

Shootout and Car Chase Through Little Italy

Monday, April 5, 1971 - THE DAY BEFORE MY BIRTHDAY

An Off-Duty Detective Gets Involved in What Looked Like a Gangland Hit

It was my day off, but I had to go downtown to Manhattan Criminal Court to testify on an active case. In those days, detectives did not receive overtime for court appearances. We received compensatory time instead.

I was assigned to the Fifth District Robbery Squad, which operated out of the 24th Precinct in upper Manhattan. I was looking forward to finishing my testimony and going home.

The next day was my birthday, and my wife Laura was planning a nice family dinner for me and our three boys. Earlier that year, we had purchased our first home in Rockland County, and we were excitedly making plans to move into it during Easter week. Life was good, and I was anxious to get home.

Fortunately, I completed my testimony at about 1:00 P.M. I knew Manhattan traffic would be relatively light at that hour, so I figured I could head north through the Bronx and then continue into Westchester County.

I got into my personal automobile and started home.

At approximately 1:15 P.M., I stopped for a traffic signal at the corner of Canal and Mulberry Streets.

I glanced out my passenger-side window.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

Two males were physically forcing a struggling man into the back seat of an automobile. A third male was behind the wheel.

The victim was fighting them.

For a moment, I just stared.

My first thought was that I was witnessing a gangland hit.

The location was right on the outskirts of Little Italy, and the scene looked like something straight out of a Mafia movie. Two guys were wrestling a man into the back seat while another man waited behind the wheel.

This wasn't a mugging.

Something was seriously wrong.

I immediately tried to get the attention of a traffic cop who was directing traffic on Canal Street. I blew my horn, trying to alert him to what was happening.

He didn't see me.

I blew the horn again.

Nothing.

Unfortunately, all I accomplished was drawing attention to myself.

The perpetrators looked directly at me.

Now they knew somebody was watching.

I had a decision to make.

I could drive away and call it in—or I could do something about what I had just witnessed.

I decided to follow them.

The car turned onto Mulberry Street, and I pulled in behind it.

As they headed north, I watched the two men in the back seat force the man they had snatched off the street down onto the floor. One of them placed what appeared to be a coat over him.

That was enough for me.

I was now convinced that whatever was happening, it wasn't legitimate.

The suspects continued north, racing through the narrow streets of Little Italy, blowing past Hester Street, Grand Street and Broome Street before reaching Kenmare Street.

I stayed with them.

My personal automobile was equipped with a burglar-alarm siren device. I reached for it and activated the siren.

Now the chase was on.

We were tearing through those narrow, single-lane streets with me right behind them.

And that's when reality began to sink in.

I was alone.

I was off duty.

I was driving my own car.

There were three perpetrators in that automobile.

I had no backup.

And I had no idea who the hell these people were or what they were going to do when they realized I was a police officer.

As I chased them through Little Italy, a thousand thoughts raced through my mind.

I said to myself:

“What the fuck did you get yourself into?”

Then another thought:

“How the hell are you going to handle three perpetrators?”

And then:

“What the hell were you thinking?”

I was also thinking about my car.

“Are you going to crash your own car—and for what?”

It was my day off.

My testimony was finished.

My birthday was the next day.

My wife and three boys were waiting for me at home.

And somehow, I had managed to turn the trip home into a high-speed pursuit of what I believed might be a gangland hit.

I had no idea how this was going to end.

But I wasn't about to let them disappear with that man.

THE CHASE

The nerve-wracking chase continued for more than a mile.

At one point, I fired a warning shot into the air. I then lowered my arm toward the perpetrators' vehicle, deliberately giving the impression that I was firing at them.

At Kenmare and Mott Streets, I managed to pull alongside their car.

I identified myself as a detective and ordered them to stop.

Instead, the driver suddenly accelerated into traffic, going the wrong way down the street.

They headed south on Mott Street, and I stayed right behind them.

Now I was pursuing a car traveling the wrong way through the narrow streets of Little Italy.

As I chased them, I was thinking:

“I've already fired a shot. That's going to cause me nothing but grief.”

I was already worried about my career. I had previously been passed over for promotion to sergeant because of a bullshit C.C.R.B. complaint. Even though I had been cleared by the Grand Jury a bastard captain was slow walking the charges over my heading pending the Trial Room .

