

Safety in Unfamiliar Environments

An Interview with Greg Ellifritz

by Gila Hayes

More and more we hear from people who avoid going unfamiliar places because they're scared. The concern goes beyond choosing to stay out of dangerous areas because, for example, one may need to drive through a poorly patrolled, lawless neighborhood between the freeway and the medical center designated by our HMO, or maybe a cancelled flight strands us overnight in a big city where crime is rampant. The unknown makes personal safety a bigger topic than not going to the 24-hour supermarket at 2 a.m. or not drinking in a bad part of town.

*In search of commonsense coaching that's more nuanced than just "don't go where it is not safe," I turned to author and instructor Greg Ellifritz who travels extensively. Who better to teach about staying safe in unfamiliar environments? I've long been a regular reader of his blog at [ActiveResponseTraining.net](https://www.activetraining.net), and I enjoyed his 2020 book, *Choose Adventure* (<https://armedcitizensnetwork.org/february-2021-book-review>) which addressed safety in less-developed countries. Mixed in with details about overseas travel, I found a lot of material that was imminently applicable to navigating unfamiliar areas in the U.S. In the years since *Choose Adventure* was published, Ellifritz has retired, built up a busy teaching schedule and continues to write and travel.*

*Earlier this month, I caught up with Ellifritz when he was home briefly between trips and took advantage of a great opportunity to explore applying the lessons of *Choose Adventure* to staying safe in unfamiliar areas into which we may be thrust without ever leaving the U.S. I think members will enjoy the discussion as much as I did, so we switch now to Q & A format.*

eJournal: Thank you for speaking with me. Could you give us a little bio about your career, your many travels, and what you're doing now as a busy retired guy?

Ellifritz: I'm a retired police officer. I worked 25 years as a police officer in a suburb of Columbus, Ohio. I spent thirteen of those years as a full-time tactical training officer for the police department. I had a chief that was very pro-training,

and he sent me off to any kind of training I wanted, so long as I brought the skills back to the officers. I amassed about 90 different instructor certifications, mostly use of force related. I retired about three years ago and now I spend about 40 weekends a year traveling across the country teaching gun and knife and empty hand and medical classes.



A less formal video version of our talk with Greg Ellifritz is available at <https://youtu.be/N1c0ja58qOs>.

At about 30, I decided I wanted to see the world and got a passion for travel. Since then, I've been spending six to eight weeks a year in countries where I can't drink the water, doing crazy things. I decided to combine my passion for travel with my desire to teach people how to stay safe with firearms and defensive tactics. I wrote a travel book designed to teach people how to stay safe in questionable areas, whether internationally or here at home.

eJournal: I am interested in how one's perceptions warn of or let us wander into danger. The book *Left of Bang* teaches recognizing normal behavior so that something out of the ordinary pings our radar as possibly dangerous. How quickly can you establish a baseline if you've never been to an area before?

Ellifritz: It's tough. The premise of *Left of Bang* is establishing a baseline, learning what is normal behavior so that you can quickly detect what is abnormal and act on that. If you're not local to the area, it may be really tough to quickly establish the baseline. When I travel into unfamiliar areas, I pay a lot of attention to what the locals are doing. More particularly, I tend to pay attention to local females, mothers, and especially parents with kids, because they aren't going to put themselves in dangerous situations unless they have to. If I'm in an area and I see a lot of females walking alone, if I see mothers with children, if I see parents with kids walking around, that tells me it's probably a pretty safe area in general and I tend to model my actions on the behaviors of those folks until I can get a better read on what's normal and what's abnormal. Because they're probably the most vulnerable to attack, paying attention to women who are alone and to parents with kids provides a real good resource for deciding if something is safe or not.

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eJournal: Before leaving home, how much can you front load your knowledge base? Are there ways to get a sense of the environment, even the layout before arrival? In how much detail? In recent years, it's gotten a little easier for drivers with apps like Waze. How do you prepare? Perhaps you have to go into Baltimore, and you've not been there before. What do you do?

Ellifritz: If I haven't been to an area in the U.S. before, I'll pull it up on Google Maps and look at both the satellite view and the street view to get a feel for things. Pretty much universally, I'm looking for signs of disorder; that's an indication of danger. Do I see a lot of graffiti? Do I see a lot of broken windows? Do I see people, especially young, working-age males, aimlessly hanging around during the day? Are they just hanging out without a reason to be there? I'm looking for bars on the windows. I'm looking for lots of security guards. That tells me a little bit about the place. I can often get that from just very basic satellite views on Google or similar apps.

If I'm unfamiliar with the city and don't have a whole lot of time to research it, I tend to look for a hotel or a place to stay near real upscale shopping venues, so I look for expensive department stores or something like a Whole Foods grocery store. They don't put those stores in bad neighborhoods. That gives you just a real quick indication. It is not a hundred percent safe but you're probably not going to be staying in the ghetto if you've got a Whole Foods grocery store next to you.

The other thing I look for is police departments. Even if I'm in a bad part of town, staying within eyesight of a police department is probably a good move, even in other parts of the world if the police are corrupt. The criminals aren't usually going to commit a lot of crimes within view of an active police station. I look for upscale shopping malls; I look for police stations; I look for expensive grocery stores. That generally gives me a baseline level of safety, with some exceptions.

eJournal: Many of us have read books about personal safety that advise always knowing an escape route. How well you can do in an unfamiliar place where there may be unexpected road blockages – maybe a gas main broke – or an exit door in your motel is blocked. How do you hit the ground running?

Ellifritz: I really like getting the lay of the land around the area where I'm staying so I can develop some of these mental escape routes. I start by talking to the taxi drivers as soon as I land in a foreign country or a strange city. As I'm getting a ride from the airport to my hotel, my Air BNB, or wherever I'm staying, I ask the taxi drivers what areas are good, what areas are bad, and what areas I should stay out of. They usually have good intel.

