

PREFACE

IN JULY OF 1992, a reckoning was set into motion in the basement garage of the Dirksen Federal Building in downtown Chicago. The murderous escapee didn't realize it, but his end was near.

IT WOULD BE A FULL STOP.

IN THE summer of 1992, I was working as an emergency 9-1-1 Communications Officer at the Hamilton County Communications Center (Ohio). I was three years into the job after relocating from Chicago to the Cincinnati area, where my wife's family lived. Back home in Chicago, I also worked as a 9-1-1 Communications Officer for the Evanston, Illinois, Police Department.

Before we moved to Ohio, we made our home in Chicago's Edison Park neighborhood. The neighborhood is located on the far northwest side of the city. Many Chicago police officers and firefighters reside in the area. It's a tidy, cramped, and warm little neighborhood full of mom-and-pop shops and restaurants. My wife, first son, and I lived in a cozy two-bedroom apartment on busy Northwest Highway in that sliver of the city.

After working many a midnight shift at the Evanston PD, I'd drive my gray Dodge Omni westbound on Touhy Avenue from the lakefront and then head south on one of the several confined side streets that would lead me to Northwest Highway and home. Most days, as I traveled south from Touhy onto Oriole, Olcott, Oleander, or any of the other "O" streets that lattice the area, I'd see other men and women exiting their parked personal vehicles lined up along the curbs. These public servants would be wearing police and fire uniforms or white t-shirts over dark blue uniform pants—all of us just arriving home after exhausting midnight shifts. We would nod and wave to one another, although not personally knowing each other,

realizing that we all existed in the same professional circumstances.

In July of 1992, while at home in Ohio watching the nightly network news, I was shocked and saddened to learn that 58-year-old Harry Belluomini, a retired Chicago Police Department detective, had been killed in a shootout in the basement of the Dirksen Federal Building in Chicago. I didn't personally know Harry, but he was one of Edison Park's own. A few days later, I tuned into Chicago-based WGN News and witnessed Harry's funeral, which was presided over by the priests at St. Juliana's Catholic church—located at the corner of Touhy Avenue and Oketo Avenue—one of the "O" streets that I knew so well.

The shootout took place when a federal prisoner, Jeffrey Erickson, a former police officer who was on trial for a series of bank robberies in the Chicago area, slipped his restraints, got his hands on a US Marshal's revolver, and tried to escape the courthouse building. The incident shocked the residents of the Chicago area and the nation, and my fellow 9-1-1 Communications Officers in suburban Cincinnati. I recall the other people at work talking about the incident days after, wondering how such a heinous episode could occur, especially in a protected Federal Building. Unfortunately, it was one of many "innocence lost" moments America would experience over the next decade, including the Oklahoma City Bombing and the terror attacks in September 2001.

The killing of Harry Belluomini and the lack of any meaningful media stories about his courage and bravery struck a sour chord. Even though I didn't know Harry or his family, we had been neighbors, and I took his death personally.

For years afterward, the focus seemed to be on the criminal. Written articles, a television film and documentary, and even a theatrical feature film about the former-cop-turned-bank-robber known as the "Bearded Bandit" were produced, and no one seemed to pay any real attention to Harry Belluomini. Yet Harry had quite literally placed his life on the line to single-handedly save countless others and put a stop to a murderer's rampage.

When I set about to writing Harry Belluomini's story, I knew that I was perhaps in for a few years of effort to complete the project—and that was before Covid-19 took hold around the world. As with many other tasks that were begun pre-pandemic, this project experienced delays. I researched Harry Belluomini for some time before I began to cement an approach to writing the book. Even that initial approach changed over time, especially once things were moving at an accelerated clip. There were months and months of scouring sources to build a foundation for where to originate this book. But that type of research will only go so far in creating a nonfiction piece about a human being who no longer walks the earth. First, I had to meet the people who knew Harry the best—his family.

In May of 2018, I mailed a letter to Harry's daughter Anne. At least I believed that I was sending the letter to the correct Anne Belluomini. I didn't want to cold-call Anne for fear that I'd frighten her off. I couldn't have her wondering who in the world was calling and asking about her father. So I took a nuanced approach and typed a one-page letter, introducing myself, filling Anne in on a bit of my background, and advising her that I was hoping to write a book about her father.

