

The Fastest Gun in Greenmarket Square ...! by Harry Friedland



City-centre law firms can be extremely competitive places to grow up as a lawyer. Many years ago, I read a wonderful book about New York lawyers, written by an American lawyer (American lawyers are quintessential lawyers). The book was called “Lions in the Street”, and had been loaned to me by one of my partners. To this day he swears that I never returned it, and I swear that I did but be that as it may the book never resurfaced. I wish I could find it. It's out of print but if I was a law lecturer, I would have made it prescribed reading. If you want to get anywhere in the business you have to understand the culture.

One of the arguments put forward by the author is that those American firms are so big that they have distinct and characteristic cultures, but they can basically be divided into two groups: there are those where the lawyers have a culture of bragging about how hard they work and those where the lawyers go to great lengths to tell the world that they hardly work at all – but they're all very effective lawyers, whichever group you belong to.

My firm down here in Cape Town was an average-sized Cape firm at that time, but we were the “hard working lawyer” kind. I once got into office at 4.00 a.m. (the truth, which I never told anyone, was that our new-born first child was crying through the night and I couldn't sleep anyway so I just gave up on trying to sleep and came in to the office – but that's not how I ever explained it to anyone and this is my confession. I explained that I was very, very busy!) I was a hero for months after that. But this story is not about that occasion.

It was late one weeknight. In fact, I was so intent on whatever I was doing that I did not realise precisely how late it was. The sun had gone down long ago. The streetlights had come on. Crowds of night revelers had come out. The staff had all gone home hours ago. One by one my hard-working partners had gone home. Eventually the whole ten-storey building was empty and dark, except for the light in my own office on the seventh floor, where I was working away. Our building looked out onto Greenmarket Square, which is known to everyone and the hordes of tourists who visit the square at all daylight hours. But at night it gets a bit creepy. There are dark corners and there is a constant sound of shattering glass – drunks dropping (or throwing) bottles, car and shop windows, tin cans

being kicked around, the shouts of street ruffians – once I found a largish, good quality pocketknife stained with blood in the gutter outside the building. Being the obsessive trash-picker that I am, I took it home, washed it off (wearing rubber gardening gloves), boiled it in an old paint tin, and dropped it into my toolbox, where it now serves as an efficient wire-stripper (I last used it two days ago) (to strip some electrical cable – did I need to explain that? – well, just in case you thought ...). If it could ever have served as evidence to some dastardly deed, I'm sorry, I got there first!

The corridor outside my office was pitch dark, but I hadn't even looked up from my desk and I was unaware of that. Our floor of the building was sealed off from the rest of it by a set of double doors, which were locked after hours. At about 10 p.m. I heard a door bang. That alone was not cause for alarm. My partners were an eccentric bunch and it was quite possible that one of them might have come back to office to take care of something, despite the hour. Indeed, one of my partners was a legendary eccentric: he had once come back to the office at 2 a.m., driving through from Newlands in his pyjamas, because it had just struck him that there was something to take care of. He then returned home and continued his sleep. So, as I say, no cause for alarm at the sound of the door banging at 10 p.m.

But I looked up and realised with consternation that all the lights were off. So as a common courtesy I called out "Hello?"

I got no answer – nor did the corridor lights come on.

Again, "Hello?"

Again, silence - and no lights.

"That's odd", I thought. I was getting a bit edgy.

Another door banged – different sound, so presumably a different door.

I tentatively put my head out into the passage - into impenetrable darkness. The only light switch that I knew of for the corridor lights, was at the opposite end of my arm of the corridor. I suddenly felt quite claustrophobic.

In the depths of the corridor, I heard the plopping sound of bundles of paper hitting the floor – not single sheets, but a sound like a writing pad, or a small pile of paper hitting the carpet – many small piles of paper, in fact, one after the other. "Someone's rifling an office up there" I thought, while standing indecisive and frozen in the middle of my office. "They're looking for something..."

Then another loud bang – another door, closer to me. Shuffling sounds, like feet on a carpet. "Well, I'm not just going to be a sitting duck..." I thought. There was an ancient green safe in

one corner of my office – a relic from my late great-grandfather's general dealership in Mossel Bay, established in the late 1800's, in which I had once found bundles of Russian Ruble notes from before the Russian Revolution. But that wasn't what I was thinking of just then. I was thinking of the old pistol which I had thrown in there many years ago, and never looked at again.

"Better than nothing ..." I was thinking. With sweaty hands and one ear focused on the dark passage, I located my safe keys and unlocked and hauled the huge, heavy door open, to reveal the neglected chaos within. The black butt of an old pistol protruded from a heap of papers and I grabbed at it – and found myself looking at the butt and chassis of an old, disassembled, small-calibre pistol. I'd forgotten. Of course – I would never have put it away fully assembled!

By now I was no longer "Cool-Hand Luke" – I was truly sweating like a pig, and fearful. After more rummaging I located an A5-sized manilla envelope which clanked with bulky metal things inside. I turned it out onto the carpet. These were the remaining components of the weapon – and about six old bullets. They didn't look very promising, but beggars can't be choosers. Would they fire? Would they jam the weapon? I slid the carriage into place, checked the hammer and firing pin, shoved the rounds into the magazine, and jammed the magazine into position. I couldn't see a safety catch.

Ah, there!

Flipped it into the "off" position.

Jesus, this thing is ancient – pre- second world war, probably. At least half of those rounds are bound to be duds. No time to experiment though.

I switched off my office light and stood still in the darkness to give my eyes time to adjust.

