



RALPH FRIEDMAN, NYPD'S MOST DECORATED DETECTIVE

'GOD, GUNS, GUTS AND GLORY'

DORSEY KINDLER

It's difficult to say exactly how many tattoos Ralph Friedman has accumulated over the course of his life, though at last count the tally stood at more than 100. As several decades have passed, he's gradually run out of real estate, with newer ink covering older designs.

His obsession began when he was a 20-year-old trainee with the New York City Police Department. He was too young to become a full-fledged cop but old enough to come out of Big Joe's Tattoo Parlor in Mount Vernon, New York, with an eagle on his right biceps.

He didn't think he'd get any more at the time, but over the years, his body became a tapestry of his life and his career. He thought of it as memorializing or commemorating all that was important to him as he became the most decorated detective in NYPD history.

Perhaps the most relevant tattoo for our purposes is located on his trigger finger. It reads, "JUSTIFIED 4X." That's the number of lives he took in the line of duty on the streets of the Bronx — in some of the most violent precincts in all of New York City — in the 1970s and early 1980s.

"For us cops, it was a fight for survival in a borough gone rogue," he said.

TRIAL BY FIRE

Friedman grew up in the relatively tranquil Fordham section of the North Bronx in a working-class neighborhood that was primarily made up of Jews, Irish and Italians. His mother was a homemaker, and his father managed the San Carlos Hotel in Manhattan.

He spent his days lifting weights to bulk up his naturally skinny frame and racing his '67 Mustang under the connecting highway in Astoria, Queens. Though he had a few run-ins with the police, his commitment to physical fitness and clean living largely kept him out of trouble.

"The Vietnam War was in full swing," he said in his 2017 autobiography. "And while most guys my age were smoking weed and drinking any cheap form of booze they could find, I never touched either. I viewed that crap as poison and abstained from it totally because I regarded my body as sacred."

Not sure what he wanted to do with his life, Friedman took a walk-in police test at nearby Clinton High School in 1967. He



found the test easy and was later informed that he'd scored in the top 5 percent. He became a trainee in January 1968 and answered 911 calls in Manhattan until he hit the requisite age of 21. He was sworn in as a police officer in February 1970.

After he graduated the academy, he was assigned to the 41st Precinct in the South Bronx. Even though it was located a few miles from his boyhood home, it may as well have been an alternate universe, such was the disparity in socioeconomic conditions. The 2.5-square-mile precinct was nicknamed "Fort Apache" in a nod to the Wild-West-level of violent crime.

By the early 1970s, the South Bronx was the epitome of urban decay. As the decade progressed, some 300,000 residents fled the area, and entire city blocks were lost to arson. Property values plummeted, and large numbers of tenements and multi-story apartment buildings sat abandoned for long periods of time. Street gangs were rampant, drug deals were conducted in the open, and children hurled bricks at cops from the rooftops for sport.

"It was like a war zone," said Les Rudnick, one of Friedman's former partners from the "Four-One." "There's no other way to describe it. It was the worst precinct to work in the city of New York. It was a hellhole."

Friedman hit the ground running, making quality arrest after quality arrest from his first day on the job. His work ethic and determination caught the eyes of his superiors, and before long he was assigned

to the precinct's elite Anti-Crime Unit.

Officers in the unit dressed in plain-clothes (military fatigue jackets were the unofficial uniform) and patrolled the streets in old yellow taxis, Con Ed vans and milk trucks, looking to catch perpetrators in acts of crime. It wasn't unusual to get into 10 to 15 confrontations during an eight-hour tour. Friedman found the work exhilarating.

"I was getting a reputation as someone who didn't take shit from the street," he said. "If criminals cooperated during the arrest, they were fine; if they raised their hands to me, I raised mine to them."

His goal was twofold: make it home in one piece, and get the word out on the street that if you messed with any cop — particularly Ralph Friedman — you were going to pay for it.

ETCHED INTO HIS MEMORY

The day Friedman became involved in his first fatal shooting, he was temporarily paired up with fellow Anti-Crime officer Kal Unger. The two were cruising in Unger's Volkswagen Beetle when a call for a burglary in progress on Fox Street went out over the radio.

