

TACTICAL PATROL FORCE TRAINING: THE NIGHT SERGEANT GEBERTH TURNED THE TABLES

"In the early 1970s, the New York City Police Department's Tactical Patrol Force (TPF) had earned a reputation as the NYPD's shock troops." Their mission was simple: go where the danger was greatest and restore order when chaos threatened to overwhelm the city. The TPF was akin to a "Recon Unit" in various High-Crime neighborhoods and Rapid Mobilization Force that could be deployed City-wide.

When Sergeant Vernon Geberth returned to the Tactical Patrol Force in September 1971, he brought with him a wealth of street experience. A former TPF officer from 1965 to 1968, he had spent the intervening years as a "Gold Shield" detective assigned to Bronx Narcotics, City-Wide Street Crime, Manhattan North Robbery, and Harlem, where he worked on investigations involving the Black Liberation Army's (BLA) assassinations of NYPD officers prior to his promotion to Sergeant in August 1971. Back in the elite tactical unit, Geberth once again faced the relentless training that forged TPF officers into a highly disciplined force—riot-control drills, combat firearms training with shotguns and .223 rifles, and demanding tactical exercises designed to prepare officers for the most dangerous assignments in New York City.

One of those intense training exercises took place in the abandoned housing projects of Far Rockaway, Queens.

Master builder Robert Moses had built Ocean Bay in the early 1960's when he served as head of the Mayor's Committee of slum clearance. Under Moses, the Rockaways were soon transformed from a middle class resort community into an ideal location to warehouse the poor. In expectation of the upcoming urban renewal, vacant bungalows were demolished. However, the renewal project was delayed. A gap in funding from the federal government contributed to pressures to cancel the redevelopment of mental facilities, nursing homes, and drug rehab centers which soon began to pop up all over the Rockaways. To fill the new housing complexes the city sent thousands of poor black and brown New Yorkers to live in the extreme margins of the city. Given the isolation much of the public housing was left to decay and further construction was abandoned. The remaining buildings had fallen into disrepair and were one-third vacant.

This was where TPF held their training exercises.

The sprawling complex stood like a concrete ghost town on the edge of New York City. Years earlier, urban renewal projects had promised a bright future for the area, but funding shortages and political setbacks left entire sections unfinished and

abandoned. Empty apartment buildings stood silent against the Atlantic winds, their dark hallways and vacant rooms creating a perfect setting for police tactical training.

These building assaults involved “Apprehension of Armed Fugitives” who were actually Firearm’s instructors by the TPF personnel who were participating in these exercises involved the use of “*blank ammunition*” which were specialized cartridges that contained gunpowder but no projectiles for the purpose of realistic simulation.

And on this hot summer evening, they became a battlefield.

The TPF squads reported for training during the 6:00 P.M. to 2:00 A.M. tour. As darkness settled over the deserted complex, the officers gathered for their briefing. The assignment sounded straightforward: assault the building, clear every floor, and apprehend armed suspects hiding inside.

But there was one problem.

The suspects were members of the NYPD Firearms Unit.

The Firearms Unit had developed a notorious reputation among TPF officers. They knew every inch of the abandoned buildings. They knew the hallways, stairwells, blind corners, and hidden apartments. Worse yet, they delighted in ambushing TPF teams attempting to clear the structures.

Rumors spread throughout the unit that surviving one of these exercises was nearly impossible.

One squad after another had entered the buildings only to be "fictionally killed" by hidden gunmen armed with blank ammunition. The Firearms Unit seemed unbeatable.

As Sergeant Geberth listened to the briefing, he wasn't interested in becoming another casualty.

He had already done his homework.

Over the previous weeks he had spoken with squad leaders who had participated in earlier exercises. Their stories revealed a pattern. The Firearms Unit repeatedly used the same ambush positions and tactics. They hid inside abandoned apartments off the hallways, waiting for unsuspecting officers to walk into carefully planned kill zones.

Geberth decided that if the opposition wanted to play dirty, he would change the rules of the game.

Before arriving at Rockaway, he had quietly acquired a dozen cherry bombs—small but powerful firecrackers. To his squad, they became improvised "percussion grenades."