Months passed before I received a reply. Anne Belluomini phoned. She explained that I had, indeed, sent the letter to the correct family member and that she and her sister and brother, Karen and Michael, would be interested in meeting me for lunch to discuss the proposed book. Unfortunately, Anne's mother, Milly, lived in northern Wisconsin and wouldn't be available to attend our meeting.

We met on a weekday at Moretti's, a mainstay Edison Park eatery and pub. And from the moment we began speaking to one another, we fell into the familiar conversational rhythm of people raised within a particular geographical region and who have had a similar upbringing. For me, it seemed—instantly—as if I had known Harry Belluomini's children for a long, long time.

As we got to know one another, eldest sister, Karen, cleared her throat and said, "Well, just so you know, we had you checked out by a private investigator before we met with you." She seemed reluc-

tant to let me in on that bit of information, but I felt relief, knowing that I must've passed the "sniff test." Karen continued, "We know a private investigator who used to be a detective for the Evanston PD. He said that he knew you and that you were okay."

Once the formalities of getting to know one another were out of the way, we began discussing their father. Two hours passed in what seemed like minutes. What emerged for me in that time was that Harry's own children didn't know much about what he had accomplished while on the Chicago Police Department. Belluomini had done an excellent job of separating his family and professional lives. In that moment, I decided to keep the chapters of the book separate as well, and not to layout the piece in a succinct chronological order. So here you'll find chapters about his police work accompanied by separate chapters about his family life.

At the end of our lunch meeting, the Belluomini children agreed to provide phone numbers and otherwise help me track down some of their family members and the former detectives their father worked alongside at the Chicago Police Department. And once that lunch was over, I got to work.

While employed as a 9-1-1 Communications Officer, I was also doing my best to become a professional writer. I had a lifelong appreciation and pursuit for creating fictional stories, and I found some success beginning in the mid-90s. But I didn't believe I had the talent to tackle an intensive true-life project about the retired hero cop. Even after writing and selling screenplays and having novels published, I still didn't feel that I could write a work that would properly honor the man. So I'm still not sure if I'm worthy of creating a suitable written account of Harry Belluomini's life. But I offer up this piece in the hope that the reader will learn more about Harry and what he meant to his immediate family and his friends and colleagues.

And I want to answer a question: Why write about Harry Belluomini, his family, and his legacy now, thirty years after the tragic events that took place in the Dirksen Federal Building garage? Because selfless service and heroism never fall from favor.

1

ON JANUARY 9, 1990, the First National Bank of Wilmette, Illinois, was robbed. Bank robberies in the well-heeled North Shore suburban area of Chicago are a rarity. The perpetrator that day was calm and professional—a tall Caucasian man armed with a pistol, wearing a fake beard, ball cap and leather driving gloves. He held a portable police scanner in his free hand. The Wilmette robbery, and the ones to follow from this same offender, seemed to be meticulously planned because the offender seemed to always get away without any trouble. The police had very little evidence to work with at the beginning of the robber's spree. Still, the FBI and local police authorities would later allege that Wilmette was first bank robbery committed by Jeffrey Erickson.

At the time, the 31-year-old Erickson was about to become the owner of a small used bookstore in the western Chicago suburb of Roselle. He was an ex-police officer, having once worked as an auxiliary police officer for the Rosemont Police Department and as a patrolman for the northwest suburban Hoffman Estates Police Department before being let go for reasons never officially revealed. Sources for this book have stated that Erickson, known to authorities as the "Bearded Bandit," was allegedly let go after being caught by a supervisor doing Western-style "quick draws" with his loaded service weapon in the police department's locker room. Other sources stated that the rookie cop was fired for being "too nice" and letting speeders go during traffic stops.

Erickson was a large and physically fit man, standing 6'4" and weighing 240 pounds. He trained in police procedures and tactics, which could come in handy when taking down a bank. He was also a combat-trained Marine, comfortable with firearms, and an accomplished marksman.

The Wilmette bank job was believed to be one of at least eight such robberies attributed to the Bearded Bandit in the next two years, a suspected crime spree that would garner an estimated \$180,000 for the offender. However, some close to the investigation into the Bearded Bandit's crime spree and his subsequent trial believe the number of banks he robbed to be closer to 20—the amount of money taken, unknown. But these allegations have never been proved.

