

Knights of the Roundtable  
By Bob Vernon

I picked up the telephone and punched in my home number. My wife answered, "Hello?"

"Look babe," I said, "I can't make it for dinner. Something big is developing." A long pause, and then she responded, "But we have four guests coming over. What am I supposed to do?"

"Well, it's probably too late to cancel. Just do the best you can and try to explain. They'll just have to understand."

Now her voice revealed her tension. "But they'll be here in about 15 minutes! Can't you give me something I can tell them?"

I thought for a moment. "You know how this job works," I said. "We have an undercover officer with his life in the balance. I'm on the surveillance right now. No, you can't say anything. Just tell them I'm working and can't make it. I've got to go now. Sorry."

Sound familiar?

In prior issues, I've addressed three types of conditions unique to law enforcement that can mold and change an officer's personality: limited perspective syndrome, exposure to the extremes of life and the necessary development of command presence. These conditions have the potential of making you cynical, calloused and an obnoxious controller. They can damage important personal relationships, unless recognized and appropriately addressed.

In this issue, I discuss perhaps the most dangerous condition in law enforcement. I call this "Knights of the Roundtable Syndrome." I believe it's so dangerous, because it's so subtle in its seduction and noble in its motive.

Why We Do It

As a young boy I spent a lot of time at the playground at the end of our street. In the summer, one of the workers started a program to interest us in reading. The first year, she read from a book of exciting stories about the Knights of the Round Table. My mind conjured visions of knights, horses, armor, castles and beautiful damsels rescued from the "bad guys." These childhood fantasies are one of the reasons I joined the police profession.

In fact, for many years we surveyed new recruits joining the LAPD and , it turns out, my motives were not unusual: Most of our recruits joined because they wanted to work at something that was more than a job: They wanted to do something with meaning and a noble mission.

Our profession is ancient. The border of the LAPD badge depicts three papyrus reeds bound together. This was the symbol of law enforcement in ancient Egypt *over three thousand years ago*. Anthropologists explain that enforcing the rules of society is one of the few functions that must take place for a society to survive. Law enforcement is truly that "thin blue line" that stands between order and chaos. One cannot perform this important function very long before this truth becomes evident.

## The Job

Shortly after taking up the badge, I noticed my partners referring to police work as “the Job.” It was an unstated truth that this profession is the ultimate calling. The Job can give meaning to our lives—a sense of significance and fulfillment. But it also has the potential of placing everything else in our lives in a lower priority. We can neglect other very important responsibilities and relationships—*even our own families*.

Officers typically go through an adaptation to police work somewhere after two to five years of working the streets. Most become addicted to the work, but some also become cynical and embittered. Even those who remain positive and maintain a balance in their lives may find that the Job becomes the very center of their lives. All other considerations fade in their importance—because duty calls.

It’s possible for an officer to finish their career with no family, no friends—other than a few other cops—and no outside interests. And when the Job ends, as it must, there’s nothing.

But there are steps we can take to avoid this. These include:

- Recognizing a hazard is the first and most important step to avoid or minimize it. Consciously think about the impact our profession can have on those around us.
- Minimize the disruptive schedule our profession can demand. Some are unavoidable; but some can be adjusted. For example, trading a work day with a cooperative partner in order to attend a family celebration.
- Discuss any negative impact your job is having on your family with your superiors. Many of them will do their best to accommodate special needs. They have “been there—done that.”
- Resolve the tension between the significance of your duty with the reality that if you were killed today, someone would fill in tomorrow. No one is indispensable.

## Conclusion

Many of us are survivors. My career spanned nearly 38 years, and I still have a life. I’m grateful for experiencing 54 years of an awesome marriage and a wonderful family. The key is balance. It goes without saying that we should do our best in this most significant responsibility, but it *should not* consume one’s life.—On Point

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