

WALTERS

Face-to-Face With a Robber

*By Wanda M. Walters,
OIG-USPS*

Never let it be said that I lead a quiet life. The unexpected can and does happen, even to safety professionals.

One Friday night, I had made plans to have dinner with a friend in Alexandria, followed by a movie in Shirlington. While driving to Alexandria, I noticed that I-95 still had some rush-hour traffic, so I decided to take the Franconia-Springfield Metro.

I entered the metro-parking deck at 7 p.m., which still was pretty full from commuter parking. Lights already were on inside the parking deck. I always park as close as possible to the stairwells leading to the station, so I ended up on the 5th deck. About 15 cars were parked close to the stairs.

As I got out of my car, I noticed three teenagers scanning the cars in the parking area directly behind me. Because of a support column and two large vehicles, I hadn't seen them upon entering the area. My immediate thought was that they were looking for a car to break into. I put my keys in my pants pocket, instead of my purse. My house keys were not on my ring since a Land Rover's remote engine-locking system won't operate with other keys on the ring.

I saw the teenagers separate very quickly and head in my direction. "Should I get back in the car?" I wondered. I realized if they had a weapon, I could get shot through the window at head level. Should I run? With my bad knees from skiing in clog-type shoes, that option wasn't a viable one. I decided just to remain calm and start walking briskly toward the stairwell.

Before I got there, a slender black male cut me off and jammed a semi-automatic in my side. He was 14 to 17 years old and very nervous; his right hand was shaking slightly, and I could tell the safety wasn't on his gun. He told me up front he would kill me and to give him my purse. I handed it over but, unbelievably, asked if I could keep my driver's license. He handed my purse back, which confirmed my thought this kid was very new to this game and, thus, most likely was even more dangerous. In my mind,

the chance of him accidentally discharging the gun moved to a higher level.

I removed the license from my purse and asked if I could keep my cellphone, too. I explained if my mother called and he answered, she probably would think the worse. Considering her age, she probably would have a stroke or heart attack. To my surprise, he gave me the cellphone and, at this point, turned to walk away.

Now is when the situation really got stupid. I asked him please not to use the government credit cards since he could get into serious trouble—I'm the credit-card holder for my office...duh. And, I even called him "honey" in a soft voice. I guess I'll never get over that southern magnolia mode of calling everyone "honey" or "sugar." Y'all can start laughing anytime!

The young robber then turned his head toward his two accomplices, another male and a female. The latter asked him what was going on, and when he told her about the phone, she yelled back, "Go get the damn phone and finish this!"

At this point, my heart dropped, and I knew I had to make my next decision. Should I run for the stairs and risk getting shot at? He was only 20 feet away. Or should I stay still? I took some small side steps toward the stairs without him knowing it but stopped when he turned back toward me and said, "Give me the phone, or I'll have to kill you."

My mama never raised a fool. I handed over the phone and asked him not to answer it should it ring until I had had a chance to call my mother. Again, I couldn't believe the things I was asking this kid or how stupid he was acting. Talk about inexperience!

He agreed, then turned around and started rushing toward his companions. I noticed he went to the front passenger side of my car, while the girl accomplice moved to the driver's door, and the other boy went to the passenger door behind the driver. As soon as he reached my car, I calmly walked toward the stairs. Once I had put a whole level between the kids and me, though, I yelled for people not to enter the area since the kids still were on the deck with the gun.

I suddenly realized when the little criminals found out they weren't getting my car (the keys still were in my pocket), they would be very upset and possibly ready to murder someone.

Despite my calls, four people still went up to the level where those kids were.

It took the Metro Transit Police 40 minutes to show up. It was then I learned there are no cameras in the parking deck. About 90 minutes later, the Metro detectives arrived. Fairfax County didn't send any law enforcement.

Lessons to be learned

I got an excellent look at the kid who held me up—I could describe his clothing, skin-facial features, and height and weight. One thing I couldn't describe, though, was his shoes because his pants hung way over the top of them. His jeans were very baggy, along with the gray hoodie he was wearing. The hoodie didn't have any logos or trademark stuff. He had no visible scars, acne, facial hair, earrings, etc. His eyes weren't dilated or red, which would suggest no drug use. He didn't smell of alcohol or breath freshener (yes, he was that close, another hint he was inexperienced). The police wanted to know all this information.

I kept my eyes on this kid the whole time and stood totally motionless. My voice was calm and even soothing. In the back of my head, I tried to remember everything I had learned from my honors biology class in college on animal behavior, which my father swore was a waste of time. Certain animals, I remembered, keep eye contact and, under no circumstances, run or present their back to predators.

Calling the kid "honey" and keeping my voice soft and low was another good move. Most frightened animals respond less aggressively to soothing voices. Crying, screaming, shouting, name-calling, anger, and fidgeting, on the other hand, often will unnerve or anger a criminal, especially a new one.

I knew better than to open my wallet and get out the money in it. I handed over the whole thing. It usually angers criminals when you don't have lots of money. I also knew better than to throw the wallet or bag at him, and I was careful not to drop it on the ground, which often has the same effect as throwing it.

Mace/pepper spray is another good thing to have, but don't even think about spraying it once you see or feel a gun against your skin. Only use it if you don't see a weapon or they are trying to assault you. Proximity to the face is required to make the mace really effective.

If a criminal orders you to get into a car and drive them somewhere or tries to drag you toward a car, fighting back is a strong option. Once you're in the car, your chances of survival are reduced.