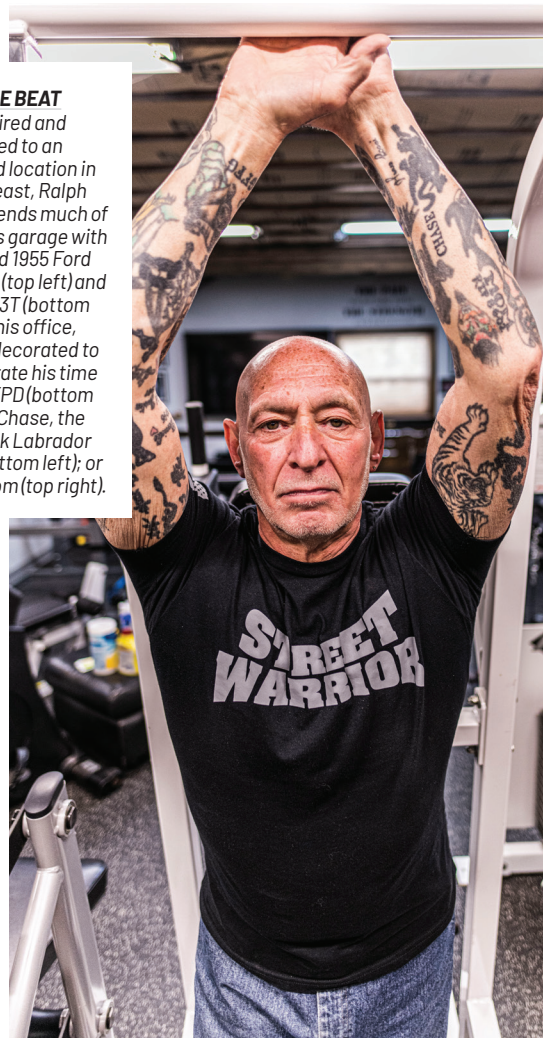
The first unit to arrive on the scene, Friedman and Unger raced to the top floor of the urine-soaked and garbage-strewn tenement. As they hit the top-floor landing, they could hear a woman screaming in an apartment at the far end of a narrow hallway.

They found the apartment pitch black as they busted through the door, shouting "Police!" several times. Their eyes adjusted to the dark as they passed through a short foyer into a hallway that led to the rear of the apartment. That's when the perpetrator, Charles Williams, opened fire.

Unger was taken down almost immediately while Friedman was able to drop Williams with his Colt Detective Special. The three of them fired a total of 18 rounds in what couldn't have been more than a 10-second gun battle in a space the area of a medium-sized closet.

Unger was rushed to nearby Jacobi Hospital, where he received 72 pints of blood that were mostly donated by fellow cops. Mayor John Lindsay flew in from Manhattan by helicopter to commend Friedman and personally check on Unger's status.

"To have effective policing, cops must



OFF THE BEAT
 Now retired and relocated to an undisclosed location in the Northeast, Ralph Friedman spends much of his time in his garage with his restored 1955 Ford F-100 pickup (top left) and Hummer H3T (bottom right); in his office, which was decorated to commemorate his time with the NYPD (bottom left); with Chase, the family black Labrador retriever (bottom left); or in his gun room (top right).

feel that the mayor has their backs," Friedman declared. "That is not to say that renegade police officers should get a pass; it means that every incident gets fair treatment."

Friedman was exonerated for the homicide in the coming weeks.

"I viewed my actions as totally justified, and as such my conscience was clear," he reflected later after things calmed down. "I didn't intend on killing Charles Williams. Police officers are trained to stop a threat, to recognize the imminent danger and erase it by no longer having it exist. You keep firing until the threat is stopped. Williams had been shot numerous times before my shot to his heart ended his life. Had he fallen to the floor or just dropped his weapon and given up, he'd have survived."

DECORATIONS AND SCARS

As time went on, the action was non-stop – and the threats to Friedman's life were too numerous to count. One day, as he arrested two brothers who held up a supermarket, Friedman was forced to leap onto their vehicle when they attempted a getaway. With his arm hooked through an open window, Friedman used his free hand to beat the driver on the head with his gun until he stopped the car.

"Both stickup men were convicted in court," Friedman said.