Now I was involved in a high-speed pursuit, in my own car, on my day off, and I had already fired my weapon.

I thought:

“Am I going to be in even more trouble for taking action?”

Then the thought that kept coming back to me:

“What the fuck have I gotten myself into?”

The pursuit continued at speeds I estimated to be in excess of fifty miles per hour.

Finally, on Broome Street between Mott and Elizabeth Streets, I was able to force the perpetrators' vehicle up onto the curb.

Everything happened at once.

All three males began bailing out of the car, running in different directions.

I immediately saw that the driver had a gun tucked into his belt.

As he exited the vehicle, I pointed my revolver at him and yelled:

“FREEZE!”

The suspect turned in my direction pulling his gun from his waist.

I fired one shot.

I believed I had hit him because he stumbled and went down onto the pavement directly in front of a large plate-glass storefront window.

Later, an examination of that window showed no damage.

At that moment, however, I had no way of knowing that.

I was operating on instinct.

The entire situation had become a blur.

I had tunnel vision.

I thought I saw one of the other males get out on the right side of the vehicle and run east on Broome Street.

Then something else caught my attention.

An exceptionally large man was running west on Broome Street toward Mulberry Street.

He was carrying a satchel.

I took off after him.

The man was enormous—approximately six-foot-four and weighing about 280 pounds.

I was thinking he's too big to physically restrain.

I was closing in on him when I was about to fire.

Then, suddenly, a woman and a child appeared directly in my line of fire.

That changed everything.

I wasn't going to risk shooting and hitting an innocent person.

I immediately holstered my revolver and continued the pursuit on foot.

I caught up with the guy and made a flying tackle bringing both of us to the ground.

We hit the pavement and began struggling.

Then, all of a sudden, I was surrounded by men with guns pointed directly at me.

For a split second, I thought:

“Holy shit. These are mobsters.”

I had just chased three men through the streets of Little Italy, and now a group of armed men had surrounded me.

Then I heard:

“POLICE! DON'T MOVE!”

That's when I realized what was happening.

They were cops.

I immediately identified myself as a detective and told them that the man I had tackled was under arrest.

The entire episode had become so chaotic—the high-speed pursuit, the gunshots, the suspects scattering in different directions—that I had completely lost track of where I was.

I was right behind Police Headquarters, located on Center Street between Broome and Grand Streets.

I told the officers to hold onto the suspect for me.

Then I headed back toward my car.

I had left it alongside the perpetrators' vehicle.

As I walked back, the full reality of what had just happened began to sink in.

What had started as a routine trip home from court had turned into a running gun battle and a foot pursuit through the streets of Manhattan.

And I had done it all on my day off.

THE VICTIM AND THE AFTERMATH

I located the man I had originally seen being forced into the automobile.

He was standing next to my car, visibly shaken.

I asked him his name and whether he was all right.

He nodded.

I then asked him the obvious question:

“Why did those men grab you?”

He told me his name was **Mark Indenbaum** and that he was a diamond merchant.

He explained that he had just completed some business at a Jewelry Center located at 185 Canal Street. He had walked out of the building when he was suddenly accosted by the three men.

They had taken his satchel.

The satchel I had recovered from the fleeing suspect was his.

It contained approximately \$40,000 worth of **diamonds**, with an estimated retail value of approximately **\$100,000**.

Now I knew exactly what I had witnessed.

This wasn't a gangland hit.

It was a violent armed robbery.

By this time, a number of uniformed and plainclothes officers had converged on the scene. Reports of shots fired and a high-speed pursuit through Little Italy had brought cops running from all directions.

And then the superior officers arrived.

They wanted to know one thing:

What the hell was I doing?

I was suddenly standing behind Police Headquarters with a suspect under arrest, a stolen diamond satchel recovered, shots having been fired, and a high-speed pursuit having taken place through the narrow streets of Little Italy.

The Manhattan South Commander wanted answers.

Why had a detective from the Fifth District Robbery Squad engaged in a high-speed pursuit in his own personal automobile?

Why had I fired shots?

Why had I pursued the perpetrators outside my normal jurisdiction?

And how the hell had the entire incident ended up practically in the backyard of Police Headquarters?

I knew right then that this was going to be a long night.

I explained exactly what I had seen.