As for the cellphone, I'm glad I didn't follow the advice of the first Metro Police official I saw; he said to get the phone cut off immediately. The detectives told me to leave the phone on. As they explained, by leaving the phone on, if the kid used the phone, they would have a record. The detectives also said that as long as the phone was on and the SIM card was installed, they could trace the phone through satellite systems. This capability, however, depends on your service provider, so it's important to check before signing a contract with a provider. The legal department of your wireless provider also must be involved in this type of action. You must sign a provider's release-authorization form and have the police fax it to the provider.

As long as a week after my incident, the little criminals still were using my phone, which left a wide trail. Remember to check your wireless provider's clauses about theft. I presented a police report but still was told I had to pay a huge cancellation fee for deleting the phone and changing my plan. I had a family plan, and the stolen phone was listed as the primary phone. The provider refused to convert over another phone as the primary one.

I wasn't asked until five months after my incident to review the police mug shots—something you should insist on doing immediately if you saw the person's face. By the time I saw the mug shots, the girl had changed her hairstyle and added piercings. I still managed to identify her, though. They had no mug shots of the boys but I somehow was able to pick out the brother of the boy who was using my cellphone. I did an art drawing of the kid and faxed it to the Metro Police.

Metro Smart cards cannot be cancelled unless they are attached to a work program and are registered.

Last but not least, I cancelled all my bank accounts and credit cards. Victoria's Secrets, Pier One, and Sam's Club were sweeties: Victoria's and Pier One sent extra coupons with new cards. I reckon Victoria's figured I needed new underwear after being robbed at gunpoint. The people at Sam's Club gave me hugs for surviving when I got my card printed.

My insurance company, USAA, covered my losses under my homeowners-renters policy. Meanwhile, BB&T personnel went into my hometown bank (in New Bern, N.C.), which was closed at the time (on a Saturday), and spent several hours closing and working on my savings account and putting safeguards on my investments. They will have my business for life.

I later realized the Navy Federal Credit Union had all my checking-account and credit-cards information in my Web Pay program. Since I was reviewing my son's college-loan application, and it was in the purse, his banking information also was in the hands of these kids and required canceling.

On Sunday after the robbery, it hit me I had been a crime victim. Was I angry? No. Instead, I was very sad. The incident had hit my trust factor—I started looking at teenagers dressed in baggy clothes a little differently. The Franconia-Springfield Metro now was off-limits to me after-hours, since it has such a lax protection-and-response system.

My son kept saying he should have been with me, but I thank God he wasn't. He probably would have been shot. Given his size, he probably would have grossly intimidated this kid. My son's macho football attitude would not have let him go "gently into the night."

These kids were looking for people that night, and it wouldn't have mattered if I had been with a male or had been the male victim. They had a gun and that alone made them feel brave. Not every robber reacts like my predators: Some would have shot me for asking for those items. I can't recommend talking to a guy in a ski mask or one who is smiling.

Each situation is different, just like the criminal you are dealing with. Staying calm and trying not to excite or anger your attacker is critical. Bottom line: I was lucky I was dealing with a kid, and he wasn't entirely jaded. The girl was extremely dangerous and a killer-in-the-making. If she had been the one with the gun, my friends probably would have been sending flowers and talking about how nice I looked in the pink coffin my mother had picked out.

Could I have done things smarter? No, I always park close to stairwells and avoid columns in the park deck since they provide cover for possible attackers. I never park close to large trucks or vans because they also provide good cover, and you also can be jumped and pulled into one. There was plenty of visibility in

the deck. I also was smart to have put the keys in my pocket, which prevented the criminals from getting my car or being able to enter my house. They didn't even get my address, but I put my condo-management group on alert, along with neighbors.

I'm thankful for all the terrorism and overseas theft training the Navy has provided over the years; it definitely came in handy. It probably saved my life and helped lessen the risk of getting my apartment visited by these kids. In Spain and Italy, we were told never to put our keys or valuables in backpacks or purses since robberies occur frequently.

I'm blessed to have great friends who immediately responded to the situation. I only could remember one phone number at the time, and that was for my dinner friend. He came to the station, helped in the search, and took me to dinner. He also helped with cancelling the credit cards. My neighbor, Kim, a network programmer with American Express, provided me a phone during the weekend, as well as some tips for documenting losses and events. She had been robbed at gunpoint six months earlier while on a business trip to San Francisco. Her criminal now is serving 15 years—you go girl!

Two college friends, who now are both physicians, were my sanity checks at night by providing the soothing voices and psyche counseling (it's good to know a psychiatrist, even if he did act crazier than you in college). I can't say much about the pathologist, except I'm glad he was needed only for the comfort and not an autopsy.

NCIS Agent Jim Tackett offered some advice on my case. He let me know that victims' counseling was available if I needed it. This idea was good, considering my nerves were a little frayed from dealing with the police, signing forms, and mentally reliving the experience. In the end, a lot of friends and family had called to rehash the story, give advice, and promise retribution, which led to my having a bowl of milk and the cat having the beer.

Overall, my perverse sense of humor got me through this event; however, I am sad about it. I remind myself that one of the latest murders in this state involved a college-age female, and the murderer was a middle-aged Caucasian male. All ages and races can become a victim and/or commit a crime; no one is exempt. It happens when you least expect it, particularly when we let ourselves become complacent and oblivious to our surroundings. In bringing this to a close, let me remind

everyone that, with the exception of your family, you don't have a single possession more valuable than your life. Everything else is immaterial and can be replaced.