Friedman was patrolling the streets after dark in a yellow cab with partner Bobby DeMatas when they witnessed a man in his late 30s shoot a teenager at point-blank range. Friedman immediately stopped the cab and tried to arrest the perpetrator. But instead of giving up, the man exchanged gunfire with Friedman, ran up the street and took cover behind a parked car.

DeMatas ducked behind a car directly across the street from the gunman while Friedman took cover in a stairway leading to the basement of a tenement, effectively triangulating the perpetrator. Friedman hit the man directly in the torso several times during the ensuing gun battle, but the man refused to go down.

Eventually, the shooter dropped to his knees after being shot in the shoulder, and Friedman rushed in to apprehend him. But the man propped himself up and leveled his gun, forcing Friedman to shoot him through the forehead to stop the threat.

A later autopsy revealed the perpetrator had been hit eight times, but a combination of alcohol and drugs in his system made him temporarily impervious to the bullet strikes. The wounded teenager was taken to the hospital, where he recovered.

During the next Medal Day ceremony, Friedman and DeMatas were awarded the Combat Cross, the NYPD's second-highest honor.

Not every incident saw Friedman escape injury, however. He was working out in his apartment one day when he received a frantic call from his girlfriend. She and her mom had gotten into a dispute with two males over a parking spot. By the time Friedman got there, the men were brandishing tire irons.

Friedman held out his shield and identified himself as a police officer, but they double-teamed him immediately. One blow from a tire iron broke his right hand (though he managed to hold on to his revolver), while another from behind fractured his skull. His knees buckled and his vision began to darken as he heard the siren of a radio car. He shot one of his attackers through the neck while the responding officer disarmed the other.

The beating left Friedman in the hospital overnight and on sick leave for more than two months. His head mended fairly quickly, but it took two months before the broken hand regained full function.

"I understood that police work was hazardous," Friedman said, "and that, no matter how tough I was, there was always the chance that I'd be hurt bad. I now had one bad injury under my belt and knew that there would probably be more in the future."

'FAILURE TO SAFEGUARD'

Friedman learned a tough lesson about weapon retention while attending a boxing match at a local school one Friday while off duty. A man shoved Friedman's younger brother Stu while they were taking their seats. The elder Friedman shoved the man back, and the man's friend immediately got in Friedman's face. The fight was on.

The two men had several friends who jumped in, and all made use of the event's folding chairs as the melee spilled into the ring and back on the floor. The police arrived before long and pulled everyone apart. It was around this time that Ralph

Friedman made the sickening realization that the revolver he'd tucked into his waistband was missing.

"Losing a gun is devastating to a cop," he said. "If someone found it, the murder it might commit was in part your fault."

The mistake was going to cost Friedman at least five days' pay. And the blemish on his record certainly wasn't going to help him get into the Detective Bureau. He envisioned his career circling the drain as he felt a tap on his shoulder.

A uniformed sergeant dangled Friedman's revolver with a finger through the trigger guard and asked if it belonged to him. He'd found it under a chair. Friedman breathed a sigh of relief as he escaped the departmental violation of "failure to safeguard."

AN UNRIVALED LEGACY

The action continued, the stories piled up, and the legend of Ralph Friedman grew and grew. He apprehended a notorious rapist, shot a Doberman as it leapt at him through a car window and was nearly murdered by the sister of a perpetrator whom he had shot and killed. He even used a wooden board to get from one rooftop to another in order to sneak up on a group of drug dealers.

During the course of his career with the NYPD, Friedman made 2,000 arrests, 100 off-duty arrests and 6,000 assists. He was involved in 15 shootings, with eight perpetrators shot and four killed. He was promoted to detective, relocated to another Bronx precinct and was working toward his goal of becoming a first-grade detective when a freak car accident in August 1983 left him unable to work.

"Ralph was a straight shooter," said his former captain, Tom Walker. "I think he liked the action. I think he was fair. He wasn't a cruel guy, and he wasn't brutal. He just did what he had to do. He was a wonder."

Q&A WITH RALPH

We caught up with Ralph Friedman over Zoom earlier this year after he'd just gotten his latest tattoo – "God, guns, guts and glory" – emblazoned on his arm.