I told them how I had observed the three men forcing the victim into the automobile, how I had followed them, how I had pursued them through Little Italy,

and how I had eventually forced their vehicle onto the curb on Broome Street between Mott and Elizabeth Streets.

I pointed out to the patrol sergeant the location where I had fired at the driver after he had exited the vehicle with a gun about to fire at me.

The large plate-glass storefront window was still intact.

There was no bullet hole or other visible damage.

That suggested to me that I had, in fact, struck the suspect.

Later, precinct detectives learned that anonymous witnesses had seen several men carrying the wounded suspect into one of the local Mafia social clubs.

Of course, nobody was talking.

And the people who had witnessed it were certainly not about to come forward and identify themselves to the police.

The entire incident was now beginning to look like something much bigger than a street robbery.

It appeared to be a major organized-crime operation.

The perpetrators' automobile was transported to the Fifth Precinct for crime-scene processing. One of the patrol officers took my personal automobile to the precinct as well, both to safeguard it and to preserve it for whatever investigation was going to follow.

I requested that a detective transport and accompany Mr. Indenbaum to the precinct. I wanted to speak with him there and obtain a complete account of what had happened.

The suspects' vehicle turned out to be a rental car.

It had been rented in Brooklyn earlier that day by an unknown individual using forged identification.

I eventually rode back to the Fifth Precinct in an RMP with the handcuffed suspect.

He was identified as **Mark Reiter**.

As I sat there, I began thinking about the situation I had just gotten myself into.

I was waiting for my promotion to sergeant.

That promotion had already been delayed because of a pending departmental hearing in the Trial Room.

Now I had been involved in a high-speed pursuit, had fired my weapon, had made an off-duty arrest outside my normal jurisdiction, and had become involved in what was rapidly developing into a major organized-crime investigation.

I had started the afternoon thinking about getting home for my birthday.

Now I was sitting in a police car with a handcuffed robbery suspect, wondering what the hell was going to happen to me.

I had a feeling that my birthday dinner was going to be the least of my problems.

THE MOB CONNECTION

By the time I got back to the Fifth Precinct, I began to appreciate just how much trouble I might be in.

I had initiated a car chase through the streets of Little Italy in my own automobile. I had fired several shots. The pursuit had created a major disturbance directly behind Police Headquarters.

And sooner or later, the Police Commissioner was going to hear about it.

This was the last thing I needed in my life.

I was already waiting for my promotion to sergeant, which had been delayed because of a pending departmental hearing in the Trial Room. Now I had created a major police incident practically in the Commissioner's backyard.

There was another reality that bothered me even more.

I could very easily have been killed.

I had pursued three armed perpetrators alone in my personal automobile. I had exchanged gunfire with one of them and then chased another on foot. I had no idea who these men were or what kind of firepower they had.

I had been lucky.

Very lucky.

The detectives at the Fifth Precinct who assisted in processing the prisoner soon established that **Mark Reiter** had a criminal record and was a known Mafia underling associated with the **Gambino Crime Family**.

That changed the entire complexion of the case.

It appeared obvious that this robbery had been sanctioned by organized crime.

Someone had known that Mr. Indenbaum would be at the Jewelry Center at 185 Canal Street carrying a substantial quantity of uncut diamonds.

That information had somehow gotten to the Mafia.

This wasn't a random robbery.

Someone had provided intelligence about the victim, his business, and what he was carrying.

Mr. Indenbaum was now my complainant in what was being classified as a kidnapping robbery.

He also had a serious problem.

He explained to me that he couldn't afford to have all of his diamonds held as evidence.

The diamonds were not simply personal property. They were his inventory.

The approximately \$40,000 worth of uncut diamonds had a retail value of more than \$100,000, and they represented a substantial portion of the inventory of Indenbaum and Company, located at 48 West 48th Street in New York City's Diamond District.

If we locked up his entire inventory as evidence, we could effectively put him out of business.

I understood the problem.

I instructed the Crime Scene Unit to photograph the entire contents of the satchel.

Every diamond was photographed for evidentiary purposes.

Then I made a telephone call to the Manhattan District Attorney's Office.

I asked to be connected with the **Rackets Bureau**, because I believed this case was going to involve organized crime.

I spoke with Chief of the Rackets Bureau, **Mr. Conboy**, and explained the situation.

I told him that we had recovered the diamonds, but that holding the entire collection as physical evidence would create an enormous hardship for the victim.

