

POLICE STORIES

Making One Bit of Difference

SGT. STEVE DIXON

Police Stories: Making One Bit of Difference
By Sgt. Steve Dixon

Published By:
Tonawanda Press
305 Vineyard Town Center, #282
Morgan Hill, CA 95037
www.onebitofdifference.com

Copyright © 2011 by Steve Dixon

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system without written permission from the publisher.

ISBN: 978-0-9828238-0-4

LCCN: 2010908925

Book and Cover Design by 1106 Design, *www.1106design.com*
Edited by Gail M. Kearns, To Press & Beyond, *www.topressandbeyond.com*
Book production coordinated by To Press & Beyond

Printed in the United States of America

*This book is dedicated to the memory of my “foster” parents,
the late Ken and Esther Chase of Tonawanda, New York.
They made all the difference in my life.*

*Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called the children of God.*

—MATTHEW 5:9

Contents

Foreword	ix
Introduction	xi
Chapter One: Military Police	1
Chapter Two: Transition	13
Chapter Three: My Rookie Years	25
Chapter Four: Good Cops/Bad Cops	43
Chapter Five: Predators	55
Chapter Six: Personalities	73
Chapter Seven: Cops and Robbers	89
Chapter Eight: Officer Needs Help!	105
Chapter Nine: Exit Strategy	117
Chapter Ten: My New Home	127
Chapter Eleven: The Big City	141
Chapter Twelve: Street Patrol	157
Chapter Thirteen: Promotion	175

Chapter Fourteen: PIO	193
Chapter Fifteen: Changes	211
Epilogue	223

A Note to the Reader

THIS BOOK IS A SERIES of stories about my police career. I have written it mostly from memory, and have made every effort to be as accurate as my memory would allow. With only a few exceptions, I have changed all of the names of the people in this book. There are at least two short stories I have included, which were told to me by others. I cannot verify that those two incidents took place in the manner described, but have written the stories as they were told to me.

In some of the stories, I have included my opinions of why certain events occurred in the manner they did. These are not meant to be treated as facts; they are merely the opinion of the author. This book is not meant to embarrass any person or agency. Rather, it is designed to entertain and educate the reader about the realities of a police career.

Foreword

ONCE IN A GREAT WHILE, through all the noise clamoring to be heard, comes a sound—sweet and pure—seldom heard, but always recognized. It starts softly, but then builds within the heart. It is inescapable. That sound is truth; a rare and beautiful melody that we all know instinctively.

Here you will read about one man's journey from humble beginnings to the top of his field—law enforcement. As you read his stories, the courage, honor, humor and wisdom of the author will reveal itself. Yet there is much about him that he will not share willingly.

He will not speak of his own integrity, humility, generosity, or keen insight. But the truth often speaks for itself, and these traits will also be unveiled. As a friend for more than thirty years, it was my honor to know and work with Steve through these tumultuous times.

These were the days when police work was being changed, transformed, mutilated, and repackaged for public consumption. Many of our fellow officers did not survive the changes. Good cops did some incredibly brave things one moment, and the next day they were cleaning out their lockers. A few had been fired, but most of them quit in disgust. Many of them were replaced by

officers who would never dream of doing anything brave. Those of us who remained had to either change or face the same fate.

As a witness to many of the events told here, I will attest to their veracity. In writing, Steve gives voice to the many good cops who were silenced by the reality of those times. Political correctness was in its infancy, but growing fast. Community policing was something we had been doing for many years. We did it out of love of our profession, and a strong desire to have a real impact in our communities. But when the changes came, we found that community policing was just something officers did to impress the chief, and enhance their own careers.

What follows is no mere rant against what our profession has become. It is rather a tribute to a different age—a Golden Age of police work. It was an age when courage, confidence, and tenacity were considered good traits, not liabilities. It was an age where officers were judged by their willingness to serve the public and protect the innocent—even at the cost of their own lives. As you read this book, you will see that much of that has changed.

So sit back and enjoy the book. It may make you laugh, and/or cry, but I hope it makes you think. You may even recognize characters from your own life. You might even see yourself in some of these stories. Above all, you will hear the truth. And whether you agree with it or not, you will recognize the sound.

—Rich Rodriguez
Santa Clara PD (ret.)