I follow up with the same questions when I'm checking into the hotel. I ask the hotel clerk, "I'd like to take a walk around the

hotel. Are there any areas I should stay away from?" Usually, they know. They'll say, "Hey, you don't want to go more than three blocks west. It gets a little shady there, but if you go east, everything's fine." Then I set my luggage down and go take a walk. I will find an alternate exit from my hotel floor. You might be surprised if you explore the fire escape. In a lot of places, especially in Asia, they lock up the fire escape doors and you really can't get out. It's good to know that before you have to flee some area. So, I'll take alternate routes out of the hotel; I'll take a little walk around and look at what's going on in the neighborhood, get an idea of the general safety, and then plot my exit strategy should I have to leave in a hurry.

eJournal: The fire escape is a good example of different practices in different places. I disagree when people say that America is becoming a third-world nation. Maybe we will eventually, I don't know, but I think people who say that haven't been deep in the third world, because it's really different.

Ellifritz: Yes, it is; it is different. They haven't been to the third world.

eJournal: That's not to say poverty and crime do not infest some areas and there are places where budget cuts mothballed that police station that looked active when we booked lodging and guess what? The predators have moved in. Does recognizing that you're being set up for a robbery have similar warning signs in the U.S. as in third world countries?

Ellifritz: Some yes and some no. In most other countries, we see fewer firearms. Most of the robberies that I investigated as a cop in the U.S. were firearm-related armed robberies. We see more knife crime in other countries, more multiple attackers doing strong arm robberies by physical force, and more setups like scams leading to robberies. It's less direct than here in the U.S. but it all depends. In some areas you might have the single armed robber just like you might have here; other places the danger might be from a crowd of unarmed people, youth gang members, things like that, but in general a lot of the setups are the same, but the weapons are different.

Another factor: you're probably not going to have a police officer involved in your robbery in the U.S.A. Depending on where you're at, in other countries, you can't really rely on the police. Canada, Western Europe, Australia have generally pretty good police departments that aren't corrupt, but in other parts of the world the cops may be involved in the robberies. You've got to keep that in mind overseas, whereas you probably don't have to here in the United States.

eJournal: Going back to setup cues: what are the warning signs that we should see half a block down the street and say, "Hmm, I think I'm going take one of those exit routes." Are there universal warning signs?

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Ellifritz: Yes, there are several. Anytime someone is paying undue attention to you. You might as a foreigner attract a little bit of attention, but when you have young males paying lots of attention to you, I think that's a bad sign. They're watching you for a reason. It may be a good time to get out of there.

In foreign countries, any time a local approaches a traveler for help it should be considered a warning sign. If you encountered a couple of obviously Japanese tourists in a shopping mall in the U.S., speaking Japanese not English, would they be the first people that you would go to for help should you need it? I would say probably not. If I need help, I want someone who knows what's going on locally with whom I can communicate.

A change in the baseline, as we talked about earlier, is a warning sign. It could be a quiet bar getting loud; it could be a loud bar suddenly getting quiet. Either of those are changes in the baseline. That's what we need to recognize and act on.

When you see any of those three things – someone or several people paying undue attention to you, a local asking for help, or a change in the baseline – those are big warning cues that you are not in a place you should be in and it's time to move on as quickly as possible.

eJournal: That reminds me of John Farnam's axiom, "Don't dither!" There is great value in decisiveness. What if I start worrying, "Will my decision take me deeper into danger?" which of course is our fear and keeps us from moving away briskly. What other things do we do that catch the eyes of predators?

Ellifritz: An obvious, ostentatious display of wealth. That's true whether you're here or abroad. You don't want to be the person with the very expensive watch or jewelry, counting the cash in your wallet on the street in front of people who have far less than you. Any obvious displays of wealth are a big no-no both here and abroad. Combined with general cluelessness, not looking like you know what's going on around you, not paying attention to anything – those are go signals for robbers and that's universal around the world, here or abroad. Two tips will keep you out of a lot of trouble: pay attention to what's going on around you and don't flaunt your wealth.

eJournal: When we are outside our familiar culture, we are at risk of offending the locals. Maybe we're too abrupt or we're not polite enough or we're ingratiating. Maybe that demeanor works in Nashville, but it's not okay to act that way in Nogales. Do we make cultural mistakes here at home or is that a foreign travel problem?

Ellifritz: I think it's more trouble for foreign travel, but to be honest, I think a lot of the guidebooks put a little bit too much emphasis on this. As Americans, we understand if someone from another country did something weird, we wouldn't necessarily judge that as offensive, because they're coming from a different place, and they may not understand what we do here.

People all around the world are mostly the same way. Even if you do something offensive, they tend to cut you a little bit of slack because you don't know the rules. Try to keep smiling, apologize if you've offended someone, ask "Did I do something offensive?" They'll tell you.

Probably the biggest thing that we see is differing hand gestures. I try to minimize talking with my hands and making hand gestures when I'm in other countries. If I screw up, most people are going to cut me a little bit of slack, just like we would cut a foreign traveler a bit of slack here. If you make an unintentionally offensive hand gesture, it's not quite the death sentence that some of the guidebooks might make it out to be.

eJournal: You mentioned such simple things: smiling and looking pleasant, looking friendly and kind. We get tons of coaching on what to do and not to do that we miss the importance of what we project. One behavior that baffles many pertains to managing or masking fear if you realize you're in a bad situation. What are your thoughts?

Ellifritz: One critical factor that masks fear is being decisive. Even if you are scared, making a decision and following through with that decision is a pretty good piece of advice for dealing with the fear. If I'm scared something is not right here, rather than stay in the environment and continue to get information, I'll act, make a decision, get out of there.