I stepped into the dark passage. My eyes were still adjusting, but it made no difference. It was pitch black. No point creeping around, so I called repeatedly, "Who's there? Answer me please! Who's there? Come out!"

Silence. The plopping sounds had stopped. I sneaked up to each dark doorway, skimming the wall with my body. Don't stand in the middle of the passage – you halve the chance of catching a bullet by staying up against a wall. Stood up against the nearest doorpost, leaned forward, put my head and weapon round the door, called out. Moved on to the next door. Nothing.

Then a loud "bang" came from a passage which led off at ninety degrees to the one that I was in. I could now see vaguely into the darkness. I knew that at the end of that passage

was a large store room with a set of double doors and I could faintly see that they were ajar. I was pretty sure that that was where the “bang” came from. And then, from exactly that direction, I heard those “plopping” sounds again. Someone’s in there, I thought, and they’re obviously not afraid. You don’t mess around with someone like this, I thought. You don’t make speeches and you don’t threaten and you don’t warn. Forget the side offices. He’s right ahead, in there.

And then, with a “bang”, the double doors slammed shut about three metres in front of me. But just before that, I heard the thud of something against the other side of that door. He’s in there, I thought – behind that door! “Aim low”, I thought, and squeezed the trigger.

Now, I need to explain a few things – most modern police forces would not have a single officer without backup in that situation. What I was doing was beyond reckless. The other thing is that no modern policeman would fire off a single round: he would “double-tap” – the first round is simply intended to settle down. The second round is the “kill” shot – but I didn’t know that, so things went differently. And then there’s a third thing: what you experience when you see someone fire a gun in a movie or on TV, - that’s absolute rubbish: the sound of a gunshot in a corridor – even with a small calibre weapon – is deafening. In the movies you hear “pop-pop-pop” as the shots are fired, and during training with live weapons you’d wear ear plugs or shooting muffs: but without any ear protection, in a small enclosed space, the sound is like a physical blow.

I froze. The world stood still. I was stone deaf – all I could hear was a high-pitched screaming sound in my ears. I held my breath. I was choking on the acrid smell of gunpowder.

There was a dull “thump” against the other side of that left-hand door, and it reverberated. The right-hand door swung open slowly. I peered into the darkness beyond but could see nothing at all. I pointed the pistol through the doorway but did not fire. Then the door, which had seemingly opened of its own accord, slowly started to close again.

My eyes adjusted further, and I noticed two things: a large window was hanging wide open halfway down the length of the room, and piles of paper were swirling around all over the room – and then suddenly I understood what was going on and I switched on the room lights to confirm my suspicions: the South-Easter had come up; it had sucked that big window open; the blast from the South Easter had created a small paper tornado and it was throwing paper around like a Whirling Dervish. The gusts of wind were alternately sucking and pushing against the unsecured doors. There was a pile of empty cardboard boxes behind one of the parts of the double door into the passage, and the wind must have blown the pile over so that it had fallen against the door. Hence the “thump” sound.

Suddenly it occurred to me that there was a caretaker who lived with his family in a full-sized house on the roof of the building, three storeys up from where I stood. That shot was so loud that he must have heard it if he was home. He'd be bound to call the police. I'd better get out of here, fast!

I still couldn't hear anything except that shrill ringing sound. I was soaking in sweat, and the shakes had set in. I went to the open window and noticed that the catch was broken, which explained how it had got to open like that. I slammed the window closed and jammed the catch into place with some cardboard. I made a beeline for my office, quickly dismantled the weapon, bagged it and tossed it into the safe. I slammed the safe door shut, locked it, grabbed my jacket and got the hell out of there.

When I got into the street a cold South Easter, moaned around my sweat-drenched clothes and chilled me to the bone. Our parking garage was two blocks away. I covered the distance in record time, not looking right or left, ignoring the beggars, pavement pirates and vagrants who tried to get my attention as I went along. I couldn't hear them anyway – my ears were still ringing. I was in a vortex of screaming sound. It seemed as if an alarm bell, or a siren, was going in my head.

I would subsequently discover that I had burst my right eardrum and to this day I have tinnitus in my right ear. The ringing never goes away. I am told that it never will. I can still hear well, it's just that I hear everything over that sound. It's quite bizarre, actually!

As for the bullet hole in the store-room door, every time new employees joined the firm, it became part of their introduction to the firm: someone would lead them to the door, point out the bullet hole, and say, "See that bullet hole? - That's Friedland. Don't upset him!"

For a long time after that I couldn't understand why new employees called me "Sir" - I used to say, "Listen, my name's Harry. Don't call me Sir!"

Eventually someone explained it to me...

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A Word about me:

Cape Town born and bred. I attended Herzlia School from 1959 to 1971; BA (UCT) in English Literature and Social Anthropology, BA (Hons) (UCT) in English, and finally LLB (UCT) – in 1979. I complied with my national SA military call-up obligations in 1975, but got kicked out for being a communist. I commenced articles for law at CK Friedlander Kleinman & Shandling in 1979 and I stayed on at the firm right up to the time of the firm's merger with Smith Tabata Buchanan Boyes in 2012, where I practiced as a director. I retired in 2016 but still work part-time.

In my youth I rode motorcycles and hiked and climbed mountains. As a student I spent as much of my time as possible on Clifton and Sandy Bay Beach. I travelled beyond the borders of South Africa for the very first time when I was 45 (my first trip was to Jerusalem) – and never stopped travelling thereafter.

I do not want a tombstone on my grave. Just an old truck radiator, with a number plate with my personal details on. It should rust away after a few years. Nothing lasts forever. All things must pass.

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