

Deadly Force

Friday the 13th

By John Wills

33 years of service

Quite frankly, the shot surprised me. The combination of seeing the muzzle flash, hearing the loud report, and feeling the incredible impact in my chest, caused me to momentarily lose my bearings. I slumped against the wall and lowered myself to the floor, needing to reassess my situation. A few seconds later came the second shot...

I was a young Chicago cop, five years on the job, and working the 6pm - 2am power shift on a warm summer night in the Englewood District, one of the highest crime areas on the South Side. I loved the work; my partner and I responded to high risk felony calls—man with a gun, robbery in progress, etc. In between calls we made street stops on suspected stolen vehicles, lined up gang members searching for guns and drugs—you know the routine. It was expected that each team make two or three felony arrests per shift. We were the Area 2 SOG (Special Operations Unit), and we were routinely deployed in areas experiencing high crime, particularly involving guns and violence.

The night of Friday the 13th, we had a traffic stop going when the call blared over the radio: “Robbery in progress, 63rd & Ashland, Church’s Fried Chicken.” We looked at each other, recognizing that the location was only a few blocks away and said, “Let’s go!” That night my regular partner had taken time off, and I was paired with another cop

from my unit whose partner was also off. I had a hunch that this would be a bonafide robbery. I knew that at this time of night the store was closing; the bad guys would be looking to snatch the day's receipts.

We pulled up a bit away from the storefront, so as not to alert anyone inside should the robber still be on the scene. No cars out front. Store doors locked. No sign of employees milling around inside. These are all signs that this was the "real deal." I silently went to the window out front where the paid-for items are given to the customer. In a high crime area, the counters are protected with bullet-proof glass. The pass through food window ensures that the store isn't too easy a victim.

I peered through that little opening and saw the bad guy holding a gun on two female employees. He was yelling at them to open the office door so that he could get to the safe. Apparently, the store manager had locked himself in his office when the robber announced the "stick-up." There was a hallway separating the front of the store from the rear, enough distance to allow me to crawl through the food window and creep down the hall. My plan was to surprise him when he escaped out the rear door, which was plainly in my sight.

As I was slowly moving down the hall, another unit arrived on the scene. This turn of events was catastrophic for me. The assisting unit pulled right up to the front doors—lights and siren blaring. The bad guy heard the commotion, and at that instant saw me and fired. I felt as if a hot sledgehammer had just hit me in the right side of my

chest. The impact caused me to drop my weapon; I slid down along the wall to recoup and recovered my revolver with my left hand, not knowing if the bad guy was still in the game, or if he had a partner in crime.

Just as I raised my weapon, the second shot hit me...the pain registered in my right leg. More confusion—where did this one come from? I was looking right at the bad guy, who I had instinctively shot, and knew that he had not fired at me again. Where did the shot come from? As I looked to my right, I saw my partner leaning through the food window with his gun sticking inside and the rest of him on the outside. I knew at once that *he* had shot me in the leg.

I looked back to the bad guy. He had finally dropped to the ground, succumbing to a .38 round in the solar plexus. My partner later explained that he was unable to get through the window due to his overweight condition. When he heard the shot and saw the bad guy with the gun and me on the floor, he took a shot while leaning in the window. Unfortunately for me, my partner's marksmanship rivaled his fitness program: both were sorely lacking.

My Friday the 13th journey was just beginning. When the smoke cleared, and it was finally determined that the gunman was alone, the three employees locked themselves in the manager's office and refused to come out. The problem was this: I could not walk, thanks to my partner, and all the doors to the business were locked—no one could come in. I yelled for the employees to unlock the doors so that my colleagues

could get me to the hospital, but they ignored my pleas. As I compressed the wound with my left hand, and saw the once blue uniform shirt now turning crimson, I knew that I needed help. My leg felt worse than the chest wound—the bullet had nicked my shin bone as it passed through my leg. Remember how painful that accidental kick to the shin was? Although painful, I knew that it wasn't life threatening. But I was getting concerned about the amount of blood loss from the chest wound.