We came up with a practical solution.

The Crime Scene Unit would photograph and document all of the diamonds.

Only one stone would actually be retained as physical evidence for presentation in court.

The rest could be returned to Indenbaum.

It was a solution that satisfied the evidentiary requirements while allowing the victim to continue operating his business.

Indenbaum was obviously relieved.

After that was settled, I proceeded to court to prepare the official complaint and arraign Reiter.

By then, the news media had descended on the case.

Reporters were everywhere.

They actually interviewed both Mr. Indenbaum and me while we were waiting for the court proceedings.

The story had everything the media wanted: a diamond merchant, a kidnapping robbery, a high-speed chase through Little Italy, gunfire, a wounded suspect, and an alleged Mafia connection.

Then Mr. Indenbaum told me something that made the case even more serious.

He had received a threatening telephone call at his Manhattan apartment.

The message was simple:

Drop the charges.

I immediately advised the District Attorney handling the arraignment about the threat.

The prosecutor took the matter seriously.

He put Reiter's defense attorney on notice that if there were any additional telephone calls, threats, or veiled attempts to intimidate Mr. Indenbaum, the District Attorney's Office would pursue additional charges against Reiter.

That got someone's attention.

Reiter's attorney was a well-known mob lawyer.

He certainly didn't want his client's already serious case to become even more complicated by allegations of witness intimidation.

For the moment, the threats stopped.

But by then, I knew this was no ordinary robbery case.

I had started the afternoon trying to get home from court.

Instead, I had stumbled into a kidnapping robbery involving a diamond merchant, a Mafia-connected defendant, stolen diamonds, gunfire, a high-speed pursuit, and threats against the complainant.

And somehow, I was the detective who had started the whole damn thing.

THE NEW YORK TIMES ACCOUNT

An Off-Duty Detective Thwarts Gem Theft and Kidnapping

April 6, 1971

An off-duty detective, witnessing the daylight kidnapping of a jeweler shortly after 1 P.M. yesterday, chased three suspects at high speed through the narrow streets of Downtown Manhattan's Little Italy section for more than a mile before capturing one of them.

The jeweler escaped injury, and the \$40,000 in cut diamonds he had been carrying were recovered from the captured suspect.

Detective Vernon Geberth, 28 years old, of the Fifth Detective Division Robbery Squad, was waiting in his car at a red light at Canal and Mulberry Streets when he saw two men jump from an automobile, grab a third man who had been standing at the intersection, and force him into the back seat of the car.

The automobile, driven by a third man, then started up Mulberry Street as the two men in the back seat threw a coat over their captive, **Mark Indenbaum, 40, head of Indenbaum & Company, diamond merchants of 48 West 48th Street, Manhattan.**

Detective Geberth pursued the fleeing car on Mulberry Street at speeds estimated by police at 50 miles an hour down the single traffic lane.

The detective fired three shots at the car during the chase, and reports of the shooting sent radio police cars and squad cars to the area.

The getaway car was blocked by traffic at Broome and Elizabeth Streets, and the three men jumped out.

Detective Geberth leaped from his car and tackled one of the men, who was carrying the jeweler's briefcase.

The fugitive, described by police as six feet, four inches tall and weighing 300 pounds, was subdued by the detective.

The two other men escaped on foot.

Mr. Indenbaum said:

“All I could think of as I lay on the floor of the car with the overcoat over my head was to wonder if I would get out of it and live to have dinner tonight.”

The jeweler was convinced, he said, that the off-duty detective had not only saved his jewels, but his life as well.

He added that he had been robbed twice in the past.

The captured suspect was identified as **23-year-old Mark Reiter**, unemployed, of 2580 Ocean Avenue, Brooklyn.

He was booked at the Elizabeth Street Station on charges of kidnapping, assault, and robbery.

The car used by the three men, police said, was a rented vehicle.

HERO TO ZERO

A Letter to Mayor Lindsay

On April 13, 1971, just eight days after the Little Italy diamond robbery, Mark Indenbaum wrote directly to Mayor John V. Lindsay.

His letter provided a powerful firsthand account of what had happened—and of what he believed Detective Vernon Geberth had done for him.

Honorable John V. Lindsay

City Hall

On April 5th of this year I was accosted and thrown into an automobile by three criminals with the obvious intention of robbing me and possibly worse.