You need better knowledge about what to actually be scared of. In general, what kills travelers is not kidnapping, robbery or terrorist attack. It's car crashes and more mundane things. Having a good baseline knowledge of the types of attacks that are common in the areas that you're frequenting and what really tends to cause lots of damage will leave you a little bit less scared when you have to interact with the locals. When you're traveling to other countries, the chance of being kidnapped or shot in a terrorist attack is really, really small, but the chance of dying in a car crash is much greater than here in the United States.

I tell a story in my book. When I'd only been traveling internationally for a few years, I was in Ecuador on a trekking tour. An Australian guy who was at the hostel and I decided to take a walk through Quito. We ended up in a neighborhood where there weren't many tourists. We quickly attracted the attention of a whole bunch of drunk locals drinking big 40-ounce bottles of beer out in the street. They approached and I thought, "Oh, the fight is on for sure." We were surrounded by young men out in the street drinking. In their halting English, they said, "We don't get many English speakers here. If you let us practice our English, we'll share our beer with you."

We'd thought they were about to smash in our heads with their big beer bottles. It turned into an impromptu language lesson

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and shared beers in some rural town in Ecuador. You have got to understand that being scared isn't always indicative of true danger. The more experiences like that you have, the less scared you get.

eJournal: Looking around frantically can communicate unease, too. We get conflicting advice on scanning. How surreptitious is your scanning? How do you address keeping your head on a swivel, or do you?

Ellifritz: Well, I don't. When I'm entering a new environment, I look around just very generally and see what people are doing. I don't make active scanning motions. I'm not constantly "head-on-a-swivel" everywhere because especially outside of the United States that gives the locals the impression of one of two things.

One is that you're very scared and that's a "Go" sign for the bad guys.

The other reason, especially for a guy like me with short hair who's big and looks like a cop, is the head-on-a-swivel looks like I'm paying attention to everybody. No foreigner does that unless they are CIA, DEA, or some type of foreign police officer trying to shut down whatever crime syndicate the locals have going. That's a bad place to be!

I don't want to look like a DEA agent all by myself in a foreign country who's looking to shut down their drug selling operation, you know? That's what it looks like when people do that constant, head-on-a-swivel scanning. I like a relaxed awareness of what's going on. Know who's around you and what they're doing. If you can do that without looking like a paranoid freak, you're going to be way, way better off, especially in a foreign country.

eJournal: How we scan is sort of a test of our sophistication. I'm reminded of the great Ed Lovette, with whom I've had the privilege of studying. He gave an interview that I titled *Beneath the Radar* (<https://armedcitizensnetwork.org/beneath-the-radar>), in which I bounced the phrase "head-on-a-swivel" off him while asking about awareness. He indicated, in Ed's inimitable way, that he really did not care for it.

Ellifritz: Ed is a wonderful resource. He is a friend of mine whom I have known for a very long time. Anybody watching this interview who doesn't know who Ed Lovette is and hasn't read his *Snubby Revolver* book, and his book with Dave Spalding, *Defensive Living*, should put his books at the top of their reading list because he has some experience that very few people have nowadays.

eJournal: That's absolutely right. Both you and Ed have done us a great service by applying safety lessons learned overseas to daily safety here in the U.S. We could also use coaching on how to ask for help as safely as possible after an accident,

automotive break down, or an unexpected medical issue. How do we fail – other than just not asking for help? How do we get help when needed?

Ellifritz: In foreign countries, knowing the word for help is pretty useful, but if you're asking for help after something serious, a car accident, a medical emergency, or a robbery, I think most of the people who are interested in helping and would come to your aid, can figure out what's going on and get you the help that you need. That's one of the things that people are pretty good about all over the world and maybe even more so in other countries where there's a feeling of national pride. They feel bad if a tourist is injured and they really want to show a foreign tourist that they are helpful, kind people who will do everything possible.

Now, the issue is what can be done in those environments. In the United States, if you need help, you call 9-1-1. In most places, you're going to have police or medics there in a short time. That may not be true in other locales, but there I think most people are going to be as helpful as they can be.

eJournal: Do you think as Americans we are slower to step up and lend a hand?

Ellifritz: I think so. Maybe our legal system causes a fear of lawsuits more than other countries where the legal systems tend to be a little bit different. Furthermore, I think Americans are accustomed to allowing authority figures to handle problems. In the developing world especially, no one is coming to solve the locals' problems and they're used to helping each other because they can't really rely on any of the governmental institutions to help them. They are more likely to be helpful and figure things out for themselves rather than waiting for the military or the police or the paramedics. You're probably in a little bit better spot if you're asking for help in a foreign country than you are here in America.

eJournal: Whether it's asking for help, confirming exit routes or avoiding problems, we are trying to strike a balance. It's interesting because your balance is going to be so different than mine. I don't want to be so cautious that I never leave home, but I don't want to take stupid risks, either.

Ellifritz: I think a lot of us, especially folks who are into self protection and the gun world, tend to overestimate the risks of travel and underestimate the benefits. I have learned more about dealing with criminals and dealing with people of other ethnic origins and backgrounds and just how to be a good human through traveling than I ever learned through any of the thousands of hours of defensive training that I had. Travel makes you more adaptable and those skills remain with you even when you come back home. I think that's really critical.

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A lot of people fail to account for the benefits of the travel and tend to only see the risks, but that's a bad accounting in my estimation. I don't want you to do stupid things, but there are a lot of ways that you can travel internationally, even to potentially dangerous areas, and do so in as safe a manner as possible. The benefits far outweigh the risks, but a lot of people don't have a real good handle on that, mostly because they lack experience.

The first time I traveled I was completely paranoid. I was 28 years old the very first time I left the country. My sister had a destination wedding in Jamaica. I wore body armor on the plane and brought every type of weapon imaginable. I got down to Jamaica and all the resort folks said to stay on the resort. "It's too dangerous to go outside," they said.