Several years ago, he moved from New York City to an undisclosed location in the Northeast, where, after more than 30 years removed from the job, he still keeps the hours of an officer who works

NOTEWORTHY NYPD OFFICERS OF THE PAST

■ **George W. Gastlin:** Gastlin joined the NYPD in 1864 and in June 1876 was appointed to head the newly organized "Steamboat Squad." This special unit was formed to battle swindlers, river thieves and street gangs infesting the wharves, ferries and steamboats along New York's riverfront. By the end of August, the squad made 152 arrests, rescued over a dozen individuals from drowning and recovered \$1,600 in stolen property (roughly \$40,000 today). For his service in helping rid the riverfront of crime, Gastlin was presented with a gold shield in 1884. He retired in 1890 after more than two decades on the force.

• **Anthony Allaire:** A brevet brigadier general during the American Civil War, Allaire spent 34 years with the NYPD. He served as a member of Gastlin's Steamboat Squad but is best known for breaking up several nefarious gangs, including the Slaughter House Gang, and apprehending prominent forgers and criminals. Among the criminals he brought to justice was the murderer

the night shift. His favorite room in his house is his office, which he personally remodeled and turned into a museum of his time with the NYPD. The walls are adorned with photos, newspaper clippings and commendations. It's where he goes to relax, reflect and conduct the occasional media interview.

At age 72, he still exercises vigorously several times per week and weighs in at just under 190 pounds—only a few pounds shy of his fighting weight during his days of wrestling perpetrators into submission in the "Four-One." He still doesn't drink or smoke and does his best to eat clean.

He wrote *Street Warrior: The True Story of the NYPD's Most Decorated Detective and the Era That Created Him* in 2017 with co-author Patrick Picciarelli. That same year, the TV channel Investigation Discovery came out with a six-part series called *Street Justice: The Bronx*. Friedman thinks both projects turned out well and are accurate depictions of his career. Both are available for purchase through Amazon.

He also continues training and doing the paperwork to maintain his right to carry as a retired member of law enforcement. Just like the old days, he likes to carry a six-shot Colt Detective Special in a holster on his left ankle.

Do you think the .38-caliber snubby is still an effective self-defense tool?

Oh, yes I do. I'm a little partial because I've always been trained in .38s. And when I needed a gun to resort to deadly physical force, I always used a .38. I still carry one today. I'm not an automatic man.

Daniel McFarland, who shot and mortally wounded his wife's lover, and Albert D. Richardson, a prominent writer and editor of *The New York Times*.

• **Mary A. Sullivan:** Sullivan became a member of the NYPD in 1911 after the unexpected death of her husband. She made a name for herself with her skill working undercover, most notably for her involvement in the Herman Rosenthal murder case. "I've found few things in the world more thrilling than the moment of revealing myself to a trapped and startled crook as a woman detective," she wrote. Sullivan became the first female homicide detective and lieutenant in the department's history. She later published a memoir of her experiences titled *My Double Life: The Story of a New York Policewoman* in 1938. She remained a member of the NYPD until her retirement in 1946.

— **Frank Jastrzembki, Associate Editor**

What do you like about ankle carry?

When you reach for [your pistol] — if you're right-handed and you're reaching down to your left ankle — that arm comes into play. Your arm is shielding your body. So hopefully if you take a bullet, you're going to take it in the biceps or forearm before it enters your chest or your stomach. Plus you're going into a crouch position, which makes you a smaller target.

During your time as a cop, did you ever stop someone who was carrying legally?

Oh yeah. I've stopped police officers. I've stopped corrections officers. I've stopped civilians and store owners. Even though their weapons were always concealed, I was the type of guy, you know, who went out there looking for guns. I caught everybody with guns. As long as they obeyed the commands I gave and produced the proper identification, they were on their way.

What are your thoughts on [private citizens] carrying concealed?

First off, I believe that responsible citizens should be able to carry a gun. As long as they're investigated and licensed by the police. And they're responsible citizens. I support the Second Amendment.

Have you had to draw your carry gun since retiring?

I was in Manhattan about 20 years ago and I saw a guy getting stabbed on the street. And I drew my weapon and I stopped the [perpetrator] from stabbing him. The police responded, and [the perpetrator] was arrested.

Any particular tactics you can recommend from your gunfighting experience?