Fortunately, the attempted robbery was thwarted by the brave and heroic action of Detective Vernon Geberth of the 26th Squad, 5th D.D. Robbery Squad.

He singlehandedly pursued the robbers' car and was able to save not only my merchandise but most likely my life.

In these times when there is a shadow cast on the reputation of our Police Department, it is indeed heartening to know that an off-duty detective would risk his life to save a citizen.

It is my hope that you would see fit to bestow upon Detective Geberth a reward commensurate with his brave actions.

Signed,
Mark Indenbaum

T

The victim could not have stated it more clearly.

He believed that an off-duty New York City detective had risked his life to save him. He believed my actions deserved recognition commensurate with that risk.

I believed so, too.

Instead, I received a **Departmental Commendation**.

Under the Department's standards, the **Medal of Valor** recognized acts of outstanding personal bravery performed at imminent personal hazard to life and under circumstances demonstrating disregard for personal consequences.

That description certainly seemed to fit what had happened on April 5th.

I had confronted three armed criminals alone and off duty. I pursued their automobile through the narrow streets of Little Italy in my own car. Gunfire was exchanged during the pursuit. I chased one of the perpetrators on foot and tackled a man approximately six-foot-four and 300 pounds who was carrying the victim's stolen diamonds.

I had no backup. No radio. No police vehicle. And no way of knowing whether I was going to survive the encounter.

If those circumstances did not warrant the Medal of Valor, I believed they certainly justified consideration for **Honorable Mention or Exceptional Merit**.

But bravery was apparently not the only consideration.

The Least of My Troubles

The Murphy Factor

There was another factor in all of this that cannot be ignored: **Police Commissioner Patrick V. Murphy**.

To say that Murphy was unpopular with many of the cops and detectives working the streets would be an understatement. Among the rank-and-file officers I knew—

particularly aggressive street cops and detectives—there was deep resentment toward his policies and his philosophy of policing.

I was one of those detectives.

Murphy represented almost everything that frustrated working cops of that era. From where we stood, decisions affecting men who were confronting armed criminals on the streets were increasingly being made by administrators far removed from the realities we faced.

I also believed Murphy had a particular disdain for the aggressive street detective—the kind of cop who relied upon experience, instinct and immediate action when confronted with violent crime.

Whether Murphy personally disliked me, I cannot say.

But I had certainly become the kind of detective his administration viewed with suspicion.

I had fired my weapon during the Little Italy pursuit. One of the perpetrators had been shot. I had pursued armed criminals while off duty and outside my assigned command. And hanging over everything was an unresolved CCRB case from the Bronx.

To Murphy's administration, apparently, those circumstances made me a problem.

To me, the issue was much simpler.

I had witnessed a man being kidnapped in broad daylight. What the hell was I supposed to do—watch them drive away?

I believed then, and I believe now, that Murphy's attitude toward aggressive street policing played a significant role in how my actions were viewed and why the recognition stopped where it did.

And the pressure didn't stop at Headquarters.

The Pressure Reached My Own Command

It reached the Manhattan South Borough Command and eventually my own Commanding Officer in the Manhattan North Robbery Squad.

I was told to **let it go**.

Think about that for a moment.

I had witnessed the kidnapping.

I had taken action.

I had pursued three armed criminals through the streets of Little Italy.

I had recovered the victim's stolen diamonds.

I had apprehended one of the perpetrators.

And now I was being treated as though I had somehow done something wrong simply because I had become involved.

What was I supposed to have done?

Stand there and watch three armed criminals abduct a man because I was off duty and outside the geographical boundaries of my assigned command?

My Commanding Officer advised me not to challenge the award. He had been told that Headquarters was concerned about the serious CCRB charges still pending against me from the earlier Bronx incident.

The message was clear.

Don't challenge the award. Don't make an issue of it. Let it go.

So that was that.

Eight days after the incident, Mark Indenbaum had personally written to Mayor John V. Lindsay describing my actions as “**brave and heroic**” and stating that I had probably saved his life.

Inside the Department, however, the shooting during the pursuit, Murphy's concerns about my conduct, the pending CCRB charges, and the characterization of me as a “cowboy” had overshadowed what had actually happened on the street.

I considered that a disgrace.

But there was nothing more I could realistically do about it.