As the squad stacked up outside the building, the Atlantic breeze carried the smell of salt air and decaying concrete through the abandoned project. The sun had disappeared hours earlier, and darkness now swallowed the empty hallways.

Inside, somewhere in the black maze of stairwells and vacant apartments, the Firearms Unit waited.

Everyone knew their reputation.

The instructors had turned these buildings into killing grounds. They knew every hidden room, every broken doorway, every shadow where a man could disappear. More than one TPF squad had entered these structures confident and come out "dead" within minutes.

Tonight would be different.

Sergeant Geberth gathered his men close.

"Stay tight. Watch your sectors. Nobody outruns the point man. And remember—if they think they know the game, we're changing the rules."

The officers nodded.

Each man checked his weapon one final time. Blank rounds were loaded. Flashlights were tested. The building loomed ahead like a fortress.

"Move."

The squad entered.

Their boots echoed across cracked tile floors. Dust hung in the air. Somewhere above them a loose window banged against the wind.

Then silence.

Too much silence.

Geberth knew what that meant.

They're waiting.

He raised a hand.

An officer lit the fuse on the first cherry bomb.

The tiny device hissed across the floor and disappeared through the doorway of a dark apartment.

For one heartbeat—

Nothing.

Then—

BOOM!

The explosion thundered through the hallway like artillery in a tunnel.

Instantly the building came alive.

A startled voice yelled from inside the apartment.

Another figure burst through a doorway, hands over his ears.

"Police! You're dead!" shouted one of Geberth's officers as blank rounds cracked through the corridor.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

The hidden ambush had collapsed before it even began.

The squad advanced methodically.

Every doorway.

Every room.

Every dark corner.

Another cherry bomb rolled.

Another blast echoed.

Again and again, hidden defenders emerged from cover, stunned and disoriented.

The hunters had become the hunted.

By the time the squad reached the upper floors, word had spread among the Firearms Unit instructors.

Something had changed.

The TPF squad wasn't walking into ambushes.

They were creating them.

One instructor later admitted that as the explosions echoed through the building, even veteran firearms officers began wondering what Geberth's men would do next.

Within minutes, the exercise was over.

For the first time in memory, the supposedly unbeatable defenders had been overrun.

As the men exited the building into the humid summer night, sweat-soaked and grinning, they knew they had accomplished something unusual.

They had beaten the experts at their own game.

During the after-action debriefing, the instructors demanded to know exactly what had happened.

Geberth simply shrugged.

"You told us to apprehend armed fugitives," he said. "Nobody said we had to do it the same way everybody else did."

The room erupted in laughter.

Even the Firearms Unit had to admit it.

The Sergeant had turned the tables.

A few days later, Geberth was summoned to the Inspector's office.

Whenever an Inspector called, a cop never knew whether he was about to receive praise—or a pounding.

The Inspector looked over the top of his glasses.

"Geberth," he began, "I heard about your little war out in Rockaway."

For a moment, the Sergeant wondered if disciplinary papers were about to appear on the desk.

Instead, the Inspector leaned back and smiled.

"The Firearms Unit's commanding officer told me the whole story."

He shook his head and laughed.

"At first I thought I was going to have to write you up."

He paused.

"Then he told me you won."

The Inspector pointed a finger across the desk.

"You never disappoint. You're a class act—and definitely a piece of work."

Geberth smiled.

Coming from an Inspector, that was high praise.

In the Tactical Patrol Force, survival had never belonged to the strongest or even the fastest.

It belonged to the officer who could think.

The streets of New York in the 1970s were violent, unpredictable, and unforgiving. Criminals adapted. Gangs adapted.

The police had to adapt faster.

Long before distraction devices became standard equipment for specialized tactical units, Sergeant Vernon Geberth had improvised his own answer to a difficult tactical problem.

Years later, flash-bang devices would become common tools in high-risk operations.

Whether coincidence or foresight, one fact remains beyond dispute:

On a hot summer night in the abandoned housing projects of Far Rockaway, Sergeant Vernon Geberth demonstrated a lesson every tactical officer eventually learns—

Superior positioning means little when confronted by superior thinking.

The side that adapts fastest usually wins.

And that was exactly why the Tactical Patrol Force earned its reputation as the NYPD's Shock Troops.

