

Deputy Bill Panzone's Brutal Attack

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In 1975, an escape attempt occurred at the Hall of Justice Jail that shortened Deputy Bill Panzone's career only days after it began and affected his life forever.

Bill Panzone started his career with the Sheriff's Department on January 17, 1975. He was sworn in as a deputy sheriff and worked as an "Off the Streeter" at the Hall of Justice Jail for two months before his academy class started. The purpose of the Sheriff's Department's "Off the Streeter" program was to hire great applicants right away so they weren't hired by another department. They worked as an "Off the Streeter" until the next academy class started. Panzone started immediately as a Deck Officer at the Hall of Justice Jail. By the time he started the academy, he was very familiar with procedures at the Hall of Justice Jail. He went to the Sheriff's Academy at Biscailuz' Center as a recruit on March 10, 1975 and was assigned to Class 173. Panzone and his classmates spent the next six months going through rigorous testing and training. With much pride, and all the pomp and circumstance that surrounds all LASD commencement ceremonies, he graduated from the Sheriff's Academy on Friday, August 22, 1975. Two days later he reported to work back at the Hall of Justice Jail, this time as a full-fledged Deputy Sheriff.

As a "Fish Deputy," a term used to describe new sworn personnel, Panzone was assigned to work 1250 Deck on the north side of the Hall of Justice. This module consisted of six long, linear rows. Four of these rows, containing twenty-two two man cells, emptied out into the gated in open area around the deck officer's wooden desk. Two shorter rows containing thirteen two man cells were around the corner on east side of the building. These rows were known as 1275. That meant that if the cells were full, Panzone was responsible for 228 inmates. There were times in those days when floor sleepers would be given a mattress and assigned to a cell. So the number of inmates might be higher. Panzone's Training Officer, Deputy John McQuay, was assigned to 1200 Deck on the south side of the building. 1200 was the mirror image of 1250 with a comparable number of inmates. The jail's visiting room was also located on the 12th floor in an area in the center of the building between the two decks. Inmates and personnel could gain entry to the floor a number of ways. The main jail stairwell ran from the tenth floor to the fifteenth floor and opened outside the 1250 deck officer's area. There was an additional stairwell that went ran through the deck officer's stations from 1050 deck through 1350 deck and a smaller stairwell that traversed the jail between the 1075 area and 1375. Inmates could come and go through any or all of these stairwells so deck officers needed to be ever vigilant.

The PM shift on 1250 deck was extremely busy. For the first week Panzone was beginning to get the handle on the deck's tough pace and starting to learn who the inmates were, but as his shift drew to a close on Friday August 29th, he found himself in a fight for his life. As their shift drew to a close that evening, Deputies Panzone and McQuay began locking the 12th floor inmates into their cells for the night. Because Deputy Panzone was still relatively new and on training, Deputy McQuay was assisting him, but he was around the corner out of Panzone's sight locking down another row. Once the inmates on each row were locked in their cells, it was standard procedure for deck officers to open the first cell. This was where the trusties were housed and they were let out of their cells to clean up. One of the trusties then pushed the large trashcan off the row and into the officer's area so it could be emptied.

Unbeknownst to Panzone, two inmates on one of the rows he was locking down planned an escape that night. Earlier, these inmates overpowered and tied up the two row trusties. They then hid them under bunks at the far end of the row so that Panzone wouldn't see them. The plotters then waited in the trusties' cell for Panzone to close all of the cell gates on the row and then open the gate to the first cell. The first part of their plan worked as they hoped. Panzone unlocked the trusty cell then opened the row gate so the trashcan could be removed. One trusty impersonator exited the cell and pushing the trashcan. But then everything went to hell. This inmate grabbed Deputy Panzone in a bear hug from the front, pinning his arms to his side. The other inmate exited the row holding the detached wooden brush from a push broom. He then began swinging the broom head as if he were wielding an axe striking Panzone repeatedly in the head.

Deputy McQuay heard the sound of the struggle and immediately shut the gate to the row he was locking down. As he locked the gate and the control box, he still heard the continued violent assault on Deputy Panzone. As Deputy McQuay ran around the corner, he observed the first inmate holding Panzone while the other was beating him with the broom head. McQuay saw several visible lacerations to Panzone's head. McQuay guessed that the inmates were trying to knock Panzone out to get his keys. Panzone was able to free one hand and began punching the inmate who was holding him on the head even as he continued to receive strikes from the broom head by the other inmate. Finally, Panzone was able to free himself from the hold of the first inmate and was able to block a couple of strikes from the other inmate's assault. Blocking these vicious strikes caused severe injuries to Panzone's hand, wrist and shoulder. McQuay looked around for a weapon to counter the one in the possession of the inmate attacking his trainee and saw a broom handle. Using this as a baton, he jabbed one of the inmates in the side. This inmate screamed and both inmates turned and ran back onto the row. With his adrenalin flowing, McQuay ran after the inmates. As he did this, he knocked a prowl phone off the wall to get assistance from other deputies.