I got bored after several days on the resort and decided to take a walk into town. A taxi driver approached me when I went into a convenience store to buy a bottle of water, introduced himself and told me that he just got out of the Jamaican military and was trying to make a living as a taxi driver. He said, "I'll make you an offer. I'll give you a private tour of my hometown in my taxi and at the end of it you pay me what you think I'm worth." I thought to myself, either this is going to be really good or I'm going to end up somewhere missing a kidney.

I took the risk, and he gave me a great tour that only a local could provide: all the local markets, restaurants and bars and some scenery that a tourist wouldn't know about. It was such a good trip that I booked him the next day to do the same kind of tour for the rest of my family.

Without taking those kinds of risks, I would have never had such a wonderful experience learning about a completely different culture. That's the kind of thing that a lot of folks don't understand. They're too worried about their safety. It's really not all that dangerous to travel to other countries, even the less-developed ones. Most people are not trying to kill tourists or rob you or steal your organs; you're going to be fine in most cases.

eJournal: Let's play a little mind game. What if the taxi driver had approached you in New Orleans, for example? Would you have gambled...

Ellifritz: *[Grinning]* There would have been no chance! No chance would I jump in a random car with somebody who approached me on the streets of New Orleans! In another country, the equation is a little bit different. People act differently and some of the risks pay off. Those benefits are something a lot of people really discount, and in my opinion, they shouldn't.

eJournal: Back to seeking balance: here at home, especially with either permitless carry or reciprocity, one might go into a dangerous area saying, "Well, I've got a gun, I'll be okay." We're doing that balancing act between not to stepping beyond the

front door and going where a wiser person might ask, "Well, should you have really been there even if you had a gun?" Where's the balance?.

Ellifritz: Each person individually has to draw that line. I don't think that having the gun gives you a license to do stupid things, especially in our current, litigious environment. I wouldn't do anything with a gun that I wouldn't do without a gun, either here or abroad. If I wouldn't do it because I'm not armed, I probably wouldn't do it, period. That's probably a smart way of looking at things. That gun doesn't give you a license to do stupid things.

eJournal: That's an excellent sound bite. You may have the title for your next book, *Would I Do It Without a Gun?* Are you writing anything else?

Ellifritz: I am. I currently have six different books in some stage of completion. I think I have writing attention deficit disorder. I get a book about halfway done and get bored with it and move on to the next one. I'm currently trying to finish two of them.

I spend most of my winters now in Playa del Carmen, Mexico. I'm writing a travel guide for first timers to that city. Then I'm also working on a book on tourist scams in the developing world. The most feedback from the readers of *Choose Adventure* is about the chapter on travel scams, so I wanted to expand that. I've done quite a bit of research. I've traveled Mexico and Turkey and Colombia trying to intentionally get myself scammed, interacting with every hustler, drug dealer and hooker I can find on the street just to see how their scams work. It's all going into a travel scam book that I'm working on right now.

Last summer, I spent three weeks in a very wealthy part of Medellin, Colombia where most of the expats live. Because it has money, that's where all the hustlers and scam artists operate, too. Every night after dark, I walked for an hour or two on the streets. I speak passable Spanish and I engaged with every single con artist and hustler that I could find, just to see how they were trying to scam me and learn how they operated. It was very educational. I learned quite a bit doing it, so I repeated it both in Mexico and in Turkey this last summer and got some good results. I'm writing all that up in a book that should be out before the end of the year if everything goes well. Look out for that one. I think it'll be good.

eJournal: I can't wait to read it! Do you ever anticipate writing about defensive tactics just for plain old Americans? I think you've got a tremendous amount to offer.

Ellifritz: I've thought about it, but is it a valuable use of my time? You know, most Americans don't read. The big, 500-page travel book that I published is very successful by independent

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publishing standards, but I could make more in a weekend of classes than I made after eight years of working on the book. Should I teach more, or should I write more? Right now, the writing isn't paying as well as the teaching.

I've got over 2,000 articles on my website at [ActiveResponseTraining.net](https://www.activetraining.net), where I've been writing three to four articles a week since 2012. Eventually, when I get done with all these books I'm working on, I'm going to start compiling some of the articles into books on certain topics. I think that will be my contribution to the American self-defense scene.

eJournal: That compendium would be great, and in the meantime Network members, it's all on ActiveResponseTraining.net where there's a wonderful resource archived. For now, though, what would you like us to take away from our talk today?

Ellifritz: I start my book with this. Most of the people who are going to be reading this or watching the video version are familiar with John Farnam's admonition not to go stupid places with stupid people and do stupid things. The same holds true for international travel. You don't want to do stupid things, but being unfamiliar with the environment, we don't know what's stupid and what isn't.

What may be stupid here, may not be stupid in other areas, so a little bit of research before you go is really important and I would say that the benefits of travel in the developing world far outweigh the risks for most people. That's an equation that is improperly weighted in many folks' minds. I think if they did a little bit of exploration, the world would be a much better place for them. It isn't as big of a danger as people make it out to be.

eJournal: What you just said applies equally to traveling around our country. If you live on the West Coast, go visit the East Coast; go to the mountains, go down to Galveston, whatever you want to see.

Ellifritz: No doubt. Life is short. Staying inside locked in your living room with your AR-15 sitting next to you isn't really the life that I want to live. There's a time and place to be paranoid and to be armed. I'm not discounting that at all, but sometimes the greater lessons are learned when we're a little bit more vulnerable.

eJournal: So true! Greg, this chance to talk with you has been great. Thank you so much for taking this time with me.

Ellifritz: I've wanted to talk about this particular topic for quite a while and no one's been interested. I'm really glad that this is a topic of interest to you and the Network members. If anybody has any additional questions, get ahold of me through my website. There's a contact form (<https://www.activetraining.net/contact>) right on the website home page that goes straight to my email. If I can help you out, please get ahold of me and I'll try my best to do so.

