



Shooting leaves HPD officer with tough job: recovery

By **JAMES PINKERTON** Copyright 2009 Houston Chronicle

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Balloons float in Houston police officer Rick Salter's hospital room, left over from his 55th birthday celebration. There have been other milestones celebrated here in the months the injured undercover narcotics officer has spent rehabilitating: his 28th wedding anniversary, birthdays of his wife and one of his children.

Next to his bed is a white board, scrawled with notes documenting Salter's slow, painful recovery from a March shooting that took his life but didn't end it.

These are the trappings of the 28-year veteran officer's new existence, a grueling 9-to-4 regime of exhausting physical therapy, overshadowed by the reality he is not soon going home and resuming an active life.

Salter's face is gaunt, a testament to more than 50 pounds he has shed since that night when a drug suspect shot him in the face as he attempted to serve a search warrant. Sitting in a wheelchair, the woman he married as a rookie cop close at his side, Salter catalogued the damage left by a .40-caliber slug that tore through his carotid artery, robbing his brain of oxygen and triggering two strokes.

"I don't have use of my left leg, or use of my left

arm. I'm blind in my right eye," Salter said. He still carries bullet fragments in his throat and mouth. A second operation is needed to reduce the paralysis in his vocal cords, which lowered his voice to a hoarse whisper and limited his ability to swallow. On his right cheek is a deep, dime-sized depression where the bullet entered.

"It's going to be a long road," Salter said. "I mean, it's going to take me years — half a lifetime — to get back to normal, where I can walk. I'm definitely going to have to deal with this the rest of my life, no question about it."

It is the same purposeful approach that allowed Salter during nearly three decades on the force to execute thousands of search warrants without ever firing a shot.

"It's really tough to keep a positive attitude, but like I say, you don't have any choice. You could quit, but I'm not a quitter. I don't believe in that," he said.

Hours of therapy

The officer said that, despite the pain and exhaustion brought on by rehabilitation, to do otherwise would mean a descent into depression.

"My wife keeps me going. You've got to take it one day at time and try and get better every day — that's all I can do, I have no choice. I mean, I have a wife and family I have to take care of, and (I have to) get myself back as close to normal," Salter said. "Because I can't stand this, I was a very active person prior to this happening, in my

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private life and on the job. So, it's driving me crazy, being in this wheelchair. But I'll be out of it one of these days."

Salter said there is no break from hours of physical therapy, which includes using exercise machines and walking with the help of therapists.

"Everything that he does every day is painful," said his wife, Sue Salter, who has moved to a nearby apartment. "A day doesn't go by that there's not pain somewhere, if not everywhere, on his body, starting from his head down to his toes. Someday he'll be throwing up in a bucket from doing physical therapy at the same time, but he's very determined."

Salter has a limited memory of March 5, when police say drug suspect Wilfredo Alfaro fired a shot from a Glock pistol as officers broke through the door at his home on East Avenue O. Alfaro, a citizen of El Salvador, was ordered out of the U.S. by an immigration judge in March 2001, returned illegally and was arrested three times before the shooting.

"I remember bridging the door and as soon as the door came open, that was it — I never heard the shot," Salter said. "The next thing I remember, I was in the ambulance ... actually, when I woke up I thought that I had tripped and fell, I didn't realize I was shot."

Sgt. John Yencha, Salter's supervisor on the narcotics squad, said he was part of the raid team at the request of other officers.

"The reason he was there that day, and that wasn't his squad, is because he is good at what he does," Yencha said.

Salter's shooting added fuel to the contentious debate over the Houston Police Department's long-standing policy against questioning residents about their immigration status. Houston officials, along with those in every other major Texas city, insist their no-ask policies are critical to effectively police crime in communities with large concentrations of immigrants.

Gary Blankinship, president of the Houston Police Officers' Union, has pushed for the department to not only scrap the policy, but link city jailers with federal immigration databases.

"It's important because there's enough bad guys, so we should do what we can do to (level) the playing field, either deport them or send them to prison," he said.

Salter's shooting, along with the deaths of officers Henry Canales last month and Rodney Johnson in September 2006, were committed by illegal immigrants.

Earlier this month, U.S. immigration officials approved a request for a group of HPD jailers to receive expedited training on immigration databases to check the records of those booked into jail. Mayor Bill White made the request days after Salter's shooting.

Salter is chagrined that his crippling injuries came at the hands of a criminal who was not supposed to be here.

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"I don't know what the answer is ... they deported him once, how did he get back in this country so easily?" he asked. "If he hadn't gotten back in, I wouldn't be in this situation for the rest of my life."

would like to take his life every day when he goes to work. People need to recognize the dangers and not take that job for granted."

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Many are helping

Salter and his wife say they have been supported at every turn by members of the police department, as well as the police union.

One regular visitor is former HPD motorcycle officer Merle T. Taylor, who suffered a crippling spinal cord injury in car wreck while on patrol in 1994. Despite being a quadriplegic, he is able to dove hunt and is active in his church and with the police union.

"His wife describes him as having a Type A personality, and I believe he'll work at it, get stronger, and never give up," Taylor said of Salter. "You just have to look at the positive, not dwell on what you can't do, but what you can."

Sue Salter, who met her future husband while studying at Texas A&M, said many people don't realize the danger police officers face each day.

"They think he's just gone home and his life is just back to what it was," Sue Salter said. "Rick's life will never be the way it was."

"If people don't already recognize what a police officer does for them, they need to appreciate it more," she said. "He goes into a hostile environment every day. There's someone who

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