

The Bronx in the 1950s could be as dangerous for the as Iraq in 2015. The neighborhoods in the Bronx were divided territory allocated to various gangs. The Fordham Baldies were a notorious gang that lived up on the north end of the Bronx around Fordham road. They abutted the Italian gangs would eventually graduate the infamous Mafia Don, John Gotti out of their ranks. Each of these groups was deadly, defended their territory with their very lives, and was not to be crossed. My neighborhood was Highbridge in the West Bronx now identified by the city as part of the South Bronx. The people in our neighborhood never considered us to be in The South Bronx. That was a lower class, more dangerous area, also populated by several different gangs. This area crossed a number of ethnicities, Irish, Italian and Puerto Rican gangs. They had a different set of operating conditions and a different methodology of solving problems.

The Fordham Baldies came into the neighborhood one night with about 20 guys in a half-dozen cars. They stopped anyone they could find on the streets and beat them unmercifully. They did not bother any women or children, but any teenager was really roughed up. This was unforgivable and retaliation was the order of the day. The neighborhood had a half-dozen dangerous gangs and a number of freelance hoodlums.

Two vicious hoodlums were associated with each other for many years. One had lost an eye in an altercation with a .22 caliber pistol. The other had seen action in Korea. Both of them had reputations that they felt they had to uphold and woe to anyone who crossed their paths.

They concocted a plan that as usual required a stolen car. Then they obtained a Thompson sub machine gun with lots of ammunition and a couple of fragmentary hand grenades.

They took the stolen car to a location where they had kept the ammunition, the machine gun and the grenades. The younger member nicknamed Popeye was the designated driver. He was mean. He was tough and he was brutal. The veteran manhandling the weapons they called Tiger. Known as a hard man, Tiger had been in combat and had waded through many gory events. He was bad news.

They waited until dark and drove over to a candy store, which was a meeting place for Fordham Baldies. They stopped at the beginning of the block and checked around see if there were any Police cars. Then they slowly eased down the block and Popeye was told to stop in front of the store. When he did Tiger rolled down the back window, stuck out the muzzle of the Tommy gun and started firing. He emptied the 30 round clip into the store window. At that moment, Popeye reacted to the violence the screams, the shouts the booming of the gun and the breaking window glass. To Popeye the constant firing from the gun unnerved him. He panicked. He hit the accelerator tossing Tiger into the backseat just after he pulled the pin out of a grenade. Now it was consternation. Tiger was hollering from the back of the car yelling "Popeye, stop the car so I can put the pin back in the grenade otherwise we will both be toast." Luckily, Tiger still had the handle of the grenade depressed so it would not go off. Once you have released the handle you have five seconds before detonation. Popeye did not want to stop because he was afraid that the machine-gun fire would draw the authorities. Tiger then threatened to kill him. Popeye stopped. Tiger reinstall the safety pin in the grenade and told Popeye to get the hell out

of there. They did so driving the speed limit returning to the neighborhood. No one was the wiser as they dumped the stolen car.

The next day, the papers reported some poor soul in the candy store lost a leg. Those people never knew how close they all were to dying because they never knew about the hand grenade. Sometimes it is better not to know when death passes you by. To this day, the Baldies talk about the event blaming a Negro gang from Harlem who was one of their major enemies. The trail never led back to our neighborhood.

THE END