*The Network is proud to count Greg amongst our Affiliated Instructors. Since his retirement several years ago, he has greatly increased the number of classes he teaches. Learn more about his gun, knife, empty hand and medical classes at <https://www.activetraining.net/available-classes>. Don't miss the book we mentioned in this interview, *Choose Adventure*. Learn more at <https://www.chooseadventurebook.com/>.*



President's Message

The Police Are Not Your Enemy!

by Marty Hayes, J.D.

It is very popular in the self-defense after action assistance industry (read self-defense insurance) for attorney pundits on YouTube to scream "never talk to the police" from the rafters. They tell horror

stories about how their clients talk themselves into prison, when the police use their statements against them in court.

In our Network member education programs, we have discussed how we think armed citizens should act towards police if they have to use force, and I see more and more well reasoned, logical people using Massad Ayoob's [Five Point Checklist](#) to teach or advise armed citizens how to handle the interaction with police.

This topic comes to mind because recently two Network members shot in self defense, and they DID NOT invoke their fifth amendment right to remain silent. Less than a month later, they are walking around free with no criminal charges pending. In both these cases, shortly after the incident police questioned our members. Based on our members' statements, they investigated the shootings and based on the investigation, concluded no evidence existed to arrest our members. In either case, if the member had not explained to the police what occurred to make them have to shoot, they likely would have been arrested.

My background consisted of about a decade of law enforcement work, primarily as a patrol officer who, because

of working in small towns, also served as the investigator of alleged crimes. As a result, I have a rather unique perspective in contemplating this issue.

I would be willing to state that the vast majority of police are not hostile to armed citizens using force in self defense, and if they don't actually identify with the armed citizen, at least do not have a bias against them. It is only in urban, anti-gun jurisdictions (mostly) where the police target armed citizens and will seek out evidence to arrest, while ignoring exculpatory evidence.

How does working in populated, urban societies result in this type of "bent" police force? The answer lies in the hiring process. Before an individual is hired, they have to sit for an oral interview. At this interview, the police administrators who conduct the oral interviews can probe the candidate's feelings toward the gun issue. In addition, the psychologists who either pass or fail the candidate can at times probe into the psyche of the candidate to see if he or she would be a "good fit" in the department. A "good fit" might mean the type of cop who will "go along to get along." By the time this weeding-out procedure is completed, those in power can be assured that they are hiring officers who do not possess solid, patriotic personalities and who are moldable. The same can be said about federal law enforcement. Consequently, if one needs to decide just how much to cooperate with police after an incident, the reputation of the agency and how anti-gun the administration is matters.

I do have some bright lines that if crossed, I have decided I will not make any statements. One line is if I am handcuffed and read my Miranda warnings. At that point, I will politely ask, "Why am I handcuffed? Why are you reading me my rights? Am I under arrest?" If this is the case, I will simply tell the police I am willing to cooperate once I have spoken to a lawyer.



Photo: John McGrath, an instructor with the Arizona Church Security Network played the role of the defendant in a recent Deadly Force Instructor class, with Ayoob questioning him and Tim Forshey, an Arizona Network Affiliated attorney and judge for the day, listening intently. This mock trial concluded with a mistrial, with the jury deadlocked.

To further explain these nuances, a few months ago, I made a couple of YouTube videos which explained in detail the issues surrounding with talking to the police. If you haven't seen these videos, I would recommend you watch *Making Statements Part 1* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vW2nh0AJw2E> and *Making Statements Part 2* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LAq16Dpf_U

As always, what you do is ultimately your choice, and the consequences of your choice or choices are your responsibility. Choose wisely.

One More Deadly Force Instructor Course This Year

Last month, I was honored to assist Massad Ayoob in certifying 20 armed citizens as deadly force instructors. Most of them were instructors who spend most of their time teaching concealed carry licensing courses in their respective states. We also had a few Network members

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who simply wanted to improve their knowledge in this critical area. We are teaching another offering of this class in Washington State on July 22-26, 2024. Browse to <https://firearmsacademy.com/guest-instructors/deadly-force-instructor-washington> for details.

The high point of the deadly force instructor course for most students is the moot court/mock trial which we involve the whole class in the court procedure. We use the students as jurors, witnesses in court, as experts in court, and one lucky student gets to be tried for murder. When we teach this course, typically once or twice a year, we try to get a real local judge to run the court proceedings, and if we have any attorneys in class, especially criminal defense attorneys or prosecutors, we ask them to play the parts of prosecutors or defense attorneys.

If you are not an active instructor, should you take this course? The answer to that question is, unequivocally, YES! When you testify at your self-defense trial, wouldn't it be worthwhile to

be able to explain to the jury that you are the very rare armed citizen who was so concerned about doing everything right if pressed into the need to use deadly force, that you spend your own time and money to attend and become certified as a deadly force instructor? I very much think so.

I am reminded of the prosecution of Kayla Giles for murder, where she was found guilty of second degree murder after shooting her ex-husband. In viewing an interview with her from prison on YouTube by attorney Marc Victor, it was plain to me that her legal defense was abhorrent, bordering on negligent. For those of you who have not followed her case, she is the USCCA member who was dropped by the USCCA in the middle of her representation. Here is a link to the video interview, which is well worth watching. *Kayla Giles Shares Her Side of the Story with Attorneys On Retainer* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JRAr5Hq2TYY> . In a future column, I hope to give a complete breakdown as to why I believe her defense was "abhorrent."



Attorney Question of the Month

The question of obstructing an investigation or tampering with evidence arises about what one may do with alternative weapons and other personal effects after self defense and before police arrive and search. We are told of instructors advising students to divest themselves of knives, pepper spray, second or back up guns and entrust them to another person before police arrive. We wonder whether divesting oneself of other weapons would likely result in obstruction or tampering with evidence charges, so we asked our affiliated attorneys –

How does your state law or case law address removing weapons that were not used in the self defense act but that were carried on one's person?