2

TWENTY-EIGHT-YEAR-OLD CHICAGO Police Department detective Harry Belluomini (bell-Wah-mini) stood at the corner of North Lamon Avenue and West Altgeld Street on the evening of July 6, 1962, studying closely the imposing brick structure that sat before him. His concentration was strangely forced, in a way, not much like his usual demeanor. Harry had a naturally gregarious personality, complete with a gravelly yet booming voice. He could easily “read a room” after entering almost any situation, determining who was sincere or who was bullshitting him in just a few seconds. But this July day was so hot. The hottest day of the year so far in Chicago, and Harry was feeling its effects. He was queasy, a bit dizzy, and quite nervous, but he was here to do his task.

Harry was not a tall man—a stocky 5'9", 180 pounds, with jet-black hair—but there would be pity for anyone who physically challenged the officer. He'd once gotten into a fight with a combative suspect in front of a drug store and launched the aggressive perp, a bigger man, through one of the business' plate glass windows when the man tried to get the better of him.

Harry began his duties as a patrolman with the CPD in 1957 and had only made it to the detective ranks a few months earlier. He'd found himself in challenging situations on the job over those past scarce years, like the time weeks earlier when the detective partner he was working with failed to watch Harry's back when they respond

ed to a domestic violence call. The angry woman inside the home launched a heavy clay flowerpot at Harry's head when the officer turned away, striking him in the face and blackening his eye. The domestic call was terrible, but he was much more nervous about what he was getting into that July evening. He was both nervous and excited.

Moments after entering the large brick structure and approaching his objective, the harsh elements of the day finally took their toll, and Harry passed out. The heat and his nerves had gotten the best of him. The priest presiding over the wedding rehearsal at St. Genevieve's church that evening turned to Milly Cutich, Harry's soon-to-be bride, and asked, "Is he drunk, or what?"

Harry wasn't drunk, but his nerves and the weight of a huge wedding, with 350 guests arriving from all over the states and Canada, plus the heat, had done what many an aggressive perp hadn't, which was to drop Harry to his knees.

Enrico Alberto "Harry" Belluomini was born at St. Elizabeth Hospital in Chicago on Sunday, October 8, 1933. Harry's father, Francesco "Frank" Belluomini, was one of six children born to Alberto and Zita (Michelotti) Belluomini of Lucca, Italy. When Frank reached adulthood in the 1920s, he traveled to the United States to visit relatives who'd already arrived in the country. However, Frank also wanted to find work. So he stayed with his cousins, the Pellegrini family, in Tacoma, Washington, for a time, worked hard, saved his money, and then returned to Lucca.

Harry's mother, Rufina Checchi of Carrara, Italy, known as Ruth, had a widowed mother named Carlotta who worked in a convent, cooking and cleaning for the nuns. That's where Ruth learned to prepare excellent meals and how to expertly sew and repair clothing. Ruth was an only child and, from all accounts, quite shy.

Once back in Italy, Frank met Ruth, and they fell in love and married. Frank and Ruth lived with Frank's parents for a short time in Lucca. There, Ruth furthered her domestic education at the hip of Zita Belluomini.

In the late 1920s, Frank and Ruth permanently immigrated to Chicago, Illinois, and they purchased a tavern at 1418 W. Madison Street, across the street from the current CPD 9-1-1 communications center. Frank worked the bar, and Ruth ran the kitchen. Shortly after they moved to Chicago and purchased the tavern, Frank and Ruth welcomed a baby girl named Loretta to their family. Harry arrived five years later.

Harry Belluomini was raised in the Austin neighborhood on Chicago's west side, mainly in the apartment above his parent's tavern. Young Harry didn't appreciate the long hours his parents had to work to hold onto their business, but he helped out by sweeping the floors and keeping the coolers stocked with ice.

Harry's lifelong friend Bill Broderick recalls that their childhood was pretty all-American. The boys loved following the Bears and White Sox. "We were about ten years old when we met. We talked about who was a better baseball or football player, stuff like that. We went to the same schools. We went to the same Catholic Church."

