

The events unfolded live on CNN as dozens of Henrico County police officers surrounded a suspect in the infamous 'Beltway Sniper' attacks. Our quiet community, which always felt so safe and sheltered from incidents such as this, had in an instant become the center stage in a national manhunt for a madman whose indiscriminate rifle attacks terrorized the mid-Atlantic region. It was unsettling to know that a person of such evil intentions was in our backyard, but we were proud and comforted by the knowledge that our police force was involved.

The shootings began on October 2, 2002 in suburban Washington, D.C. The local newspaper reported that there had been several murders with similar circumstances. As the killer's range began to get larger in the coming days, it quickly became evident that this was the work of a serial murderer. Way down here in central Virginia, we watched the story unfold with detached shock. While we felt anger that there was a cold-hearted killer on the loose stalking innocent people, and we felt genuine sorrow for the victims and their communities, these dreadful events seemed to be happening a world away from us. This was a problem for other people to worry about. Watching from where we lived, the crimes might as well have been happening in Dallas or Seattle. We knew that we were safe, because that's the way it had always been. "It can't happen here," we all told ourselves.

But then something happened that invaded our sense of insulation and safety. The killer moved his fiendish operation south, using Interstate 95 as a migration route. He struck in Massaponax, at a gas station near the highway. We all knew I-95. That is a main road through Richmond, and many of us used it on a daily basis. This sniper had invaded our comfort zone. Suddenly, we were pulled into his sick world. Things didn't feel so safe anymore. People around here started to pay attention with a more personal interest. We started to look at strangers with suspicion.

"That guy over there in the white van is probably just a delivery man, but maybe...just, maybe," people began wonder. All of a sudden, there was fear in daily routines. People started to scrutinize their surroundings. With a palpable sense of relief, we watched the news reports track the crimes northward again. The sniper was still on

the prowler, a coward with no regard for human suffering. But, he was back in northern Virginia, far away from us.

“Too bad it’s happening to them, but lucky it’s not us,” many of us thought without saying it. All decent people felt frustrated that such a dangerous person could be loose out there. The terror continued, and in fact intensified, as the killer began to revel in the attention of the media. We watched with anxiety as the police of many other jurisdictions did everything in their power to stop him.

Meanwhile, we in central Virginia quickly fell back into our cocoon of relative safety and comfort. As the manhunt intensified up north, however, something interesting happened here. We began to take notice when a police cruiser went by, whereas before we tended to take the protection of the police for granted. Before the sniper intruded upon our space, the police had always been around but rarely acknowledged. Now that he was in our midst, the presence of law enforcement officers was suddenly noticed and appreciated. We had a sense of relief when the police were nearby, and with more officers on the beat during this crisis, calm quickly returned to the area.

The calmness was short-lived, however, when events struck close to home once more. “There was a shooting in Ashland,” my friend said in a frantic voice on the telephone. “Ashland? No way,” I responded. It couldn’t be. This was too close. Now he was in our living space, right out there among us. He had struck right under our noses, taunting the public and threatening the safety of our friends and neighbors. In one terrible moment, our morbid curiosity had been transformed into personal terror. While the world watched, we felt threatened and scared.

Like a nightmare come to life, this had suddenly become our problem. The randomness of these crimes meant that the killer could be anywhere. Nobody felt safe. Young and old, black and white, rich and poor were equally threatened.

“Maybe today’s the day they catch him,” we all thought. Until this incident brought it home, “*they*” had been anonymous. Now, “*they*” were our local policemen. We put all of our faith and trust in them to protect us from a monster that was hiding in the bushes with a rifle trained on us. Up to that point, “*they*” had been doing such a good job of keeping us safe from day to day that we didn’t even take the time to even notice them.

Everybody noticed them on October 21, 2002. That was the day that *our* police, the Henrico County Police Department, acted so quickly and professionally in what everyone had hoped was the apprehension of the sniper. Officials had a very strong tip that the sniper had made a call from a phone booth at the corner of Parham and Broad in western Henrico County. Every cable news channel, and all the local stations, had breakaway coverage of our police surrounding a van and apprehending suspects. The Henrico police force responded with the swiftness and precision of a highly specialized military unit. They blanketed the scene, sealing the suspects off and keeping the public safely at a distance. If there was going to be violence, they were perfectly positioned to handle the situation in a way that the citizens would not be harmed.

As we watched the scene unfold on television, my friends and I couldn't believe that this was happening less than a mile from our high school in a location that we were all very familiar with. It was exciting to know that these policemen were our guys, on our turf at the front line of a potentially deadly situation. As it turned out, to everyone's frustration, the actual suspects had fled the scene and the men in custody were not involved in the crime. By a matter of only seconds, this monster had slipped away. Still, our officers did us proud. They represented the community with professionalism and courage. In this national effort, they did their part with great skill.

In a matter of days, through excellent police work across many jurisdictions, the actual snipers were apprehended in Maryland. As quickly as it started, the killing stopped. The evidence gathered here, and the police work done by our officers, certainly contributed to the ultimate identification and arrest of the culprits. Our lives, which had been so disrupted by 23 days of domestic terror, quickly returned to normal.

Peace and quiet returned, and our policemen gradually became anonymous once again. As the police cruisers passed us on the streets, we began to take less and less notice of them. But there is a much better awareness, in our community at least, of how competent and professional these men and women truly are. This awful incident helped us to realize how much we rely on a well-trained and well-funded police force. When trouble lurks out of the darkness and visits our safe little community, we are very comforted to know that we are protected by some of the best police officers in the world. And for that, we are grateful.