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There are videos available on the internet which show law enforcement officers in Florida turning over the personal belongings of an arrestee to a person accompanying the arrestee at the time of arrest. Nonetheless, some law enforcement officers and prosecutors reviewing a self-defense incident might believe used or unused personal effects items such as a pocket knife, OC canister, firearm reload, flashlight, NRA or ACLDN membership card, cell phone or other property may/should be seized without consent or a warrant, whether or not the defender is arrested on scene. I think not.

However, of note is the felony under Fla. Stat. § 918.13, which might be asserted against the defender and the person given the personal effects, even though it is in a chapter labeled "Conduct of Trial." The offense is not dependent on the commission of an independent crime or the item's admissibility as evidence or other use in a trial if it was available to law enforcement at the scene. Much of the caselaw refers to the statute as "evidence tampering."

The statute, as edited by me for readability and to address the Attorney Question of the Month:

It is unlawful for any person, knowing that an investigation by a duly constituted prosecuting authority or law enforcement agency is about to be instituted, to conceal or remove an item with the purpose to impair its verity or availability in such investigation.

Many states have similarly worded, all-encompassing evidence tampering and obstruction statutes which follow the language and near madness of the plethora of federal criminal laws on such. (As I write this, one such important case is now pending before the United States Supreme Court.) Affiliated attorneys from all states might want to look at a recent Utah Supreme Court case, *State v. Paule*, as a caution to giving advice on a client's offloading personal effects at the scene of a self-defense incident. In that case the defendant was acquitted of all charges but convicted of obstructing justice. See <https://legacy.courts.gov/opinions/supopin/State%20v.%20Paule20240201.pdf>.

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I would absolutely guard against removing weaponry from the premises, even if not involved in the incident. A judge would take a dim view of any spoliation of evidence, as likely would a jury. As to Maine, in most areas of the state, multiple weapons in a house, even many, would not prejudice a jury.

Much better to face down questions as to whether you are a responsible owner than to face questions as to why you disposed of possible evidence, disturbed what is now a crime scene, or delayed in contacting authorities.

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Each case is so fact-specific and unique that there is no blanket answer for this important question. In Utah, the risks and frequency of being charged with Obstruction of Justice and/or Evidence Tampering are so significant that an individual consultation is the best way to get this answer.

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As a general rule, I would advise against it. Especially if it happens in a public place where there's liable to be surveillance cameras everywhere. They see you divesting yourself of other weapons, it is likely to be interpreted by any prosecutor as evi-

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dence of an underlying crime. It would also be seen as altering evidence in general.

Remember, the law is whatever the prosecutor decides it is, so you shouldn't carry more than one pistol or at most two. A primary and a back up. If you carry more pistols than that, you need a psychiatrist, not a lawyer. If you're carrying a pocket knife, that's just a tool. If you're carrying spray, that's a great idea because it means the gun is not your first idea. This is evidence that would tend to lack of intent to kill. I would urge people to carry both a gun and pepper spray. I teach this in CPL class. It's a nice halfway step between your fist and a gun. That's how you explain it. Why kill somebody if you can pepper spray them?

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You are justified in using deadly force or you weren't. In representing officers, I find more get in trouble for a cover up when it was not necessary. Who cares what other weapons you may have had? If you get caught hiding evidence you could hurt the credibility of your self-defense claim.

The hiding of evidence can result in tampering with evidence charges. Most important is credibility when asserting a self-defense claim. Instructors stating otherwise are giving their students bad information.

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I had a client who accidentally shot a hole into his first floor apartment ceiling, and after the upstairs neighbor left her apartment in fear — and it was known that she was going to see a relative — the client called my office to ask for advice. I advised him to immediately empty his gun safe of everything except the offending weapon, and to take the guns to a friend's house for storage.

The purpose of that advice was to prevent the very over-zealous police in that jurisdiction from seizing every gun the client owned, which they would have done when they arrived many hours later, responding to a complaint from the upstairs neighbor. But, that was a very special situation. No one but the client

knew how many guns he owned, and the location was very private, so no one saw him loading his modest gun collection into his car and driving away.

A self-defense shooting is unlikely to offer such an opportunity for divestment of secondary weapons or other equipment. Likely the police will arrive very quickly, and if there are witnesses, there is no way to eliminate things without being observed. Also, while it may not be strictly illegal to give your wife or a friend items not used in the self-defense shooting, later it will be questioned, and you will look suspicious. It also allows a prosecutor to allege that you were hiding evidence, and the jury will ponder that matter. Even if you hid nothing of relevance, the jury will wonder why you hid anything.

Unless such a maneuver can be made with absolute privacy and no likelihood of disclosure, it is unwise, and could seriously prejudice a criminal case. An attorney will have a much easier time explaining why you carry three guns, two knives and a sap, than they will have explaining why you tried to hide most of those things after the shooting.

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An exact specific answer to this would probably be case by case dependent, but as a general bit of counsel, I certainly wouldn't advise courting additional charges by even having the appearance of concealing or attempting to conceal weapons that may be relevant to a defensive incident. If you have the opportunity to do so SAFELY before police arrive on scene, I could see handing off a wallet sans ID and carry license, keys, or other valuables, in the expectation that right or wrong you are still probably going to jail in the short term, but as to weapons, you should have the expectation that anything from pepper spray to a backup firearm you carry on you will be seized in the event of a defensive act.

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The State of Alabama does not have a statute that removes weapons from someone that is being investigated, however it is a common bond condition for someone charged not to possess firearms.

