

Off-duty policeman enforces own law

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IT WAS a springtime Sunday morning, and Leroy Watts was on his knees in an empty apartment, pleading for his life.

His former landlord, Patrolman Maurice Beachem, was off duty and in his black leather jacket, and he had just shot Watts in the chest and stomach.

"Mr. Beachem," Leroy Watts implored, "if you'll just let me get up, I'll go away."

"If you get up, I'll kill you," Beachem told him.

Watts struggled to his feet and ran into the next room, with Beachem following. He shot Watts in the left arm. Watts stumbled into still another room, and Beachem shot him in the right hand.

They were in Watts' former apartment in a building owned by Beachem. That was April 29, and Beachem was angry because Watts had left some plastic bags filled with trash sitting in the kitchen when he moved the night before.

THE POLICE Department has an impressive list of evidence, witnesses, and

There are 13,000 policemen in Chicago. The vast majority are dedicated, honorable, and courageous. But some have abused their powers and the rights of citizens they are sworn to protect. During a five-month investigation, Tribune reporters talked to hundreds of alleged victims and witnesses, interviewed policemen, searched thru documents, and arranged dozens of polygraph tests. This is the second in a series compiled by George Bliss, chief investigator, and reporters Pamela Zekman, William Mullen, and Emmett George.

polygraph tests that show that Patrolman Beachem willfully shot Watts.

But Beachem still goes to work every day as a policeman, and Watts too alive, is still recovering from his wounds and unable to work. And it is Watts, not Beachem, who is facing criminal charges of aggravated battery.

In Chicago, a policeman is a police-



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man for 24 hours a day, under orders to carry his gun at all times, empowered to make arrests under any circumstances.

That is the Police Department's rule, and it is probably a good rule because of the increased police coverage it affords the community.

At the same time, it is an awful re-

sponsibility to the individual policeman as he lives his private life. He has his badge and gun and the awesome power of the law—a power he can abuse and use to protect himself if he should get into trouble while acting as a private citizen.

DURING A five-month investigation, Tribune reporters talked to hundreds of alleged victims of police brutality, and many of them told of violent encounters with policemen during their off-duty hours. The reporters tracked down witnesses, examined supportive documents, and arranged polygraph tests to substantiate the stories of victims.

The investigation showed that a brutal policeman's instincts do not disappear when he ends his shift.

The department had received complaints about Patrolman Beachem long before he shot Leroy Watts. Some of them had come from tenants who started moving out of his building soon after he bought it last year.

They described him as a swaggering

despot who kept his service revolver on his hip and visible even when he was in civilian clothing.

MRS. EARLEE Burks, for instance, sought a court injunction against Beachem while she lived in his building. She asked for an order to stop Beachem from harassing her and her family.

Mrs. Burks had an apartment across the hall from Leroy Watts, a man she described as quiet, hardworking, and devoted to his family. She was in her apartment the day Watts was shot, and she heard him begging for his life. She moved from the building after that.

Ironically, Watts himself said he hadn't had much trouble with Beachem until the day he was shot. He moved the Saturday his lease was up to a larger apartment down the street simply because he needed a bigger place.

The morning after he moved, Watts was on his way to the store for some milk when Beachem stopped him and demanded to know where he had left the keys to the old apartment.

Watts told him they were hanging in the living room, and when Beachem asked him to go with him to find them, Watts agreed. They went in a back door thru the kitchen.

"My wife and I left some plastic bags full of trash in the kitchen because we filled all the garbage cans outside," Watts said. "He started fussing about the trash and told me to take it out."

He said he tried to explain that the plastic bags were neatly piled and tied for easy removal and there was no reason for Beachem to raise his voice.

"HE SAID he was ready to die over this," Watts said. "I thought he was teasing. I didn't know he had a gun."

"You think you're real slick," he said Beachem told him.

For several moments, the two men stared tensely at each other in the stillness of the empty place. Then, as Watts turned to go out the door, he said, Beachem kicked the door shut.

"I turned around to see what he was

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doing" Watts said, "and I turned right into a bullet in my chest. I didn't feel nothing, and I thought he shot a blank or something."

Beachem, he said, ordered him to get on his knees.

"Then he shot me in the stomach and I felt that, and I saw the blood."

That's when he started pleading for his life.

MRS. BURKS heard the shots and stood petrified with fear behind her front door across the hall.

"Let me go, Mr. Beachem," she said he begged. "Let me go."

The voices kept getting closer, she said, and the shots kept ringing out, until she heard them in the hallway.

Several squad cars arrived, and she opened the door. Beachem was standing over Watts in the hallway with a gun in one hand and a butcher knife in the other.

Beachem told The Tribune that Watts had attempted to stab him after he asked Watts to remove the plastic bags from the kitchen.

"When I asked him to clean it up," he said, "he [Watts] struck at me with his fist. His fist missed and I was caught by his arm and I went down."

Beachem said he pulled his revolver

and struck Watts on the head. They started scuffling, he said, and Watts pulled the knife. They went from room to room as they struggled, and finally tumbled into the hallway.

"I WAS DOWN and he was standing over me," Beachem said. "I fired."

Watts said he never saw the knife Beachem claimed he had pulled. Indeed, when the police confiscated the butcher knife Beachem was reported to be holding, they went thru Watts' pockets and found his small unopened pocket knife.

Watts was in critical condition for several weeks after the shooting, and several months passed before he was able to take a polygraph test.

The result of those tests, taken Oct. 4, support Watts' story that he didn't threaten Beachem with a knife or knock him down.

In fact, a ballistics study of the bullet wound in Watts' stomach indicates the slug entered in a downward fashion, as tho Watts had been on his knees when it was fired.

After Beachem took the polygraph test, the police Internal Affairs Division quickly sustained Watts' case and recommended firing Beachem from the force when it learned The Tribune was investigating the incident.