Introduction

“LOOK, I KNOW THEY GET YOU all charged up at the police academy to make you think you can change the world, that you’re going to make a big difference out here. It doesn’t work out that way. There’s just too much going on, and you’re not going to make one bit of difference!”

He was a veteran police officer and those were his exact words. I suppose he probably meant well. I was a young officer on the Santa Clara (California) Police Department, and I was eager to do my job. I was rushing from call to call, wrestling PCP “blasters,” and taking a lot of people to jail. Exactly what I thought I was hired to do.

I was excited about going to work every day, and was having the time of my life. But this senior officer had gotten me aside one day and told me to slow down, take it easy. And I clearly remember him ending his admonition by telling me that I was not going to make “one bit of difference.”

I retired from the police force in July 2008, having spent thirty-one years trying to prove him wrong. It was much harder than I had imagined it would be. My own police department made it harder for me to be a good cop than a bad cop. One problem was that we got paid every two weeks, no matter how much or how

little we did. I found a small group of dedicated officers willing to work hard, but a larger group that did little, if any, police work.

The good cops put their lives on the line nearly every day, racing to violent calls. They made almost all of the arrests, took most of the calls, and wrote most of the reports. The lousy cops, I call them “slugs,” avoided violent calls, made few arrests, and could always find a way not to write a police report. Both groups made the same money.

But the worst part was that my department treated some of those “slugs” better than some of our best cops. Why? Because good cops might get into trouble, and bad cops don’t. And staying out of trouble seemed to have replaced public safety as our top priority. The unofficial motto was, “If you don’t do anything, you won’t do anything wrong.” That’s not exactly a good philosophy for fighting crime.

Some police chiefs have a tremendous fear of lawsuits. And they know that the less work their officers do, the less chance their department has of getting sued. So hard working cops were sometimes criticized or disciplined, while bad cops were allowed, and maybe even encouraged, to be bad cops. Some current chiefs have even gone so far as to tell their officers that “arrests are not important”—unbelievable!

Some of our laziest cops got promoted or were placed into a special assignment, while some of our best cops were passed over. One commander admitted to me that an officer had been given a special assignment because he was “useless” on the streets. They rewarded him for being “useless,” and denied that assignment to one of our hardest working cops. I worked for that kind of leadership for much of my career.

Some of our best cops quit in disgust, transferred to another police department, or simply gave up and stopped doing any kind of proactive police work. I was so frustrated that on two separate occasions I nearly gave up too.

I believe that we are fast approaching a crisis in law enforcement in many communities because so many good cops are giving up. We will see it in any police agency that has avoiding lawsuits as its top priority, or treats its bad cops better than good ones. Unfortunately, I think that will probably include a lot of police departments all over this country.

With that introduction, one might assume that this book is going to be about what a terrible career I had as a police officer. Quite the contrary: I had a great career! In spite of some incredibly bad leadership, and working with some lousy teammates, I accomplished far more in my career than I could have imagined. That's why I wrote this book. I want to encourage other good officers to keep working hard and not give up.

I also wrote this book because I want citizens to be aware of what really happens when they call 911. Good cops all over this country will speed to your call and risk their lives to save yours. But there are a lot of other cops who will simply choose not to put themselves at risk for your safety. They will drive away from your call without any repercussions. We promise to "protect and serve," but many officers will do neither.

I want citizens to expect more from their police officers and demand better leadership from their police chiefs. I remember our chief at the San Jose Police Department in 1988. Many of us still call him our "last good chief." He had the kind of leadership style we need in law enforcement today. He expected his officers to do police work, not sit in a coffee shop avoiding lawsuits. Not coincidentally, when he was our chief, San Jose was one of the "safest large cities" in the country, and we had more respect from our citizens.

Lastly, I wrote this book for our newest generation of police officers. Some of them will face the same obstacles I faced: cowardice and laziness among some of their teammates, and unbelievably poor leadership. I'll show them that with hard work and

dedication, they can still have a successful and fulfilling career, and have a real impact in their communities.

I have worked with some of the best cops in the country and, undoubtedly, some of the worst. I still get together with some of the good cops I worked with to play cards and tell “war stories.” We are all very proud of what we accomplished in our careers.