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As a former prosecutor and law enforcement official, I would most importantly recommend that one not conceal or do anything which would suggest that he or she is attempting to mislead the investigative officials. The impression that one is being misleading or not being truthful will be harmful to one's defense. If other more lethal weapons were lawfully in the possession of the subject of the investigation, but were not used, that could be very beneficial. Each case has its own unique issues and it would be helpful if the subject of the investigation consulted with counsel before taking any action or being interviewed.

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I think any instructor who advises a person to divest themselves of any other sort of weapons or give them to someone else before the police arrive is giving horrible advice that will only make the situation much, much worse. Taking such steps smacks of dishonesty as if the person who used deadly force had something to hide. That's the last impression a justified shooter needs to project.

Responses to the Attorney Question of the Month column are voluntarily contributed by our generous attorneys who squeeze time out of their pressing schedules to contribute answers to our questions. There are many additional affiliated attorneys for whom work pressures were too great to provide responses. A busy attorney is a successful attorney. Knowing the pressures under which the legal profession works, we are so very grateful for all of our affiliated attorneys who have identified themselves as resources for the Network and its members after use of force in self defense. Members, please join us in saying "Thank you!" to all of our affiliated attorneys and to those who make time to contribute responses to this column, an extra round of grateful applause.

Book Review

Legion of Michael: Defending the Flock

By Paul G. Markel

[Independently published](#), 128 pages,
Paperback \$10.99 or \$3.99 eBook
ISBN-13 979-8649331784

Reviewed by Gila Hayes

Paul Markel, a life-long Christian, writes a compelling introduction to his book about church security in which he relates his experience as a young man choosing a use-of-force profession while staying true to his faith. In the Marine Corps, he encountered many who misunderstood the Biblical injunction to turn the other cheek, and the sixth commandment, which, if translated from the Hebrew correctly, should actually read “thou shall not commit murder.”

Some are blessed, he posits, with the ability and willingness to use force in defense of those who cannot defend themselves. In the context of worship and assuring the safety and defense of fellow congregants, Markel dubs these protectors “the Legion of Michael,” sketching out the Biblical account of the war in heaven in which the archangel Michael led an army of angels to force Lucifer to leave heaven. Armed forces, law enforcement professionals, church safety teams and armed citizens may stay within the bounds of their faith and use force in defense of the innocent, he explains.

Parishioners who carry guns are “not an effective security strategy” alone, Markel writes, noting that the level of training and practice is woefully inadequate amongst many civilian gun owners. He details the many considerations present when choosing the security team. Abandon “childish notions of ‘fair’ or ‘equal’” when choosing team members, he advises. Physical and mental attributes are important, including stamina. Hearing and vision are necessary, despite our sympathy for older or disabled believers who want to serve. A desire to serve and willingness to make the sacrifices that may attach are also important characteristics.

Poor team member choices include church members who “spend all of their time telling you about how many and what kinds of guns they own,” he adds. To avoid appearing arbitrary, those leading church security teams should maintain written records of why a team member is or is not chosen, he advises. In a later chapter, Markel discusses professionalism, explaining that having a written standard operating procedure document is in no way “overkill” even for two or three volunteers protecting a small-town congregations. He offers examples of mission statements, incident reports, organizational and assignments including who is authorized to give statements on behalf of



the church after an incident, training and ongoing qualification requirements, suggested courses of fire for qualifications, some of which needs to be reviewed by the church attorney, he specifies. He also stresses the importance of teaching justified use of force, providing models, but noting that policies must be appropriate to laws where the church is located. Returning to the topic of professionalism, he later also explains the importance of name tags, and the value of keeping a daily log any time security is provided.

Even if a team member comes to the mission with an exceptionally high level of skill, Markel recommends requiring participation in the team’s training sessions. Training builds camaraderie, he explains. Training goes beyond marksmanship, includes gun safety, and must also cover trauma medicine. Likewise, a safety team needs to have physical capacity and people skills to handle “disorderly, argumentative or unbalanced” people who may enter the church. In addition to grappling skills, he suggests TASER®s and pepper foam. One chapter discusses firearms, and other communications equipment.

Markel dedicates a chapter to explaining justifiable use of force, introducing his topic with the observation that the subject is “not as complicated or complex as many would have you believe,” then describing circumstances under which it is reasonable to fear the death or “permanent or prolonged disability” to an innocent person at the hands of a violent attacker. He goes on to discuss the means of injury that are considered deadly force and the actions that demonstrate intent to cause harm.

Markel’s lessons about awareness and that mindset’s application to the security mission are of equal importance to his use of force introduction. I was pleased when he echoed a sentiment I saw first some years ago when I read *What They Don’t Tell You About Church Safety* (<https://armedcitizensnetwork.org/june-2016-book-review>) that clearly defines the preferred motivation and the resultant demeanor of security volunteers. Markel describes it thus: “It is important that the members of the Legion of Michael never come across to the congregation as stern, sour, or standoffish. Always offer members a smile and a nod to acknowledge them. You want them to be glad you are there and not feel intimidated by your presence.”

He continues with a warning that church security team members must never consider themselves elite or better than the rest of the congregation, some of whom may already be opposed to church defense preparations. Build bridges, Markel recommends, suggesting that church security volunteers might host a spaghetti dinner for the congregation to meet with the safety team. The team leader could offer a preview of training, or offer a short course like a *Stop the Bleed* demonstration, which he adds, creates a positive, “warm, fuzzy, feeling” that is much more productive than promoting the need for church security by invoking fear as would result from showing “a PowerPoint on church shootings,” he observes.

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Take care, also, not to alienate congregants who carry guns, Markel continues. A joint session for the safety team as well as armed congregants who don't volunteer for the team might present a guest speaker teaching about justifiable use of force or trauma medical care and first aid, he suggests.

Markel's chapter on the aftermath of self defense considers the physical, emotional, and legal well-being of the volunteers who have shouldered the church safety mission. He tackles issues including summoning law enforcement and medical help, what to tell police when they arrive and who should speak on behalf of the church, as well as the difficult and dangerous question of rendering first aid to an attacker, explained through the lens of Christianity.