The Department had a way of reminding you that **doing the right thing didn't necessarily mean you were going to be rewarded for it.**

On April 5, 1971, I had been an off-duty detective who happened to be in the right place at the right time—and acted when a man's life was in danger.

Eight days later, that man asked the Mayor to recognize me for my bravery.

Then the bureaucracy took over.

I went from Hero to Zero.

The Recognition the Department Withheld

But the story didn't end there.

On **September 8, 1971**, several months after the Little Italy incident, I was selected as **“Cop of the Month”** by the Metropolitan New Jersey and New York Detectives Crime Clinic.

The organization recognized outstanding members of law enforcement throughout the metropolitan area for their dedication, courage and service to their communities.

This time, someone outside the NYPD looked at what had happened and saw it differently.

Laura and I attended the awards luncheon at the **Neptune Inn on Route 4 in Paramus, New Jersey**, where I received the honor.

It meant something to me.

The NYPD had not given me the recognition I believed the circumstances warranted.

The Metropolitan New Jersey and New York Detectives Crime Clinic did.

The Department might have questioned my judgment. It might have characterized me as a cowboy. It might have allowed the pending CCRB case and the politics surrounding it to overshadow what I had done.

But none of that changed the facts.

A citizen had been abducted off the street by three armed criminals.

I saw it.

I acted.

I pursued them.

I recovered the diamonds

I apprehended one of the perpetrators

And the victim himself had told the Mayor that I had probably saved his life.

That was something no bureaucratic decision could erase.

The Department could decide what medal I received.

It couldn't change what happened on that street.

And sometimes, the people who recognize what you actually did aren't the people sitting behind the desk deciding whether you deserve a medal.

NO GOOD DEED GOES UNPUNISHED

In the fall of 1972, more than a year after the Little Italy diamond robbery, I received a subpoena from the New York County District Attorney's Office directing me to report to the **Rackets Bureau** concerning the case of **Reiter v. New York**.

I couldn't believe it.

The case against Mark Reiter had apparently been dismissed because I had failed to appear for a court proceeding.

There was just one problem.

I had never been notified or subpoenaed to appear.

Neither had Mark Indenbaum.

And now I was being investigated by the very Rackets Bureau I had contacted on the night of Reiter's arrest.

I was outraged.

Immediately after the robbery, I had recognized that we might be dealing with an organized-crime case. I contacted the Rackets Bureau that very night, specifically seeking guidance concerning the recovered diamonds, and spoke directly with Bureau Chief **Ken Conboy**.

I had also warned the Bureau about threats being made against Indenbaum and made it clear from the beginning that I believed organized crime was behind the robbery.

Now, somehow, **I was the one under suspicion.**

I reminded the District Attorney investigators of all of this.

More importantly, I had the documentation to prove it.

I produced my notes and every court notification I had received concerning the case.

I had never missed a court appearance. Not one.

I also explained that I had remained in communication with Indenbaum concerning the prosecution and any scheduled court appearances.

He hadn't been notified about this hearing either.

That should have told them something.

As the Rackets Bureau investigators began digging deeper into what had happened, the focus of their inquiry changed dramatically.

They determined that a judge, whom I understood to have a reputation for associations with mob lawyers, had apparently **rescheduled Reiter's court hearing after the indictment without proper notification to the District Attorney's Office, Indenbaum, or me.**

That was why we hadn't appeared.

We didn't know there was a hearing.

The investigators realized that I had done nothing wrong. In fact, they apologized profusely for having suspected me in the first place.

Then the investigation took an entirely different direction.

Instead of investigating me, the Rackets Bureau began examining the circumstances surrounding the judge and the mob lawyer.

A new Grand Jury was convened.

Mark Indenbaum testified.

So did I.

The investigation and testimony ultimately resulted in a **superseding indictment against Mark Reiter.**

The case that had nearly disappeared was back on track.

And this time, the record was unmistakably clear.

I had done my job.

I had never missed a court appearance.

I had never ignored a subpoena.

I had documented my actions.

And from the night of the robbery, I had warned the Rackets Bureau that the case bore the earmarks of organized crime and that the complainant was being threatened.

The irony was extraordinary.

first, I apprehended one of the men involved in the diamond robbery.

Then I was treated like a “**cowboy**” and denied the level of departmental recognition I believed the incident deserved.

And more than a year later, when the prosecution mysteriously went off the rails, **I became the one they investigated.**

In the end, my documentation told the story.