We were sometimes criticized and reprimanded by our supervisors, when we should have been commended. Some of my friends were unfairly passed over for a promotion or a special assignment. But we all have the satisfaction of knowing that we were able to save some lives, and make positive changes in many others. Maybe we just wanted to prove that in spite of all those obstacles we really could make “one bit of difference.”

Chapter One

Military Police

Bullies

“HELP ME, DIXON!” The little guy was terrified, and I soon saw why—he was white, and had two much larger black guys chasing him up the stairs. I was in the sixth week of basic training at Ft. Dix, New Jersey. My platoon was crowded into a barracks room listening to a staff sergeant lecture us about something. I was a squad leader, standing on the outside of the group, when I heard the commotion on the stairwell behind me.

The little white guy ran up and got behind me. “Don’t let them get me,” he said. I moved to the top of the stairwell and blocked the two black guys from going any further. They told me to let them by so they could kick the little guy’s ass. He had called them the “N” word, and they were going to teach him a lesson.

There were two possibilities. First, this little white guy, who was one of the nicest kids I had ever met, had walked by two much larger black guys, and deliberately provoked them with a racial slur. Or these two big black guys saw a much smaller white guy, and decided to kick the crap out of him. I had no doubt the answer was possibility number two.

I told the black guys that the kid was in my squad, and if they wanted to get to him they had to go through me. That might

sound courageous, and perhaps it was, but not as much as one might think. One of the traits that would serve me well later in my police career was the ability to read people, and I had read these two guys correctly. They didn't want to take me on, even though they were as big as I was. They preferred beating up little guys.

So with a little more defiance in my voice, I told them again that they had to go through me to get to him. Just a few days earlier, I had watched my drill sergeant kick another sergeant in the balls for hurting one of his soldiers, and I had already decided to do the same to one of these guys if they took another step.

The staff sergeant finally heard the commotion in the stairwell and came out of the room yelling, "What the hell is going on out here?" The two black guys quickly left, and I assured the sergeant that we had things under control. The little guy couldn't thank me enough for protecting him from those two bullies. I told him that I owed it to him as a member of my squad. He was a good kid. And although I didn't know it then, I would spend the next thirty-six years protecting other people from all kinds of bullies.

MP School

I grew up in an orphanage in the small town of Greenville, Pennsylvania. After graduating from Reynolds High School, I joined the army in November 1970. After basic training at Ft. Dix, I was sent to Monterey, California, for eight months at the DLIWC (Defense Language Institute West Coast). I had studied German in high school, so I chose to take German language training. That decision might have saved my life. I would later be sent to Germany and not to Vietnam. After language school, I went to MP School at Ft. Gordon, Georgia.

I really enjoyed MP School. They had some outstanding instructors, especially our military law instructor. He not only taught us about military law, but about command presence and treating soldiers with respect. I learned that command presence wasn't

bossing people around; it was being able to motivate people to do things that you want them to do. Many cops have difficult careers because they don't understand this principle.

I had a great time at MP School, and some of my classmates became good friends. But we got some bad news just before we graduated: of the one hundred twenty-nine students in our class, ninety-seven of them were going to Vietnam (this was 1971). Three of us went to Germany, and others went to Korea. Some of the Marines went to Okinawa.

Shortly before I graduated, I had a night off and went into the city of Augusta with a friend of mine to have some fun. We were looking for female companion type of fun. We ate at a small café, and afterward, when we walked outside I saw a city bus stopped in front of the café.

I noticed a pretty black girl sitting by herself in the middle of the bus. She looked at me and gave me a big smile and I smiled back. I told my buddy that I was going to take a bus ride. He had already figured that out, and got on the bus with me. I sat next to the pretty girl and started talking to her.

I grew up in a white community. It wasn't until I went into the army that I began hanging out with some of the black soldiers. I am of mixed race; my mother was white and my father, whom I have never met, was black. Of course, I also hung out with white soldiers, but the black soldiers taught me how to "rap" and "profile." In 1971, someone's "rap" was their way of speaking, and "profiling" was a pronounced walk that made someone look like a badass. Both of those terms have different meanings today.

I started off my "rap" with my standard, "Hey Baby, How you doing tonight?" with just a touch of a jive-talk accent. She smiled and said she was doing great. Now that the ice was broken, I kept going. I asked where she was going and she told me she was heading home. I knew if I played my cards right she might invite me to come along. And she did.