At that time, the prowl phone system was the only way to call for help in an emergency. If a deputy was in a fight, all he had to do was knock the prowl phone off the hook. The deputy in charge of communications in the Attorney Room would buzz the phone back. If no one answered, he would press an emergency system button that would cause small green lights to flash throughout the jail. Along with the light, a bell would ding to the same pattern of the light. The emergency code that was sounded over the light and bell system was 3-2. This indicated that deputies should pick up the nearest prowl phone to be told where to respond.

During this horrific attack on Deputy Panzone, it took some time for the bells to sound and for the prowlers to respond to 1250 Deck. Meanwhile, after running a few cells down the row after the inmates, Deputy McQuay realized that some of the cell gates were still open and he was vulnerable to attack from other inmates. The Hall of Justice Jail was built in mid-1920s. Fifty years later, the locking mechanisms were not as efficient as they once were. Compounding the vulnerability of the locks was the inmates' practice of stuffing toilet paper into the mechanism which prevented them from securing. The cell gates appeared secure, but could easily be pulled open by an inmate. When McQuay saw several row gates open, he was fearful that other inmates on the row might attack him.

McQuay immediately exited the row and locked the entry gate. He quickly opened the gate control box and brought the arm down without issuing a warning slamming the gates closed. He hoped to trap the inmates who attacked Panzone outside their cells. When other deputies arrived, several carried the badly injured and bleeding Deputy Panzone to the jail clinic on the 14th floor. Other deputies backed up McQuay as he went down the row and identified the inmates who attacked his trainee. Once these inmates were removed from their cell they were searched. Hacksaw blades were found in their pockets. There also was a mark on one of the inmate's sides where McQuay jabbed him with the broom handle.

Deputy Panzone was transported to White Memorial Hospital. After their shift ended, all of Panzone's fellow deputies visited him in the hospital. The trauma to Bill Panzone's brain from the assault was severe, a blood clot formed several days after the injury. The right side of his body was partially paralyzed from the attack. To this day Panzone does not have normal feeling on the right side of his body. He also suffers from severe recurring headaches and horrible neck and spine pain.

Despite his injuries Bill Panzone was determined to recover and pursue the career he wanted all of his life. Within one year of the attack, despite his debilitating injuries and against the advice of many doctors, he returned to work. His doctors told him that his neck and spine were too

unstable for him to safely work as a deputy and if he became involved in another violent confrontation, another head injury could be catastrophic. But Bill was undaunted. He was again assigned to 1250 Deck and accepted this post despite his lingering memories of what transpired there only a year before. But all the time Panzone worked in tremendous pain. He did his best to hide the pain he was suffering and his physical limitations from the attack, however. Only his closest friends knew the truth.

After returning to work, Deputy Panzone actually spoke to one of the inmates who attacked him. He wanted to know why the inmates chose him for their assault. The inmate told him that it wasn't him that they attacked; it was the uniform. Their escape plan was to overpower a deputy and use his keys to escape. It was not a personal attack. They were desperate to escape. Their intention was to take Deputy Panzone hostage, use his keys to gain access to the officer's area near the windows, and then use the hacksaw blades to cut through the bars covering the external window and escape to freedom. Panzone's ability to fight back despite the injuries they inflicted against him caught them by surprise.

When the Hall of Justice Jail closed, Panzone was transferred to Central Jail. He worked as a Module Officer and Inmate Mess Hall Officer for another four and a half years and fortunately never became involved in a major fight. He then transferred to his dream job as a patrol deputy at Lakewood Station. He grew up in the station area and always hoped to work there. Bill was able to conceal the extent of his injuries while working at the Hall and CJ, but faced with the rigors of patrol the true state of his health began to manifest. The effects of his head injury caused him unbearable pain and in high stress or life threatening situations, he had trouble recalling details of what took place

In 1982, Bill's injuries caught up with him and he was compelled to retire. But the ever present pain he feels today is an ever present reminder of that assault on August 29th, 1975.

Far more deputies are permanently disabled than are killed in the line of duty. Just like Bill Panzone, they may be attacked by an inmate or suspect trying desperately to escape arrest or imprisonment. But they are also injured in a host of other ways: chasing suspects through dark backyards, tripping over kids toys while clearing backyards or stepping in potholes while providing traffic control. Others are permanently disabled in traffic collisions while trying desperately to respond to a citizen's call for help.

Bill Panzone's wife, Vickie, became a deputy a year before Bill retired. She said that she wasn't worried about an attack like Bill's happening to her. She spent a year physically preparing before she started the academy and felt ready to handle the job as a deputy. She knew that as a deputy there are situations that are out of your control, but by being physically and mentally

prepared you will survive. Following in the footsteps of their parents, two of Bill and Vickie's daughters also became LASD deputies and another is a Law Enforcement Technician.

Despite the devastating injuries Bill suffered in August 1975, he was determined to overcome them and return to full duty. His devotion and determination then encouraged his wife to follow him into the profession. He then reared three daughters who, inspired by their father's courage and their mother's dedication and service, also chose to enter the law enforcement profession. Bill Panzone is an inspiration and his story tells us much. Never give up in a fight and don't let any obstacle stop you. You are always being watched. The effect you have on those around you is more profound than you realize. The LASD legacy of the Panzone family is testament to that.

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