My frustrated colleagues finally attached a chain to the front doors and to a “paddy wagon” and came in to get me. You would think that would be the end of the story, short trip to the ER, etc., but you would be wrong. En route to the hospital, the brakes gave out in the paddy wagon that was transporting me. We had to pull over and wait for another wagon to switch out. When I finally arrived at the ER, the journey continued. The doctor wanted an x-ray of the chest wound before he operated. As I lay on the table in the x-ray room, the technician expected me to change positions for a better picture. Due to the pain, and the fact that I was doing my best to stay conscious, I was having difficulty complying with her requests. She became angry, telling me that “you cops are all alike, no wonder you get shot!” I had a great response ready, but held it in check. My life was in the hands of these folks, the last thing that I wanted was to alienate them.

Some time later I was wheeled into the operating room. I was finally able to “rest” and not have to fight to stay awake. I had felt that if I allowed myself to “sleep,” I

would never awaken. As I was being given the sedative I asked the doctor, “Is it okay now, can I go to sleep? Do you have me?” That survival instinct was still in gear.

I awoke to find myself in a semi-private room, my wife at my bedside. She related to me that she had been in bed when there was a knock at our front door. She opened it to find two detectives. They told her that I had been involved in a fight and injured my hand, the result being that I was not able to sign the papers at the hospital. This seemed plausible to her. I had been to the ER on several occasions as a result of street altercations. However, when she arrived at the hospital in the back of that car, there were a dozen news trucks there. Her first instinct was that I was dead...

That experience for a spouse is as traumatic as the shooting is for the officer. My hat goes off to all police families that routinely are exposed to these moments and move forward. About five years later, it would happen again. This time my sister-in-law’s brother, who was in my same unit, was shot and killed during a traffic stop.

As my wife and I tried to comfort each other in that hospital room, I found that my black Friday had still not ended. I answered the phone ringing at my bedside. On the other end was a thug threatening to come to the hospital and kill me, and then go to my house to kill my wife and children. It seems that the cretin that I killed was a member of one of the most violent street gangs in Chicago—The Disciples. He had just been released from jail on another robbery, and was practicing his trade again when I put an

end to his career. That phone call triggered a 24-7 protection detail on my hospital room and my home. Lord, would this ever end?

Eventually it did end. In fact, once I got home and was feeling strong again, my police protective detail and I played games of cat and mouse. When it was clear that the phone call was bravado and nothing more, my family and I routinely tried to lose our “tail.” My wife and I would load up the kids in the station wagon to go shopping. On the way we would try to lose the cops. The kids got a big kick out of it all.

My Friday the 13th proved to be an extraordinary lesson. It reinforced for me the fact that fitness plays a tremendous role in survival. I had always known that my job as a cop would put me in great danger. The possibility of a life-threatening injury was always present. To increase my chances of surviving such an event, I worked out every day. I felt that being fit was just as important as being proficient with my firearms and tactics. After the operation, my doctor told me that had I not been as fit as I was, I would have probably died. He went on to say that most cops die in shootings, not from the wound, but from the trauma associated with it, since they had not experienced stress from the challenge of tough workouts and other “stress inoculators.” They also have an unreal expectation of what happens to them in a shooting, most of their information coming from Hollywood movies. I vowed from that moment on to continue my workout routine, and to proselytize as many of my colleagues as possible.

I eventually left the Chicago Police Department after 12 years, becoming an FBI Special Agent. I became a “Street Survival Instructor,” both domestically and internationally,

continuing to pass on my message to as many of my law enforcement brothers and sisters as possible. I retired after 21 years of service. That black Friday was a pivotal time in my life. As strange as it may sound, I am thankful for having had that experience. Because of that long journey, I just may have helped some of my fellow officers survive a critical incident.