I went from **arresting the defendant, to being investigated because his case had disappeared, to helping uncover how it had happened and putting the prosecution back on track.**

No good deed goes unpunished.

By this time, however, I was no longer Detective Vernon Geberth.

I had been promoted to Sergeant.

THE FINAL VINDICATION

Then came the final vindication.

On **October 26, 1972**, after Mark Reiter had been successfully prosecuted and convicted, **Frank S. Hogan, District Attorney of the County of New York**, wrote directly to Police Commissioner **Patrick V. Murphy**.

This time, there was no speculation about what I should or shouldn't have done.

The defendant had been convicted.

The District Attorney knew the facts

And he put his assessment of my actions in writing.

LETTER FROM DISTRICT ATTORNEY FRANK S. HOGAN

October 26, 1972

Re: Sergeant Vernon Geberth – Tactical Patrol Force

Dear Commissioner Murphy:

Recently our office successfully prosecuted and convicted one Mark Reiter of kidnapping and robbing a diamond merchant in Lower Manhattan.

We wish to acknowledge the heroic efforts of Sergeant Vernon Geberth in apprehending the defendant.

While on special assignment with our office, Sergeant Geberth happened to observe the defendant, Mark Reiter, and two other men accost the victim on Canal Street, struggle with him, throw him into a waiting automobile and then speed away.

Sergeant Geberth pursued them in his own automobile and a dramatic chase through city streets ensued, during which gunfire was exchanged.

Sergeant Geberth forced the automobile onto the curb and wounded the driver and apprehended the defendant, who had in his possession a satchel containing diamonds belonging to the victim.

As the facts in this case demonstrate, Sergeant Geberth deserves the commendation of every citizen for his outstanding police work.

Sincerely,

Frank S. Hogan

District Attorney

County of New York

There wasn't much more that needed to be said.

The victim had called my actions heroic.

The District Attorney called them heroic.

And Frank Hogan made sure **Patrick Murphy heard it directly from him.**

For me, that was the final word.

Hero to Zero—and, in the end, vindicated.

POSTSCRIPT

The Mafia Never Rests

One lesson I learned during my years investigating organized crime was that Mafia criminals never stopped committing crimes. Robberies, extortion, gambling, loansharking, hijackings and murder were simply different parts of the same continuing criminal enterprise.

If you stayed in the business long enough, you saw the same faces again and again. Some began as petty thieves and gradually worked their way deeper into organized crime, eventually becoming soldiers or even capos. Along the way, they built reputations through intimidation, violence and loyalty.

That constant criminal activity inevitably attracted law-enforcement attention. Eventually, investigators developed enough probable cause for electronic surveillance or court-authorized wiretaps.

And Mafia members loved to talk.

They boasted about robberies, murders and narrow escapes with the kind of bravado that sometimes solved cases investigators weren't even looking at. A wiretap targeting one criminal enterprise could unexpectedly expose another—an unsolved homicide, a buried body, political corruption or an entirely different criminal conspiracy.

That reality came home to me about six years after the Little Italy pursuit.

A colleague from the Intelligence Division called to tell me that while monitoring a Mafia wiretap, one of the subjects began reminiscing about a jewelry robbery years earlier.

The man described his narrow escape from a “**crazy cop**” who had chased him through Little Italy in a personal automobile equipped with a siren.

Then he mentioned the arrest of **Mark Reiter**.

I knew immediately what robbery he was talking about.

Then my colleague told me who was doing the talking.

John Gotti.

This was years before Gotti became boss of the Gambino Crime Family and one of the most notorious organized-crime figures in America.

Back in 1971, of course, I had no idea who I was chasing.

I didn't know their identities. I didn't know their organized-crime connections. I didn't know how many guns they had or what I was driving into.

All I knew was that I had just witnessed three men grab an innocent man off Canal Street, force him into an automobile and speed away.

So I went after them.

The rest unfolded at fifty miles an hour.

THE LAST WORD

Looking back, the Little Italy diamond robbery remains one of the most extraordinary incidents of my police career.

What began with an off-duty detective driving home became a kidnapping, a high-speed pursuit, an exchange of gunfire, the recovery of stolen diamonds, an arrest, an organized-crime investigation, courtroom testimony, a Rackets Bureau investigation, a new Grand Jury and ultimately a successful prosecution.

