the inquest," he says. "It's now mid-2008.

"We're getting there, but I don't know how much effort the (State) Government really wants to put into it because it's going to cost a lot of money – for the sake of a couple of coppers getting hurt every now and again.

"It's a worry because you are very isolated out there. You get out there with a partner and you are a couple of hundred kilometres from nowhere and if something happens, trying to even communicate with somebody now is very, very difficult.

"The whole thing – from the murders to the shooting – it affected thousands of people in various ways. Even my mates who are in the job, they all took a step back and thought about their job and how they did it.

"Members of the public were the same. They looked at coppers in a different light. It's a dangerous job and what we do is pretty brave most of the time. We put ourselves in harm's way to protect them."

For putting himself in "harm's way", Gray was awarded \$34,500 compensation – a questionable sum even to Police Commissioner Karl O'Callaghan when the maximum payout is \$75,000.

"It was a kick in the guts," Gray says. "Police

seem to get treated a little differently to the public when it comes to compensation payouts. I don't know if there's a perception that it's our job and part of the job is to get punched in the face and get injured.

"We basically had to end up accepting the offer. You can't risk challenging it in case you lose it all or lose half of it to the lawyers."

But Gray's wife Mandy says the compensation means little. The support from the Irwins has helped her family's recovery more.

Last year, Shane and Mandy travelled to Victoria to surprise the Irwins at the opening of a memorial garden dedicated to Colleen and Laura. A few months later, Allan and Shirley Irwin flew to WA to support Gray through the coronial inquest.

"Knowing Shirley and Allan has helped Shane come to terms with what he had to do," Mandy says. "I don't know how they get up every day knowing what this man did to their daughters, yet they are wanting to support Shane. They want to know that he's OK. They want to know that our family's OK.

"Nothing takes away the fact that Shane had to shoot and kill somebody and he now has a letter from two parents who thank him for having to do that because they don't have to see this man in court and they don't have to have somebody say he gets this long in jail. I suppose part of that is a closure for them. It's not something they have to fight for.

"We didn't know Colleen and Laura while they were alive, but we've got to know them through Shirley and Allan. They were wonderful, they were beautiful, they were smart and intelligent girls. They have become important to our family as well. It's joined us all together.

"The girls' photos are part of what has happened to us in our lives, so it is important for us to put it up and have it there in our home."

Shirley Irwin says she's taken great comfort in the friendship forged with Shane and Mandy. Instead of calling, text messaging and emailing her daughters every day, she contacts Mandy and Shane.

"Ours is a relationship that you couldn't believe – 5000km away and you feel like you're right beside them," Shirley says. "It's a friendship you can't describe. It's something that is so within your heart. It's enormous.

"We can't speak highly enough of Shane. To us he is an absolute treasure.

"For us, every day is such a struggle. To even imagine life without my Coles and Lauz just brings me tears. I just miss them so, so much. They were my life and my best friends."

Two years on and the Irwins are lobbying the Victorian Government for new laws that would see a public register to name and shame serial sex offenders. As a legacy to their girls, they want to name the legislation Colaura's Law.

"It's pointless thinking that I'd love for him (Watkins) to have suffered more, but the only people who were going to suffer more was me and Shiril," Allan Irwin says.

"He's dead, the maggot's gone, finished with and done and dusted. It was beneficial for us the way it happened.

"Initially we just wanted to thank Shane for doing what he did. He was courageous enough, brave enough and strong enough to survive so his family didn't have to go through what we are going through.

"But our friendship is much more than that now."