Broderick, who retired as the treasurer of the American Farm Bureau, added, "We were both fairly friendly with each other's parents. I'd stop by to see his parents, and he'd stop by to see mine. Harry's parents were old-country Italians. Mr. Belluomini had his own business, but then the family moved a bit further west, and he became a waiter at the Italian Village restaurant." The restaurant is still in existence in Chicago's Loop. Broderick exudes a professional disposition as he towers over others in the room. His measured words about his childhood friend are carefully thought through. The word that Broderick used over and over again to describe Harry's mother was "nice."

During those childhood years, Harry Belluomini developed as a top-flight wiseass, a skill he held onto for his entire life. Broderick noted, "You could never get the best of him if we were trying to pick on one another. Generally, you just didn't want to pick on him."

Harry was also a peacekeeper from an early age. He watched out for his friends and neighbors when trouble arose. "Harry was very

strict about rights and wrongs. And he was like that even as a kid. Harry was a buddy. If you needed something, you just asked Harry, and he could ask me,” said Bill Broderick.

Harry and Broderick started high school together at Chicago’s St. Ignatius High School on Roosevelt Road. After a year, each transferred—Broderick to St. Mel High School and Harry to Austin High School on West End Avenue.

Milly Cutich Belluomini, Harry’s widow, says that there isn’t much more known about Harry’s initial upbringing or the precise reason he left St. Ignatius. However, Harry told her that he constantly got his knuckles whacked with rulers by the Jesuit priests, so he may simply have been fleeing their particular manner of discipline.

To his parents’ dismay, Harry eventually dropped out of high school altogether and instead found employment at Nabisco, then Motorola, in the warehouse. Harry received his GED and was drafted into the Army in the early 1950s. His assignment in the Army was maintenance, specifically on light AAA artillery weaponry. He trained at Fort Bliss, Texas, and although he wanted to transfer overseas, he served entirely stateside. He was stationed at Fort Lewis near Tacoma, Washington. Luckily, the Pellegrini family—Harry’s cousins—lived in Tacoma, and he spent a lot of time with his family away from family. For his service, Harry received the National Defense and Good Conduct Medals along with his honorable discharge.

His cousin Neena Pellegrini is a Seattle-based journalist. She remembers Harry visiting her home to have dinner when she was a child. “Harry was a unique character,” Neena said. “He had a big voice and a big brain. He was street smart but had a big heart, too.” When Neena was a journalism student at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, she stayed with Harry and his family at their Edison Park home. Neena added, “He never talked about work at home. And I remember he loved watching *Barney Miller* and *The Honeymooners* on TV. Harry was the best Monopoly player. He’d have the board memorized and know who was where and what they owned. He always had to have the car game piece for himself.”

Once he left the military, Harry returned to his old inventory clerk job back at Motorola. He also applied for and tested at both the Chicago Fire Department and the Chicago Police Department. The CPD called him first, which was Harry’s first choice, anyway. After graduation from the police academy, he was assigned to the Wood Street Station.

Harry had always been a very social person, and the pattern continued in his early days at the CPD. The pay for rookies was meager in the late 1950s—around \$5,000 annually—and his outgoing personality was a benefit to supplement his pay. He moved furniture and made deliveries for a liquor store. Belluomini took the liquor store job for more than an extra paycheck, though. He had a standing discount on any liquor he purchased from the store, which came in handy when he and his friends hosted their social gatherings.

His childhood friend Bill Broderick said, “Harry and another buddy named Bob Bernard formed the Young at Heart Club or YAH Club. Bob was a partner in a bowling alley. Everyone who wound up joining the group was bowling in one league or another, and we just got to know one another. It got so that even when we weren’t bowling, we’d show up at that bowling alley—Lorraine Bowling Alley—and just all became friends. We’d meet once a month, informally. We had a wonderful time. We’d go to different programs,” he explained, meaning movies, plays, and other outings, “and then we’d go out to dinner. The YAH Club lasted twenty years.”

It was a close-knit group and very particular about maintaining memberships. Broderick added, “One fella’s wife dropped out for years and tried to come back in, but that didn’t work out.”

Nearly 30 years after Harry Belluomini’s death, Bill Broderick still has constant thoughts about his old friend. “Harry was very intelligent, and when he came out of the service, he had a thing about the police department. And he found his calling for police work. I remember him talking about that a lot. That was his chosen profession. He would sometimes moan about the police job after he was on the force, but that was nonsense. It’s exactly what he wanted to do.”