

I Used To Come For Your Guns – Now I Support Your Right to Defend Yourself

John J. Cardillo, Jun 26, 2014

New York City in the early 1990s has been described as many things, few of them complimentary.

The administration of Mayor David Dinkins was plagued with political and police corruption scandals, and some of the highest crime rates in the history of the city. Murders and violent crimes were up, tourism was down. The Mollen Commission hearings saw confidence in the New York Police Department drop dramatically. As a result, crime soared.

On the southeast corner of 181st Street and Ryer Ave in The Bronx stands the 46th Precinct, The Alamo, a place Time Magazine once called, “The Most Dangerous Square Mile In America.” So dangerous a place, that in the late 1980s that the Red Cross refused to send volunteers to help the needy.

And that was where I worked. The “four six” as we called it, was an “A House.” The busiest of the busy. The worst of the worst.

It’s where I became an adult. Where I saw that very bad things really do happen to good people.

The 46th was known for having high violent crime, an old crumbling precinct building, terrible parking, and the best cops in the NYPD. There was a work ethic, fearlessness, and attention to the job that might only be found in a handful of other commands. I learned too many great lessons to count during my time there.

But I also learned one very bad one. One that I am ashamed to admit I complicitly bought into for a while. And I didn’t learn it from the cops, but from the administration that ran New York City and the NYPD.

That horrible lesson was that gun control and strict gun laws reduce crime and protect people.

When we did hear a politician discuss guns it was typically in the context of someone being shot, and more needing to be done to take guns off the street. And that all sounded very logical. Why would we want bad guys to have guns?

I never gave any thought to the implications of law abiding people needing to defend themselves, nor to the concept that criminals don't follow gun laws. Regretfully, I didn't understand just how important the Second Amendment was back then.

So there I went, into the NYPD Academy a typical New Yorker. I took public policy at face value, comfortable that the government was truly interested in protecting me and my fellow citizens.

Believing that "if you have a gun, the criminal will take it and use it on you," I was going to be a do-gooder. I was going to aggressively get those evil guns off the street. We were the cops. We were trained. We had guns, you didn't need one. We were there to protect you.

How wrong I was.

I quickly learned in both the academy and my rookie field training that the cops probably won't get there in time. In fact, a 911 call by definition is reactive to either a crime in progress or past crime. A victim is being, or has been created.

My first night on patrol the radio chatter exploded. The 911 calls were coming in fast and furiously. I knew I had been assigned to a busy command, but this was something else entirely.

In this April 1, 2010 photo, NYPD transit officer Robert McMillan patrols the tunnel while riding the 4 train from the Bowling Green station in Manhattan to the Borough Hall station in the borough of Brooklyn in New York.

In what I think was my first four hours on the job, I responded to a rape, attempted murder by stabbing, and a guy about my age with his face slashed to the cheek bone then through to his tongue. All three unarmed.

Remember those cop shows where the old timers say things like “in 30 years I’ve never had to pull my gun or put my hands on anyone?” Well, that guy definitely wasn’t assigned to the 46th Precinct.

And this is when and where my pro-Second Amendment evolution began – about a year into my time on the street, seeing victim upon victim. All unarmed. All defenseless.

I began to realize things would have been different had they been armed, because the very few legal NYC gun owners I came across had won their confrontations with criminals.

I finally told one elderly victim of a particularly bad post-robbery beating to leave the city and buy a shotgun (all that was needed was a New York driver’s license in the surrounding counties). I was admonished by a supervisor. I didn’t care.

Critiquing myself I thought, here I was, a kid in his early 20s who was allowed to carry a firearm unrestricted 24/7. Yet, doctors, bankers, lawyers, nurses, carpenters, retirees, moms, and dads couldn’t. People far more mature and responsible than I didn’t have the same ability to protect themselves that I did. But the bad guys had all the guns they wanted.

Gun laws stopped making sense.

Then It Happened To Me

A few days before Christmas 1994, my partner and I were patrolling a particularly dangerous part of the command. Snow was falling pretty heavily so we expected a quiet night.

The familiar crackle of the radio followed by alert tones indicating that it was something serious – male menacing another male with a firearm was what central (our term for dispatch) said. Then she gave the location. Literally around the corner. We headed over. His description then came over the radio, and like a TV drama, he crossed the street maybe 20 feet in front of our car.

We exited, he drew a firearm and immediately began shooting in our direction. We returned fire but with the heavy snow, unsure footing on the icy pavement, and pitch black street we had no idea if our rounds made contact. Luckily his didn't.

Our rounds hadn't connected, but our 10-13 call (highest priority "officer needs assistance" call in the NYPD) brought the cavalry, and with it a very fast and hungry K-9 that ran the bad guy down and had teeth on him in minutes.

That was the first of several incidents in which I had to either fire my gun, or was fired on. It was an unusual tour that I didn't have to draw my weapon as precautionary cover.

I began to think "if they don't care about killing cops, that mom dropping her kids at the school bus doesn't stand a chance. She needs a gun too."

My evolution was that immediate. It just clicked. I became a staunch Second Amendment advocate and supporter, and every day that passion grows.

Thankfully, I'm not the only one. I find that many of us who patrolled the worst areas have become the most vehement spokespeople for the 2nd Amendment.

A good friend of mine and 46th Precinct alumnus Detective Anthony Agnelli is by any definition a hero. Retired from Manhattan North Narcotics, he was involved in several shooting incidents, and was stabbed in the chest but luckily saved by his body armor.

I asked Agnelli how he came to be so pro-Second Amendment, and he had this to say: "In all my years as a city detective I never encountered a licensed gun owner using a firearm in a negative way. I've been in several shootings. I also was stabbed in the chest. I'm not anti-knife."

There is a long list of current and retired cops I know who feel the same, as well as parent groups like 1 Million Moms Against Gun Control. Support is growing.

I'll close by imparting this piece of advice. I don't carry a gun daily because I was a cop. I carry a gun daily because as a cop, I saw what happened to the victims who didn't.