So I chased after this one guy, and he ran into a vacant building that was pitch black. I had my flashlight at arm's length. And I'm flashing around and, all of a sudden, a bullet whizzes by my head. The perpetrator fired at the flashlight and missed me. I returned the fire to where I saw the muzzle flash, and I shot him. The tactic of holding the flashlight away from [me] saved my life — something that I was taught in the New York City Police Department Academy when we were going through our training.

What about seeking cover behind a car?

So the trick is, when you're hiding behind a car, try to stay behind the wheels. Because then you have the protection of the wheels. Otherwise, your ankle and about 5 or 6 inches of your leg could be exposed. There's things they teach you like that.

Any other tips to survive a gunfight?

You got to have this mindset that you're going into combat. And all these things have to register in a second. One second you have to register to pull your weapon, aim your weapon, decide if it's going to be deadly physical force, if there's any civilians in the way and then getting cover for yourself. You've got to make six or seven life-determining decisions that you've got to live with.

Thoughts on the use of a backup carry piece in addition to a primary?

Being a police officer and being armed is different than being a civilian and being armed. A civilian really doesn't need a back-

up like a police officer does. A police officer is going after danger. A civilian who carries a gun would be only protecting himself because a perpetrator is coming after him.

What's the dumbest thing you can do during a gunfight?

Just stand there like a deer caught in the headlights. Take cover or return fire ... those are the only two choices, you know?

You talked about situational awareness in your book. Thoughts?

Everybody should be observant of their surroundings. That's the thing today. I call them zombies. People walking around looking at their cellphones. They walk into the street and get hit by cars. You know, I don't think that's too observant. That alone, not being on your phone and walking in the street, may save your life.

You also made an effort to command respect in the street. Any lessons there?

Well, criminals size you up too. Someone who's going to rob you or mug you? They look you over. They want the people who are going to be the least [resistant]. They're not going to pick on someone who's 6 feet, 2 inches and 300 pounds of muscle as compared to somebody who's 140 pounds and walking on the phone. You've got to project an image. You've got to be aware of what's going on around you. And you won't look like an easy mark.

How should a reader involved in a justified shooting deal with the police?

You should be respectful and polite. That's No. 1. Don't be screaming. You were professional enough to get a gun license, so you must be a decent citizen. You must interact with doctors and lawyers and other professionals. And you should have that same kind of respect and rapport with the police.

Should you say anything to them?

The only thing you should say is that your life was in danger and you had no choice. That's the most important thing. That you were scared for your life. But [you] should [also] consult an attorney.

Any thoughts on processing emotions after justifiably taking a life?

Well, I can't tell you what other people are going to feel. I can tell you what I felt. Every

time I had to take a life, I wasn't depressed about it. I felt good for the reason that I saved a life. If you have to kill somebody, there's got to be a reason for it. You either saved your own life, your partner's life or a civilian's life. Because otherwise you weren't justified in using deadly physical force.

You're no fan of political correctness. You've been quoted as saying all lives don't matter?

I personally made three arrests where people burned an infant with cigarettes intentionally. I don't think that guy deserves to live. A guy who goes on a bus and blows it up with a bomb? They don't deserve to live. There's people who don't deserve to live with society, you know?

What's the morale like among police officers these days?

[Police] are retiring in record numbers. You know, they're being told to stand down in certain situations, which they don't like. Ninety-nine percent of police want to do policing. When they're told to go to a riot and stand down and not make any arrests? It's very disheartening.

Would you steer a young person away from becoming law enforcement?

I wouldn't recommend being an officer in the big cities. I think it would be a cleaner job to go with maybe state police. Or the suburbs police like Long Island or Westchester. Right now there's just no respect.

They don't want you to do your job. People who want to become police officers want to do good. They have this desire to serve and protect. And they're not letting them do that in the major cities.

How long have you been a member of the USCCA?

Going into my third year.

Why did you choose to join?

Well, the things that were occurring across the United States in the last couple of years. The way the tide was turning. Seemed like the laws were getting more favorable for the perpetrators. I was actually surprised that I never looked into [membership] in the past, to be honest. Something that I should have.

Ever make it back to the South Bronx?

Yeah, I go back there once in a while.

What's changed?

Just some of the landscape. Some of the people are still the same. There's still drug dealing going on. There's still violent crime going on. There's still people getting shot, stabbed and killed. They put up some private homes here and there. But I don't recommend walking around that area.



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