

RIDING WITH 'JOE FRIDAY' — 40 YEARS LATER

by

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It was loud, even with the ear protectors in place. And the gun kicked more than I had envisioned. A ricocheting bullet sparked briefly as it left its trace on the scarred concrete wall. I held my breath again, squinted along the gun's sights, and fired the last of the round. The bullet punctured the center mass of the paper target. With a mixture of relief and amazement, I stared at the 12 bullet holes perforating the target's "bull's eye" and handed the empty gun to the police officer. Not bad for a novice, but I had taken many seconds longer to accomplish my perfect score than an officer would have.

I was in a police department's indoor firing range, a rectangular concrete room above the garage. Four shooting bays occupy one end, targets stand at the other. A metal trough stretching the width of the room sits below the targets to catch the expended bullets. I had just finished firing at my bad guy target, aware of the gun smoke and aroma and noise. The classmate to my right was examining her target and rolling it up to take home as a trophy. It was the penultimate class of the 9-week Citizen Police Academy course.

Taught by police officers, the course offered the average person a spectrum of not only the knowledge and skills officers must have to perform their jobs in the greater St. Louis area, but also the risks they face daily.

So, why was I taking the course? Just to fill up a few empty nights? To give me something to talk about with my nephews?

I'm a writer, and I go by the old adage 'Write what you know.' My first novel, *Death of an Ordinary Guy*, was about to be published, and for my second novel, *Sainted Murder*, I wanted to write about what I knew. Or, at any rate, 'experienced.' Not just garnered information from books and websites.

Enrollment in the citizen police academy seemed like a great way to get the information. It also gave us students the chance to do a ride-along with a police officer during his/her shift.

That was how I found myself paired with Paul Hornung, a patrol officer, who bravely endured my questions — even seemed to like them! The ride-along turned out to be a life-changing event.

During the ride we talked more about writing than we did police work, which hadn't been my objective when I signed up for the Big Adventure. I thought I'd have a chance to ask questions, take copious notes, and to experience the adrenalin rush when responding to gun-fight-at-the-OK-Corral calls — physical research essential to any mystery writer even if she did write English mysteries and was riding along with an American cop.

And I did. Well...with the exception of the adjective-laden calls. But the calls we went on were still very interesting and eye opening.

Sitting in the patrol car and seeing the familiar city through the other side of the glass bonded me in a strange way to the TV favorites of my youth: *Highway Patrol*, *Dragnet*, *The Detectives*. And to those fighting crime outside the confines of a police cruiser: Captain Midnight, Sergeant Preston of the Yukon, The Cisco Kid, and The Thin Man. I suddenly was riding along with Matt Holbrook in New York City, with Frank Ballinger in Chicago, with Steve McGarrett in Hawaii. With Joe Friday in Los Angeles. The ultimate reality show, the chance to hear Friday's voice spilling from the car radio — "Thursday, March 24. It was rainy in Los Angeles. We were working the night shift out of burglary division. My partner's Bill Gannon. The boss is Captain Brown. My name's Friday."

Of course, those familiar words never crackled into the patrol car, but the ride with Paul created its own memory. Plus, it gave me a lot of technical info that I sprinkle throughout my novels.

And at the end of the second ride-along I had much more — a new fictional character based on Paul for my Taylor & Graham series.

I still remember the strange mixture of apprehension and hope preceding my asking his permission for this naissance. Like asking a boy to come over after school to help with homework. I was sitting in the front passenger seat of the police cruiser; he was driving. The light from the passing street lamps alternately illuminated and masked his face. Kind of reflecting my mind — alternately confident he would say yes and yet fearful he would laugh. I hadn't planned the timing of my question too well, having asked during a moment of gloom and, therefore, unable to see his reaction to my odd request.

Luckily for me, the car hit a bright patch as a huge smile enveloped his face. He said yes.

With Paul now a 'character,' I had a lot of questions about his character's personality and about the situations in which his character was involved. During these ride-alongs I was seeing only a tiny fraction of what it meant to be a street cop; there was so much more I would never get to witness or understand. The addition of his character and the need to understand the intricacies of the patrol officer job necessitated, therefore, the exchange of emails and phone calls.

Paul was so helpful and seemed to enjoy lending his brain and knowledge so much that I began asking him questions on general writing problems that came up. What does a police officer do if he sees a person lying on the floor inside a house? How would officers feel if a fellow officer was wounded? What happens if a fight breaks out in a pub and a police officer is there off duty? How do I write a realistic fight scene?

That last one, by the way, really plunged Paul physically into writing. I had attempted to write my fight scene based on what I had seen on television. Big mistake! Paul read it — probably either shaking his head and muttering or laughing hysterically — I don't know which; I've never asked him. Whatever his reaction, he rewrote my attempt into a real fight.

Same thing with my pub incident.

Other bits of scene writing followed. I knew what I wanted in the books but I hadn't the knowledge or job experience to write it. Paul, on the other hand, had the knowledge and experience — plus, I discovered, he can write!

During our collaboration his contributions have evolved from answering my questions, to writing scenes, to writing entire chapters in his original character's first person point of view.

But I'm no slouch. I still do my bit for the books. I research the specific English custom around which each book is based, figure out the basic idea of the murder, the sub plots, and create the characters. I set up the skeletal story framework and show it to Paul. He will get ideas from that and we incorporate them into the story.

It's also great fun to work in something either from his days as a street cop or something that he's now involved with as a police detective — as we've done in our latest novel, *Horns of a Dilemma*.

I write the bulk of the book, still ask him questions on police procedure (like those pesky fight scenes. I guess that's one downfall of being a peaceable person), but Paul writes his own chapters. There's usually some element in the story he wishes to elaborate on from a police officer's angle. I fit those chapters into the story where they go best.

'My' books have now progressed to 'our' books. My main character's narration is now strengthened with a second character's POV. Readers of our novels not only

learn bits of English traditions (such as Guy Fawkes Day, St. Nicholas Festival, and change ringing) but also get a glimpse at a real police officer's heart and emotions. And learn what they fight daily on the job.

Which is one reason why I continue to write this series.

The other? It's sheer fun physically to write. And it's fun to work with Paul.

Perhaps stranger things have happened; perhaps stranger partnerships have existed. Paul's been a military police officer, military site security specialist, police patrol officer, field training officer, and defensive tactics instructor before adding 'detective' to his skills. I've lived in England, been a semi-professional folk singer, been bitten by a rapid skink (and survived), managed the US tour for a Scottish folksinging group, and once had dinner with Omar Shariff. But when I began the Taylor & Graham series I *never* thought that I'd be plotting with a cop on how to commit murder. Just shows you where a new experience can lead you.

The End