Additional chapters include a good discussion of how much public access is really needed for the church building, addressing concerns about creating a welcoming atmosphere to draw in those with whom the church wants to share the Christian message. If the structure has side doors or back doors through which an attacker could enter unobserved, secure those doors, he recommends. While surveying access, also verify quick access to fire extinguishers, automated external defibrillators, and other aspects of safety for congregations, he adds.

Markel's book is written in an easy-to-read conversational style, blending his background, skills, knowledge and training into a distilled, no-nonsense briefing. If you volunteer or attend a church served by a security team, I recommend this book.



Editor's Notebook

Broken Windows

by Gila Hayes

I was interested to hear an echo of the old broken windows theory in Greg Ellifritz's discussion about staying safe in unfamiliar environments. I couldn't help but think about doing trash pick up

and other community improvement projects now that spring is here after reading his comments about the prevalence of crime in run down neighborhoods.

In the 1980s criminologists suggested that damaged, abandoned buildings encourage crime because it is clear no one cares enough to prevent, stop or punish crime in that part of town. (*Kelling and Wilson, 1982*) While the fallout from applying what came to be called the Broken Windows theory was much broader than mere urban revitalization, there remains a lot of truth to the underlying belief that hard work to maintain a tidy, well-repaired living and working space communicates residents' commitment to order and lawful behavior. Since we prefer our self-defense preparations to be proactive rather than reactive, it is something to think about even if it is as simple as periodically collecting trash left behind in the company parking lot. After all, we carry guns to prevent attack when we are going in and coming out of work. Let's also do our part to keep the areas we regularly move through safe and wholesome.

Choose Us For What We Do, Not Because We're Cheap

Over the past several months, a little rash of non-emergency calls have come in on the emergency phone number. That's not so good because we need to reserve that number for the use of members calling us after use of force in self defense. One caller, distressed by the New York court's verdict against Wayne LaPierre of the NRA, called the emergency number to ask our Network President's opinion when the office phone was busy with new memberships and renewals. Another member called just slightly after closing time and still another just slightly before opening at 7 a.m.

The early morning and early evenings calls were ironic because only shortly before or quite soon thereafter, we would have had many business hours during which we could have moved the call over to the general business line and happily discussed their concerns at length. Much as I regret interrupting someone who is energetically launching into a long question or a description of their particular situation and contingent concerns, reserving the emergency line for use only after self defense is a precaution we need members to respect.

One competitor's terms and conditions includes a paragraph stating they charge \$75 for "false reports, 'test' calls, and other abuses of the 24-hour hotline number." The Network

has never even considered imposing any steps of that nature, nor can I imagine ever doing such a thing. We choose to trust our members to exercise good judgment and by their actions demonstrate their concern and respect for the needs of their fellow Network members who do call for help after self defense.

The early morning and early evening callers were new members who had not had self-defense incidents, but wanted proof that part of our assistance worked. My after-work caller also wanted to explore how the emergency call line works. I explained that two founding officers of Armed Citizens' Legal Defense Network, myself and Network president Marty Hayes, shoulder responsibility for answering that emergency line 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, but my caller remained distressed that the emergency line was not served by a commercial call center.

He related that he had switched to the Network from a large competitor which he said routed their calls for service to a commercial call center. If I was their client, I would be asking, "What is the experience of the operator to whom I would be speaking and what could they accomplish for me? Would the operator have any grasp of the nuances of use of force in self defense?" I shared those concerns with the member and asked questions to try to understand the preference he emphatically expressed for a large, commercial call center. If, I asked, that was his preference, why had he had left the insurance program and its call center. Why? The cheaper yearly price, he said.

At 6:30 a.m., about a month later, I was driving the last few miles before arriving at the office when a nearly identical call came over the emergency line from a new member who had come to the Network recently after leaving the same insurance reseller. "I wanted to make sure you answered this line," he said. I chuckled a little and assured him that we do, then asked to clear the line and reserve it for emergency calls. He badly wanted to spell out the risks to personal safety he faces, but went on to also express the same preference for our lower yearly dues as my evening caller had several weeks earlier.

Now, there are many reasons to switch from insurance-based post-incident assistance programs, as these two new members had done. Who decides whether or not to pay your legal expenses? Do they have extensive experience with the justification aspects of using force in self defense? In addition, insurance has to deal with the very troubling threat of recoupment—being required to repay their funding if the policy-holder or named beneficiary is found guilty. We at the Network invest great effort into providing the most service for a fair price, but even more than the cost, we believe it is of far greater importance to rely on the kind of people that share your own values.

The heart and soul of the Network is the 22,000 like-minded men and women who read about and watch news covering the ordeals other armed citizens have endured after self defense or defense of their families and pledged, "We won't let that happen to one of our own!"

About the Network's Online Journal

The *eJournal* of the Armed Citizens' Legal Defense Network, Inc. is published monthly on the Network's website at <https://armedcitizensnetwork.org/our-journal>. Content is copyrighted by the Armed Citizens' Legal Defense Network, Inc.

Do not mistake information presented in this online publication for legal advice; it is not. The Network strives to assure that information published in this journal is both accurate and useful. Reader, it is your responsibility to consult your own attorney to receive professional assurance that this information and your interpretation or understanding of it is accurate, complete and appropriate with respect to your particular situation.

In addition, material presented in our opinion columns is entirely the opinion of the bylined author and is intended to provoke thought and discussion among readers.

To submit letters and comments about content in the eJournal, please contact editor Gila Hayes by e-mail sent to editor@armedcitizensnetwork.org.

The Armed Citizens' Legal Defense Network, Inc. receives its direction from these corporate officers:

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Gila Hayes, Chief Operating Officer

We welcome your questions and comments about the Network.

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