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## From tragedy to triumph, Koehler battles on

By James Haag

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Tommy Koehler, a retired NYPD detective who lost his left leg below the knee in an on-duty shooting, now hopes to use his running skills to improve the quality of his cousin's life.

COURTESY OF TOMMY KOEHLER

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*Hampton Bays resident and retired New York Police Department Detective Tommy Koehler, 40, nearly lost his life in the line of duty 14 years ago during a gun battle that left three people dead. Koehler had to have his left leg amputated below the knee and replaced with a prosthetic limb after being shot. Koehler fought back to become a renowned distance runner and triathlete. Among his victories was a new record time for American below-knee amputee runners in the 2006 New York City Marathon. A recent family tragedy has given the already motivated Koehler greater incentive to push himself.*

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It was a call that changed Tommy Koehler's life forever.

In December 1994, Koehler, then an officer with the New York Police Department, and his partner responded to a report over the radio of a robbery in progress. There had been a shooting at a restaurant in Rego Park, Queens, which left a hostess dead.

A gun battle ensued when they arrived at the scene, eventually leading the suspect, Koehler, his partner and several fellow officers down Queens Boulevard to an underground garage near Lefrak City. The suspect, increasingly desperate, shot and

killed a man paying the parking attendant in an attempt to steal his car. The man had left his family in another restaurant nearby.

Under fire from the cornered suspect, Koehler sought cover behind a cement stanchion some distance away, first requiring him to run through an unconcealed area.

"I got about 20 feet out in the open when he hits me," said Koehler, 40, of Hampton Bays, recollecting the moment. "It was almost like I tripped. I didn't feel the pain until about 10 minutes later."

Koehler had been shot through his left thigh, severing his femoral artery and a nerve that paralyzed his leg from the knee down. He was able to take cover, but he was losing blood fast. Braving the gunfire once again, Koehler crawled toward the garage exit, where fellow officers grabbed him and ran him in a police van to Queens General Hospital.

"If it wasn't for that, I wouldn't have made it," said Koehler.

His eyes began to close as the lights from the hospital grew closer. An adrenaline injection woke him up as they admitted him, but he soon lost consciousness again, waking five days later.

The suspect had been shot and killed in the exchange. Koehler would later find out that the suspect was a mentally disturbed man, enraged at having been evicted by his landlord. The landlord was his first victim before he went to the restaurant that Koehler was called to. It turned out, the hostess was the landlord's wife.

## **AFTERMATH**

Although he survived the shooting, Koehler's mobility was curtailed considerably by the loss of function in his left leg below the knee. He tried to save his leg and correct sensory problems by undergoing more than a dozen surgeries over the next four years. The first year, he said, was particularly hard also as he fought depression over his life's direction.

"I said to myself, 'I'm not going to let this get me down,'" he said. "I'm going to live my life."

The leg was still intact after the shooting incident, but recurring ankle infections motivated him to consult surgeons about amputation.

"It was more of a burden than anything else," he said.

Koehler, admitting he was hesitant to embrace the idea at first, said that he realized that amputation was the way to get back to a more active lifestyle. A visit to A Step Ahead Prosthetics in Hicksville helped sway his decision.

"I come crutching into the waiting area, and there's little kid in a hockey jersey with two fake legs," he said. "He's got to be five, if that, running across the room. That's all I needed to see. I went home that day, called the surgeon the next day and said, 'Sign me up.'"

Koehler remembered the disconnect between his own elation and the disappointment his family felt at hearing the news.

"It was a strange feeling," he said, laughing. "Actually, I was excited about it. Everyone else was distraught."

In January 1998, he underwent a nearly two-hour procedure to amputate his leg below the knee.

## **BACK UP TO SPEED**

Physical therapy following the amputation dovetailed with adjustments to his new prosthetic, and both were processes that could not be rushed.

"After a year, it finds a shape that it's going to stay in," he said of adjusting to the prosthetic's fitting. "There's little problems here and there. But the first six months are painful and time-consuming. Four weeks after surgery, your stitches aren't healed yet."

Around this time, Koehler took a fresh look at running as a way to stay active. Not that he hadn't done it before, but prior to the loss of his leg he said it had been a means to an end.