Years later, the story unexpectedly resurfaced on a Mafia wiretap.

That's police work.

You never know where the next five minutes will take you.

On April 5, 1971, I was simply driving home to my wife and three sons.

Minutes later, I was pursuing three armed criminals through the streets of Little Italy.

I didn't intervene because I expected a medal.

I didn't know there would be a letter to the Mayor, a departmental award, a “Cop of the Month” recognition or, eventually, a letter from District Attorney Frank Hogan describing my actions as heroic.

None of that existed when I made the decision to act.

There was only a man being kidnapped in broad daylight.

Someone needed help.

That was enough.

The years that followed taught me something else.

Medals recognize moments.

Character is measured over a lifetime.

There would be other disappointments in my career—bureaucratic battles, accusations, delayed recognition and people in positions of authority whose judgments I believed were wrong.

But none of them would determine the kind of police officer I would become.

I continued to serve.

I continued to pursue violent criminals.

Eventually, I would investigate homicides, command homicide detectives, teach investigators and devote much of my professional life to improving the investigation of violent death.

The bureaucratic obstacles never diminished my commitment to the profession.

In the end, that was the greater test.

The measure of a police officer isn't how he performs when everyone is applauding him.

It's what he does when nobody is watching—and what he does afterward when the applause never comes.

They could delay a promotion.

They could deny a medal.

They could question my judgment.

But they could never change what happened on that street.

A man was in danger.

I saw it.

I acted.

And I would do it again.

That, more than any medal or decoration, was what it meant to me to be a **Cop's Cop.**

Vernon would finally be promoted to Sergeant in August of that year.

1

THE KIDNAPPING ON CANAL STREET

APRIL 5, 1971 – LITTLE ITALY, MANHATTAN



Off duty and driving home to his wife and three sons, Detective Vernon Geberth witnesses a man being forced into a car by three men.

He doesn't hesitate. He pulls his personal car alongside, activates his red light and siren, and identifies himself.

2

A HIGH-SPEED PURSUIT AND SHOOTOUT

THROUGH THE STREETS OF LITTLE ITALY

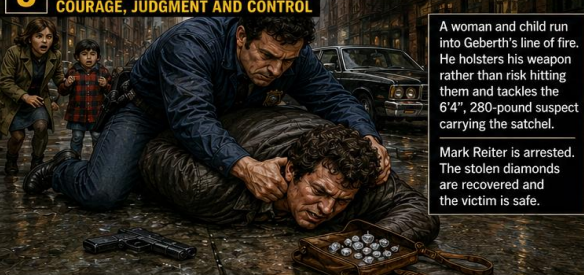


Shots are fired. Geberth exchanges gunfire with the suspects as they speed through traffic and narrow streets in a desperate attempt to escape.

3

THE ARREST AND THE DIAMONDS

COURAGE, JUDGMENT AND CONTROL



A woman and child run into Geberth's line of fire. He holsters his weapon rather than risk hitting them and tackles the 6'4", 280-pound suspect carrying the satchel.

Mark Reiter is arrested. The stolen diamonds are recovered and the victim is safe.

IMMINENT DANGER. EXCEPTIONAL COURAGE. OUTSTANDING POLICE WORK.

4

RECOGNIZED BY THE VICTIM AND THE DA...

BUT DENIED THE MEDAL HE EARNED

WELL-DESERVED ACCOLADES



The victim, Mark Indenbaum, wrote to Mayor Lindsay requesting a reward for Detective Geberth.



The press praised Geberth's heroic actions.



District Attorney Frank S. Hogan later commended Geberth in writing after the successful prosecution of Mark Reiter.



Geberth was selected "Cop of the Month" by the Metropolitan New Jersey and New York Detectives Crime Clinic.

THE DEPARTMENT'S DECISION

Despite overwhelming support and the standards for the MEDAL OF VALOR being met, Detective Geberth received only a COMMENDATION.

His pending CCRB charges—trumped his heroism.



A HERO'S ACTIONS. A BUREAUCRACY'S FAILURE. BUT HIS INTEGRITY NEVER WAVERED. A TRUE COP'S COP.

ONE MAN'S COURAGE SAVED A LIFE. HIS DEDICATION TO THE OATH NEVER WAVERED. **NO GOOD DEED GOES UNPUNISHED.**

